

NICKOLAY MLADENOV
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
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Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

In recent days we have witnessed another dangerous escalation of violence in Gaza that risked unleashing an armed conflict with catastrophic consequences for two million impoverished Palestinian people who live under the control of Hamas and have endured three wars and crippling Israeli closures.

The Secretary-General warned that a new war in Gaza would bring forth another unbearable tragedy and urged all parties to exercise maximum restraint. My team and I worked closely with Egypt and all concerned parties to ensure a return to the 2014 ceasefire arrangements. Thankfully, a precarious restoration of calm has now been achieved. We must all work to ensure that this calm is maintained.

The period of 11-13 November saw one of the fiercest exchanges of fire since the 2014 Gaza conflict. The escalation was triggered by an operation by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) inside the Gaza Strip in which a local commander of Hamas' al-Qassam Brigades and six other Palestinians were killed. One IDF officer was also killed and a second was injured in the incident.

In the following two days, militants in Gaza launched some 450 rockets and mortars at Israel, including at the towns of Ashkelon, Sderot and Netivot, killing one Palestinian civilian and seriously wounding one Israeli civilian. An IDF soldier was also seriously wounded by a targeted anti-tank guided-missile strike on a bus transporting military personnel in K'far Aza.

The IDF responded in turn with a series of airstrikes on 160 militant targets, including a Hamas-affiliated TV station and a hotel, resulting in the killing seven Palestinians – at least four identified by the Israeli Army as members of armed groups.

The fragility of the situation underscores the urgency to fundamentally change the dynamics on the ground, that address the underlying political issues.

Two million Palestinians in Gaza cannot be held hostage to political grandstanding and brinkmanship. Their lives matter and they deserve real leadership that addresses the real problems of Gaza.

The latest outbreak of violence came just as the United Nations and its partners were intensifying efforts to alleviate Gaza's deepening humanitarian and economic crises, and, critically, to provide

space for ongoing Egyptian-led efforts to advance intra-Palestinian reconciliation. This is essential to ending the occupation and resolving the wider political conflict.

Significant headway has already been made on the implementation of the package of urgent interventions endorsed by the September Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) meeting in New York.

In October, the United Nations started importing and monitoring the delivery of donor-funded fuel to Gaza's power plant. This resulted in the greatest supply of electricity since March 2017, a minimum of eleven hours per day. I reiterate the United Nations sincere gratitude to the Government of the State of Qatar for its generous funding to this end.

The impact has been immediate: water supply has increased, the risk of sewage overflow has been reduced; hospitals are less dependent on precarious generators; street lights are on again; children can study and play more; and families have more cash in hand to meet their daily needs.

These improvements however are temporary. They provide much needed relief, but can do little to reverse the longstanding, structural problems affecting Gaza, driven by years of crippling closures and Hamas control.

Mr. President,

Implementation of the other urgent humanitarian interventions in Gaza must also be expedited. My team and I will continue to engage with the Palestinian Government, with donors and partners on the ground, to support several initiatives. These include finding a sustainable solution to Gaza's electricity and health problems, increasing the supply of potable water, medical supplies and sewage treatment. These should take place alongside concerted efforts to rescue the economy through cash-for-work and other emergency measures.

Yet, the international community cannot bear the burden of addressing Gaza's problems alone.

The primary responsibility falls on the parties themselves.

The clock on intra-Palestinian reconciliation is ticking.

I urge all Palestinian parties to not waste time and engage in earnest and achieve visible progress in the coming six months. This is in the interest of the Palestinian people. It is in the interests of peace. The success of international efforts in Gaza depends on the parties' willingness to confront the inevitable hurdles, withstand the internal political consequences, and stay committed to the reconciliation process over the long-term.

If any side fails, every side fails.

Hamas and militant groups must stop all provocations and attacks, Israel must significantly improve the movement and access of goods and people to and from Gaza as a step towards the lifting of the closures, in line with UNSCR 1860; and the Palestinian Authority must strengthen its engagement in Gaza, which is an integral part of the Palestinian territory.

Mr. President,

In earlier incidents, before the most recent escalation on 26-27 October, 34 rockets were launched by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) towards Israel. In response, the IDF targeted 95 Hamas and PIJ military sites across the Strip; a hospital in the vicinity of one of the targets was damaged as were several homes in Gaza City.

On 28 October, the IDF struck and killed three Palestinian children aged 13 to 15 in the southern Gaza Strip, who they said were placing an improvised explosive devices at the security fence, a claim refuted by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights. Protests the next day saw some 3,000 participants, with one Palestinian killed and another 15 injured by IDF live fire.

I remain very concerned by Israel's persistent use of live fire against protestors. I call on the authorities to exercise maximum restraint and refrain from using lethal force, except as a last resort. I also urge Hamas and other Palestinian militants to end the indiscriminate firing of rockets into southern Israel, and to stop all violence near the fence, including attempts to breach it.

Mr. President,

Overall in the reporting period, the Israeli Security Forces (ISF) killed 31 Palestinians Gaza, including four children. One IDF soldier was killed during the 11 November operation in Gaza. Meanwhile, in the occupied West Bank, ISF killed four Palestinians.

On 22 October, ISF shot and killed a Palestinian man in Hebron, after he was reported to have stabbed and injured an Israeli soldier. Three other attempts against Israeli civilians or ISF personnel were reported near the Kiryat Arba and K'far Adumim settlements on 5 and 6 November, and in Jerusalem on 14 November.

On 24 October, a 21-year-old Palestinian man was shot and killed by the IDF during clashes following an IDF weapons search near Tubas in the northern West Bank. On 26 October, in the context of clashes between Israeli settlers and Palestinians near Ramallah, ISF shot and killed a 33-year-old Palestinian and injured nine others; another 28-year-old Palestinian subsequently died of his wounds later in November.

Mr. President,

Israeli settlement activity continued to advance, eating away at the viability of a contiguous future Palestinian state. I reiterate that all settlement activities are illegal under international law, and an obstacle to peace and must immediately cease.

On 5 November, Israeli authorities advanced two plans for a total of 264 housing units in the East Jerusalem settlement of Ramot. Demolition and confiscation of Palestinian-owned structures also continued with a total of 31 structures demolished or seized by the authorities, citing lack of building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain in Israeli-controlled Area C and East Jerusalem. As a result, some 25 people were displaced and, according to OCHA, the livelihoods of 200 others were affected.

Meanwhile, on 4 November, the Israeli authorities informed the High Court of Justice of their decision to demolish an illegal outpost comprising some dozen Israeli families that had been established in recent months in an abandoned military base in the Jordan Valley.

I welcome the announcement by the authorities on 21 October to delay the demolition of Khan al Ahmar-Abu al Helu and reiterate the call by the international community for plans for the demolition of this community and all others facing similar pressures to be annulled.

Mr. President,

On 28 and 29 October, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Central Council (PCC) held its 30th session in Ramallah. In its final statement, the PCC reaffirmed recent decisions taken to suspend recognition of the State of Israel until the latter recognizes the State of Palestine on the June 4, 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, end security coordination in all its forms, and disengage economically from Israel. A follow-up committee chaired by President Mahmoud Abbas was established to discuss implementing these decisions.

Mr. President,

The situation in Lebanon will be considered by the Council this week. As we speak, political actors have yet to find agreement on a national unity government. The delay hampers Lebanon's ability to address issues essential to its stability, including the economy. We again encourage all stakeholders to put the national interest first and expeditiously reach an agreement that preserves Lebanon's stability and its ability to deliver on its international commitments.

Mr. President and Members of the Security Council

In closing let me make two important points.

First on Gaza. It is vital that all stakeholders work to de-escalate the deteriorating situation and seize the current window of opportunity to advance urgent humanitarian and economic interventions in line with the AHLC conclusions. I would also like to reiterate the importance of sustained support to UNRWA and extend our gratitude to the State of Kuwait for the swift disbursement of its USD42 million contribution to the Agency.

Palestinian factions must seize the opportunity to engage in earnest with the Egyptian-led efforts to bring Gaza back under the control of the legitimate Palestinian Government.

We in the international community must do all we can to support these efforts. Israel must also recognize that Gaza is about to explode, and to prevent such an explosion, people must also see a normalization of their lives, for which the closures need to be relaxed and ultimately lifted.

We cannot stand idle and allow the division between the West Bank and Gaza to be further entrenched. The Palestinian people are demanding that their leadership finally re-unites Gaza and the West Bank and advances their goal of peacefully ending the Israeli occupation and establishing a viable Palestinian state based on relevant UN resolutions.

This is what people desire, and this is what they deserve.

Second on the broader peace efforts. It is essential that we prevent further collapse of the foundations that must underpin any future agreement. We must continue to consistently push back

against the entrenchment of the military occupation and the erosion of the international consensus on the final status issues.

Together, we must work with determination and with vigilance to establish an environment conducive to the return to negotiations that will end the Israeli -Palestinian conflict, in line with the 2016 Middle East Quartet report recommendations. The United Nations remains firmly committed to advancing all efforts towards a just and lasting Israeli- Palestinian peace based on relevant United Nations resolutions.

Thank you.