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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**22 JANUARY 2019**

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Minister Marsudi, thank you for joining us today

As 2019 begins, we should have no illusions about the dangerous dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which continue to unfold before our eyes.

In the past few months, understandably, our focus has been on the tragic situation in Gaza. Today I would like to return to the broader questions of peace and a sustainable resolution to the Palestinian Question.

Over time, the possibility of establishing a viable, contiguous Palestinian state has been systematically eroded by facts on the ground.

During the reporting period, Israeli authorities have advanced, approved or tendered over 3,100 housing units planned in Area C settlements, including plans for some 2,500 units, which were advanced, and tenders for about 650 others.

Nearly half of them are to be built deep in the West Bank, many in isolated settlements in the Nablus area and near Hebron. One of the plans effectively legalizes the outpost of Ibey HaNahal as a neighborhood of the Ma'ale Amos settlement, in the Hebron Governorate.

Meanwhile, we have seen additional attempts to pass legislation that would directly apply Israeli law to the territory of the occupied West Bank, raising fears of future annexation.

In December, the Government endorsed a bill to advance the legalization of some 66 illegal outposts throughout the West Bank within two years. In the interim period, authorities must provide the outposts with funding, electricity, and other services, and freeze implementation of demolition orders.

While in early January Israeli security forces evacuated dozens of settlers from mobile homes illegally installed at the site of the former Amona outpost, at the same time, a Government team has been tasked with legalizing outposts and settlement housing units built illegally, including under Israeli law.

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures also continued across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Some, 25 structures, have been seized or demolished, citing the absence of Israeli-issued building permits, permits which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain. As a result, 32 people have been displaced. With only 13 per cent of East Jerusalem designated for Palestinian construction and an estimated 13,000 outstanding demolition orders issued in Area C communities, demolition and displacement is a constant threat.

I reiterate the United Nations long-standing position that settlements are illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace.

Mr. President,

On the Palestinian side, there are growing pressures on the foundations of the future Palestinian state, many of them imposed by decades of occupation and internal divisions.

Despite the tireless efforts of Egypt and the United Nations, hopes for a genuine intra-Palestinian reconciliation are fading by the day as the sides blame each other for the lack of progress.

As ever, ordinary Palestinians bear the brunt of that suffering. The gap between Gaza and the West Bank is widening again.

The early January arrests by Hamas of dozens of Fatah members in Gaza were particularly alarming and led the Palestinian Authority to withdraw its personnel from the Rafah crossing on 7 January. These developments are a very serious blow to the reconciliation process.

I call on Palestinian leaders to engage constructively with Egypt and act decisively to resolve the political impasse by ensuring the full implementation of the 2017 Cairo Agreement.

One thing is certain, Palestinian sovereignty and statehood will remain an impossibility without genuine unity. There can be no state in Gaza and no state without Gaza.

Economic growth, meanwhile, in the West Bank is insufficient to keep the Palestinian economy afloat in the face of Gaza's dramatic economic contraction, the occupation and diminishing external support. The numbers speak for themselves – the West Bank GDP grew by 1.2 per cent in the third quarter of last year, while it contracted by 6.5 per cent in Gaza. As a result, the total GDP of Palestine contracted by 0.5 per cent in this period.

In other developments affecting Palestinian democratic foundations, on 12 December 2018, the Palestinian Constitutional Court declared the Palestinian Legislative Council dissolved and requested President Abbas to call for legislative elections within six months. I am concerned by the continuing vacuum of a functioning, elected legislative body until credible elections can take place.

There has also been a dangerous security dynamic unfolding in the West Bank over recent months, as a series of deadly terrorist attacks have taken place and the risk of destabilization has increased.

The period has witnessed an increasing number of Israeli military operations in Areas A and B of the West Bank. In Ramallah, for example, and elsewhere, the almost daily confrontations with Israeli security forces fuel anger and have raised questions among Palestinians as to the viability and relevance of the structures created under the Oslo Accords. Such operations disrupt the lives of civilians, increase tensions, and undermine the Palestinian public's trust in their own security forces, as well as the morale of their personnel.

Mr. President,

It has been over 25 years since Oslo opened a pathway to peace. The core of those agreements was long before enshrined in a number of United Nations resolutions and bilateral agreements that remain

valid to this day. They also define the final status issues that can only be resolved through negotiations between the parties with the goal of a two-state outcome. Over time these agreements, however, have eroded as the prospect for credible negotiations has dimmed, only to be replaced by the lack of hope and the growing risk of a one-state reality of perpetual occupation, as outlined in the Quartet Report of 2016.

If both sides were able to re-commit, with the support of the international community, to the basic tenets enshrined in bilateral agreements and to the principle that core issues can only be agreed through negotiations between the parties, this should provide hope for the future and an impetus for peace and stability.

A quarter of a century of investment in peace and state-building must not be allowed to wither under the pressure of violence, radicalisation and suffering.

The agreements and the principles that have been established over the last twenty-five years must be respected by all if peace is to have a chance. The Palestinian economy must be allowed to grow through expanding opportunities for free trade; fiscal leakages must be fixed by modernising existing arrangements; and the Palestinian Government must be able to expand the services it provides to its people; security coordination should also continue. These are just some examples of small steps that can be taken to strengthen the Palestinian institution building effort and must be supported by the international community, including through the mechanisms of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, the AHLC.

These steps are not an alternative to final status negotiations on the basis of international law. They are not and cannot be an alternative to statehood. Engaging on them, however, should provide some of the much needed political and economic space that people need in order to regain their faith in a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict.

For the international community, it is also important to know that both sides remain committed to existing bilateral agreements and arrangements.

Mr. President,

These challenging dynamics are unfolding as violent incidents have continued in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Eight Palestinians have been killed during the reporting period by the Israeli security forces (ISF), including during demonstrations, clashes, military operations and other incidents. No Israelis were killed by Palestinians in this period.

Protests at the Gaza perimeter fence continued during the past month with seven Palestinians, killed by live Israeli fire. The launching of incendiary devices into Israel also resumed after a lull of several weeks; and two rockets were launched by militants towards Israel.

I reiterate my call on Israel to use lethal force only as a last resort, and in response to an imminent threat of death or serious injury.

Hamas in Gaza must also stop the indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars and ensure that protests remain peaceful.

Meanwhile, the upsurge in settler violence over the past year continues to be a serious concern.

On Christmas Eve, the convoy of Palestinian Prime Minister Hamdallah was attacked with stones, in the same location that a Palestinian woman, Aisha Rabi, was killed by Israeli stone-throwers in October of last year. I urge the authorities to uphold their obligation to protect Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and hold accountable those responsible for such attacks.

Mr. President,

I would like to turn briefly to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

While the current, temporary boost in the electricity supply has led to a general improvement in living conditions, including a 40 percent reduction in the need for UN-provided emergency fuel, the situation remains desperate.

Recent funding cuts by donors have forced the World Food Program to suspend food assistance to some 27,000 people and reduce rations to another 166,000 beneficiaries.

At the September AHLC meeting last year, member states emphasized the need for increased efforts to revitalize Gaza's economy, including through cash-for-work programmes. Implementation of the package of urgent interventions continues. And donors have committed some USD 90 million out of the USD 210 million that are needed for six months. Electricity supply to households has increased from three to ten hours. Some 4,200 jobs have been created. And essential medicines have been delivered by the United Nations. I encourage donors to continue supporting our work, which is critical to avoiding another escalation.

Notwithstanding the enormity of the political challenges, the United Nations is working with the Palestinian Authority and all relevant stakeholders to address some of Gaza's most pressing needs.

The UN has also significantly enhanced its capacity to support project implementation on the ground. It is currently working with all key stakeholders to advance the package of socio-economic and humanitarian interventions and to monitor ongoing projects.

I urge donors to support these efforts.

I would also like to take a moment to reaffirm support for the critical work being done by UNRWA in Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and across the region. I urge donors also to continue their support to the essential services provided by the agency.

Mr. President,

Turning to Lebanon, the country has been without a government for over eight months. The Cabinet formation seemed within reach but failed to materialize over political disagreements in December. I reiterate our call on all stakeholders to resolve their differences so that Lebanon can address the many pressing challenges it faces, including that of a struggling economy.

In the meantime, the situation in southern Lebanon and along the Blue Line remained calm but tense. UNIFIL was able to confirm that two of the tunnels discovered by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) crossed the Blue Line and thereby constituted violations of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006).

To date, UNIFIL has not been granted access to the confirmed entry points of a tunnel near Kfar Kila on the Lebanese side. On 13 January, the Israel Defence Forces announced that it had discovered a sixth tunnel near Zarit, south of the Blue Line, in the vicinity of Ramyah (Sector West).

On 9 January, the IDF initiated T-wall construction south of the Blue Line close to the Lebanese reservation area near Misgav Am. The construction featured prominently in the Tripartite meetings on 10 January and on 17 January.

On the occupied Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been maintained with relative calm and low levels of military activity in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. UNDOF attributes this activity to controlled detonations of explosive ordnance as part of clearance conducted by Syrian security forces. The relative calm in the UNDOF area of operation was interrupted by events that occurred on 25 December and most recently on 20 and 21 January.

On 25 December, UNDOF observed a helicopter on the Alpha side fire four rockets that impacted on the Bravo side. On that day, UNDOF also heard and observed surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft defense guns, rockets and heavy machine guns fired on the Bravo side but could not observe the points of origin or impact.

On 20 and 21 January, UNDOF observed and heard an increase in air activity over, and firing of missiles into, the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. UNDOF liaised with both sides to de-escalate the situation. The observations of military activity coincided with open source reports of Israel's confirming that it had conducted a series of airstrikes on targets in Syria in response to a missile fired from Syria intercepted by Israel.

Such events demonstrate the volatility of the area and risk jeopardizing the long-standing ceasefire between the two countries. It is critical that both parties to the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement respect the Agreement at all times to prevent escalation across the ceasefire line and actions that undermine progress towards stability in the area.

Mr. President,

Returning to the Palestinian Question, I have said this many times, but let me repeat it once again – those who believe that the conflict can be managed in perpetuity are wrong. There is no status quo; there is only a deterioration that, if left unchecked, without a vision and the political will for peace, can only lead to endless conflict and the steady rise of radicalization on all sides.

I am concerned that, within the current political landscape, those on all sides who seek to bridge the gap between Israelis and Palestinians are being undermined. Despite this, critical work continues to be done by civil society to find common ground and to work towards resolving the conflict. Their efforts are inspiring and should be applauded and supported by all.

Thank you.