

**NICKOLAY MLADENOV
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE
EAST – REPORT ON UNSCR 2334 (2016)**

20 JUNE 2017

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Today I devote my regular briefing to the Council to reporting, on behalf of the Secretary-General, on the implementation of resolution 2334 during the period from 25 March to 19 June.

I will focus on developments on the ground in accordance with the provisions of the resolution, including on regional and international efforts to advance peace.

Let me once again note that nothing in the report can be divorced from the broader context in which it is happening: the half century of occupation, the stalled peace process, the lack of dialogue between the parties, as well as continued illegal settlement activities, terror, violence and increased radicalization.

Allow me to note that this month's briefing coincides with the 50-year anniversary of the Arab-Israeli war, which resulted in Israel's occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and the Syrian Golan. Achieving a negotiated two-state outcome is the only way to lay the foundations for enduring peace that is based on Israeli security needs and the Palestinian right to sovereignty and statehood.

Now is not the time to give up on this goal.

Now is the time to create the conditions for a return to negotiations to resolve all final status issues on the basis of relevant UN resolutions, mutual agreements and international law.

Mr. President,

Resolution 2334 calls on Israel to take steps "to cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem." No such steps have been taken during the reporting period. In fact — since the 24th of March — there has been substantial increase in settlement-related announcements as compared with the previous reporting period, with plans for nearly 4,000 housing units moving forward and 2,000 tenders issued.

The United Nations considers all settlement activities to be illegal under international law. Resolution 2334 states that the international community will not recognize any changes

to the 4th of June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed to by the parties themselves through negotiations.

Plans for some 3,200 units were advanced through the various stages of the planning process in 22 settlements in Area C of the occupied West Bank. These plans include 2,000 housing units in major population centers of Ma'ale Adumim and Ariel, and over 800 units in Kerem Reim, Oranit and Beit El.

One hundred units were advanced for the new settlement of Amihai, established in the eastern Shiloh Valley for the former residents of the Amona outpost, where the Israeli authorities also declared 241 acres as 'state land' in the same zone. Both acts would further sever the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian State, solidifying a line of settlements dividing the northern and central West Bank. As construction on the new settlement began today, the Prime Minister stated that "there will never be, a Government that is more prosettlement than our Government".

Separately, tenders were issued for close to 2,000 housing units in four settlements close to the 1967 line — Alfei Menashe, Beitar Illit, Beit Arie and Karnei Shomron. Infrastructure tenders for a future construction of over 200 settlement units in Kochav Yaakov, located between Ramallah and Jerusalem were also re-issued.

In East Jerusalem 770 housing units in the Gilo Southern Slopes reached the final approval stage, and building permits for over 360 housing units were granted in Ramat Shlomo, Pisgat Ze'ev and Ramot.

Meanwhile, according to OCHA, the reporting period witnessed a sharp decline in the number of demolished Palestinian-owned structures in Area C: 29 structures were demolished or seized, down from 149 in the previous reporting period. East Jerusalem saw a less pronounced decrease in demolished structures from 49 to 32; however, the monthly average of demolitions in East Jerusalem since the beginning of 2017 remains at the same levels as in 2016 when demolitions reached a 15-year record.

Mr. President,

Allow me to turn to the problem of violence that remains a hallmark of the conflict. Resolution 2334 calls on all sides to refrain from such acts and undertake efforts to combat them.

During the reporting period, the security situation on the ground remained relatively calm.

No rockets were fired from Gaza towards Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces did not conduct any airstrikes in Gaza.

However, according to OCHA seventeen Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces, in various incidents including reported terror attacks, clashes, and military operations. One Israeli soldier was killed in a car ramming attack on 6 April outside the

Ofra settlement, northeast of Ramallah, and, on 16 June, a policewoman was killed in a shooting and stabbing attack by Palestinian assailants in the vicinity of the Old City of Jerusalem.

On 14 April, a British exchange student was killed by a Palestinian assailant in a stabbing attack in Jerusalem.

The Israeli Security Forces killed a Jordanian citizen reportedly involved in a stabbing incident in the Old City on 13 May, and on 25 May a Palestinian fisherman off the coast of Gaza. The reporting period also witnessed the shooting of two Palestinian men during protests at the fence along Gaza's northern border.

On March the 24th, a senior Hamas military commander was assassinated by unknown assailants in Gaza City. This was followed by a lockdown of Gaza by Hamas in which for a period of a few days the de facto authorities did not allow Palestinians or internationals to leave the Strip. In April, Hamas executed six Palestinian men for alleged collaboration with Israel, an act that was condemned by the international community.

Settler-related violence continued during the reporting period as well. According to OCHA, 31 incidents were documented, resulting in one Palestinian killed, ten injured, and damage to Palestinian property. Much of the violence has centred around the West Bank settlement of Yitzhar, near Nablus, a recurrent source of violent actions against neighbouring villages in the past.

Against the backdrop of Israeli security officials reportedly warning of the increased risk of another terror attack by Jewish extremists, like the one against the Dawabshe family two years ago, a Rabbi from Yitzhar was indicted for incitement to violence against Palestinians, while a number of others have been arrested.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 called upon both parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric, and to "clearly condemn all acts of terrorism." Regrettably, such calls continued to go unanswered during the reporting period.

Palestinian officials and media outlets affiliated with Fatah continued to commemorate perpetrators of past terror attacks against Israeli civilians. One community center was recently named after a Palestinian woman who was involved in an attack in which 38 Israelis, including 13 children were killed in Tel Aviv in 1978. UN Women and Norway withdrew support from the organisation.

Hamas leaders have also continued their deplorable practice of celebrating recent attacks against Israeli civilians as "heroic," including the 1 April stabbing in Jerusalem's Old City in which two civilians were injured. And, just a few hours after the complex attack at

Damascus Gate last Friday, in which a policewoman was killed, Hamas was quick to praise "the three martyrs from today's heroic Jerusalem operation."

Some Israeli officials have also employed provocative rhetoric. Politicians have repeatedly declared that there will never be a Palestinian state, pledging to take the idea of statehood "off the agenda." In a regrettable incident, an Israeli minister spoke at an event, attended by other members of the Knesset, celebrating the publication of a book promoting abhorrent views towards Israel's Arab citizens. The book was condemned by the Anti-Defamation League as "dangerous and inhumane" and a number of the participants expressed regret at their attendance.

Mr. President,

Resolution 2334 reiterated the call by the Middle East Quartet on both parties to take steps "to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-state solution."

In May, Israel approved a number of positive measures to improve the Palestinian economy. These included the 24-hour opening of the Allenby Bridge for a three-month period, which is effective as of today, in addition to extended operating hours at the Tarkumiya, Ephraim, Gilboa, Maccabim and Reihan crossing points, and the construction of a vehicular crossing at Eyal. In addition, the package envisions the development of an industrial zone that includes bonded warehouses and a natural gas and fuel terminal, aiming to enhance Palestinian authority over trade and customs issues. The measures also included the demarcation of approximately 4,000 acres of land in Area C, including next to three major Palestinian cities — Ramallah, Nablus and Tulkarem – in which the regulation of planning and zoning will undergo changes, with potentially positive implications for Palestinian development.

Palestinian and Israeli Finance Ministries held a number of meetings to discuss fiscal leakages, a critical issue given the Palestinian Authority's 800 million dollar financing gap. The parties have progressed in discussions on VAT clearance revenues. In early June, in accordance with the Electricity Agreement signed last September, Israel transferred 30 million dollars to the Palestinian Authority in lieu of equalization levies and health stamps and agreed to conduct monthly transfers in the future. In May, the Joint Water Committee held its first meeting in seven years.

Mr. President,

During the reporting period, the situation in Gaza has heightened intra-Palestinian tensions, creating an increasingly dangerous humanitarian situation, and raising serious concerns about the prospect of another conflict.

By establishing an Administrative Committee to run civilian affairs, Hamas tightened its control of Gaza and further antagonized the legitimate Palestinian authorities, reducing the prospects for reconciliation.

Meanwhile, a standoff between Fatah and Hamas over the payment of taxes on fuel led to the shutdown of the only power plant in Gaza, leaving residents with four hours of electricity per day. Basic services, including health facilities, water supply and wastewater management have almost ground to a halt increasing the risk of health and environmental disasters. Today Gaza depends exclusively on Israeli electricity lines, which normally provide 60 percent of supply; on Egypt; and on a UN-managed emergency fuel operation that given the funding available, will expire in two to three months.

On May 15th, the Palestinian Authority informed Israel that it would reduce its payment for the electricity Israel supplies to Gaza by 30 per cent. One month later, Israel agreed to the Palestinian request. An initial five per cent reduction was implemented on 19 June; further cuts are expected to have catastrophic consequences for Gaza's population.

Mr. President,

Going beyond the scope of today's report on the implementation of resolution 2334, I want to — once again — warn all parties that Gaza is a tinderbox.

If and when it explodes, it will have devastating consequences for the population and derail all efforts at advancing peace.

Two million Palestinians in Gaza can no longer be held hostage by divisions. For a decade they have lived under the control of Hamas. They have had to deal with crippling Israeli closures, Palestinian divisions and have lived through three devastating conflicts. Perpetuating this situation breeds radicalism and extremism.

We have a collective responsibility to prevent this.

We have a duty to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe.

Returning to the resolution, Mr. President,

During the reporting period there have been no developments related to Member States' distinguishing, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied in 1967. There have, however, been continuing efforts by the international community to advance peace.

On the 29th of March in Jordan, at the Summit of the League of Arab States, Arab leaders committed to re-launching serious peace negotiations on the basis of the two-state solution, establishing a Palestinian state "on the lines of June 4, 1967 with its capital in East Jerusalem" and reaffirmed their commitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

In May, on his first trip abroad, U.S. President Trump visited Israeli and Palestinian leaders and made clear that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is critical to combating the threat of violent extremism and terrorism. He expressed his personal

commitment to helping both sides achieve a peace agreement that would begin a process of peace throughout the region.

The Secretary-General looks forward to working with the United States, Russia, the European Union and regional partners towards improving the environment for peacemaking, including by engaging with all sides to improve the Palestinian economy in the West Bank and Gaza.

Mr. President, Members of the Council,

In closing, I would like to share some broad observations on the reporting period.

First, I must stress once again the urgency of addressing the rapidly deteriorating situation in Gaza.

We must acknowledge the significant budget constraints the Palestinian Authority is currently facing and the need to support the Government in addressing them. However all decisions must be taken with due consideration of their humanitarian impact. I, therefore, call on Palestinian leaders to urgently reach the necessary compromises that will return Gaza to the control of the legitimate authorities.

Last month, I warned the Security Council that this crisis is leading us toward another conflict. A conflict that no one wants. I urge all parties to act before it is too late.

Secondly, the policy of continued illegal settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territory contravenes resolution 2334. The large number of settlement-related activities documented during this period undermine the chances for the establishment of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution.

Thirdly, the continuing terror attacks, violence and incitement remain a very serious concern. Leaders have a responsibility to implement measures demonstrating their commitment to combatting violence and any acts of provocation and inflammatory rhetoric.

Fourthly, while Israeli initiatives to improve the Palestinian economy are positive steps forward, it remains to be seen whether this will significantly increase Palestinian civil authority, in line with Quartet recommendations and prior commitments between the parties.

Mr. President,

In this symbolic month it is time to turn the challenges of the past into opportunities for the future. As the Secretary-General recently stated: "The occupation has shaped the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis. It has fueled recurring cycles of violence and retribution. Its perpetuation is sending an unmistakable message to generations of Palestinians that their dream of statehood is destined to remain just that, a dream; and to

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Israelis that their desire for peace, security and regional recognition remains unattainable.”

Every day that passes without peace, is another day we neglect our collective responsibility to advance a meaningful strategy towards a negotiated two-state solution that meets the national and historic aspirations of both peoples.

The United Nations will continue its determined engagement with the parties and all key stakeholders to achieve that objective.

Thank you.