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

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Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I brief you today as the Middle East continues to confront the monumental challenge of containing the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 23 March, the Secretary-General launched an appeal for an immediate global ceasefire. On 11 April, my fellow Envoys to the Middle East and I echoed the Secretary-General's call and restated our firm commitment to preventive diplomacy, to assisting all efforts to respond to the health and socio-economic consequences of the crisis, to supporting cooperation in the interest of peace, and to facilitating humanitarian access for the most vulnerable.

The past month has seen inspiring examples of cooperation across conflict lines in the common battle against the virus. But it has also witnessed continued confrontation and fighting, as the human toll of war continues to rise.

Mister President,

The dangerous prospect of annexation by Israel of parts of the occupied West Bank is a growing threat. If such a move were implemented, it would constitute a serious violation of international law, deal a devastating blow to the two-state solution, close the door to a renewal of negotiations, and threaten efforts to advance regional peace.

On 20 April, the two leading political parties in Israel signed a coalition agreement to form a government. While the two sides reiterated a committed to advance peace agreements and cooperate with Israel's neighbors, they also agreed on advancing annexation of parts of the West Bank, starting 1 July 2020. The Palestinian Authority has threatened that if this move takes place, it will cancel the implementation of all bilateral agreements.

Mister President,

Despite these worrying developments, I am encouraged that the COVID-19 crisis has also created some opportunities for cooperation. I hope that these opportunities will not be undermined or destroyed if the political context between Israel and the Palestinian Authority deteriorates. With support from the United Nations, both sides are coordinating their efforts on tackling the common threat posed by the pandemic. Much more can - and must - be done.

The recognition of this interdependence could, if there is political will, can translate into tangible progress towards resolving the conflict.

I strongly urge Israeli and Palestinian leaders to seize this moment to take steps towards peace, to reject unilateral moves that will only deepen the wedge between the two peoples and undermine the chances for peace.

Mister President,

Developments on the ground continue to be dominated by the COVID-19 crisis and efforts to respond to its medical, social and economic consequences.

The UN has put together a Response Plan, requesting USD 34 million to respond to the public health needs and immediate humanitarian consequences of the pandemic in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. The response plan, led by Deputy Special Coordinator McGoldrick, was developed in coordination with the Palestinian Ministry of Health. It will provide an important bridge to the Palestinian Government's broader socio-economic recovery plan.

I thank all Member States who have contributed and encourage others to urgently support these critical efforts.

Since the start of the crisis, the UN has delivered more than a million items such as essential drugs and equipment for the management of COVID-19, including personal protective equipment, laboratory materials, thousands of tests, oxygen therapy devices and advanced analysis machines. These items have reached hospitals and clinics directly and also through the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

The UN and its partners have provided training for Gaza health workers to build capacity on the ground, while the World Health Organization and UNICEF continue efforts to procure essential ICU and ventilator equipment.

On 15 April, the Palestinian Ministry of Health sent a shipment of drugs and supplies to Gaza. This included laboratory and testing materials, dialysis materials and some critical medications.

Israel also continues its efforts to provide and facilitate assistance to the Palestinians related to COVID-19.

UNRWA is also engaged in response efforts, having opened its health services to non-refugees in Gaza. In this context, I welcome the efforts of Jordan and Sweden in hosting the second Ministerial Strategic Dialogue on UNRWA on 22 April and the important focus placed on the need to continue supporting the Agency.

Mister President,

I take this opportunity to commend once again Palestinian and Israeli authorities for their continued efforts and sustained coordination to contain the virus and mitigate its economic fallout.

Despite the positive steps, significant challenges remain.

Palestinian health services continue to report an acute shortage of medical equipment and personnel due to insufficient funding.

In Gaza, the Ministry of Health reported that in March it ran out of 44 per cent of essential medical supplies. This, in addition to the urgent need for laboratory materials needed to conduct testing, as well as ICU equipment.

Tens of thousands of Palestinian workers have remained in Israel, providing for their families during a difficult time. If they return home, they must be properly quarantined and screened. The UN Country Team is working with the Palestinian authorities to ensure that the necessary facilities are in place for such an eventuality.

In East Jerusalem, where the health network is chronically underfunded, only two of six hospitals are prepared to deal with cases of COVID-19 that require clinical care. The Israeli closure of a COVID-19 testing clinic in the Silwan area of East Jerusalem on 14 April has also raised concerns.

Although to date no COVID-19 cases have been reported among prisoners, the Palestinian leadership has expressed concerns regarding the potential impact of the crisis on detainees in Israeli prisons.

I encourage all authorities to consider the release of or alternatives for those in various forms of detention who are particularly vulnerable – such as the elderly or those with pre-existing medical conditions – as well as children and women.

Mister President,

The impact of the virus on women and girls is particularly concerning. Evidence is emerging that gender-based violence, including domestic violence, has increased since the onset of the pandemic.

The crisis is also impacting women's engagement in economic activities and exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities. According to a recent survey by UN-Women, 27 per cent of women's businesses have been shut down, and 73 per cent of women surveyed indicated that they can only sustain their businesses under the current conditions for a maximum of four months. I encourage the Palestinian Government to work with the UN and take all necessary measures to ensure protection of women and girls.

Mister President,

Aside from the immediate health concerns, COVID-19 will also take a severe toll on the broader socio-economic situation.

If current trends continue, the damage to the economy risks the very existence of the Palestinian Authority. Revenues from trade, tourism and transfers have declined to their lowest levels in the last two decades. The PA fiscal gap for 2020 will likely exceed USD 1 billion.

Israel has a critical responsibility to ensure the well-being and safety of people under its control.

As a result of the occupation, the Palestinian Authority has limited sway over its economy and does not have access to the conventional monetary and fiscal tools necessary to remedy the crisis.

Following a series of consultations recently held with the Israeli and Palestinian Ministers of Finance, I can report today that measures are being discussed that will ensure, for the coming four months, that clearance revenue transferred by Israel to the Palestinian Authority do not fall below

USD 137 million per month. This is the minimum amount necessary to ensure the Palestinian Authority's fiscal viability and critical service delivery to the Palestinian people.

In this context, I also welcome the Palestinian Prime Minister's announcement of an emergency budget aimed at keeping public spending to a minimum. This budget should re-orient all spending towards health-related expenditures, income support to vulnerable people, support for affected firms, and continuity of government, including salaries and security-related expenditures. Gaza's specific needs must also be addressed in this budget.

Mister President,

Turning briefly to Gaza, a relative calm has prevailed in and around the Strip. Two rockets were launched towards Israel on 27 March, and in response the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fired three missiles at targets it identified as militant facilities.

Earlier this month, however, Hamas security forces detained eight civil society activists on the grounds of "establishing a normalization activity with the Israeli occupation." Three have been released. The UN Human Rights Office has raised serious concerns over the legality of the detentions, fair trial standards and the risk of ill-treatment in and outside detention. I reiterate their call for the civil society activists to be released.

Meanwhile, the Erez crossing has been largely shut down since 12 March, except for the exit of emergency medical cases and cancer patients. Severe movement restrictions have been put in place inside Gaza as well.

Exit via the Rafah crossing was also halted on 15 March. Since 13 April, however, the crossing has reopened in one direction. Egypt has allowed some 1600 Palestinians to return to Gaza. Local health authorities there have organised isolation facilities, placing all who return in a mandatory three-week quarantine. The UN is working with all stakeholders to ensure that these facilities are properly maintained, and appropriate screening mechanisms are put in place.

Mister President,

Despite a notable decline in clashes due to COVID-19 related movement restrictions, sporadic violent incidents continued in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Overall, three Palestinians were killed and 25 injured, including four children, in various incidents. Two Israelis were injured, including one civilian and one member of the security forces.

On 22 March, Israeli Security Forces shot and killed a 32-year-old Palestinian man and injured his relative, while they were traveling on a main road in the central West Bank. The Israeli military reported that the two were throwing stones at vehicles, an account that has been disputed by family members.

On 22 April, a Palestinian man carried out a car ramming and stabbing attack against an Israeli border police officer and was subsequently shot and killed.

In East Jerusalem, the situation in the Issawiya neighborhood remained tense, with clashes and arrests taking place during the reporting period.

On 3 April, Israeli police detained the Palestinian Minister of Jerusalem Affairs for several hours and interrogated him over allegations of violating an Israeli law prohibiting the Palestinian Authority activities in Jerusalem without coordination. The minister was released on the condition that he abstain from such activities and was banned from movement within East Jerusalem for 14 days. Later on 5 April, Palestinian Authority's Governor of Jerusalem was arrested over similar allegations and released on the following day.

During the reporting period, OCHA recorded an increase in settler-related violence as compared to January and February, with some 38 incidents of Israeli settlers injuring Palestinians or damaging their property.

OCHA also recorded some 11 Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians in the West Bank resulting in 1 injury and damage to 11 vehicles.

Meanwhile, the Israeli authorities demolished 34 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C due to lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which remain very difficult for Palestinians to obtain. No structures were demolished in East Jerusalem during the reporting period or in Area C of the West Bank since 26 March. While the temporary halt in home demolitions is a positive measure, the continued targeting of other structures, in particular water and hygiene-related structures, remains of concern.

Mister President,

Turning briefly to the region, on the Golan, where the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained, the overall security situation remains stable despite some continued violations by both parties including the presence of unauthorized personnel and equipment in the areas of separation and limitation.

On 13 April, UNDOF observed 15 drones flying from the Alpha side to the Bravo side over the area of separation with five of these drones heading towards the area of limitation on the Bravo side. On 17 April, UNDOF observed an aircraft from the Alpha side flying across the ceasefire line and over the area of separation. Around the same time, UNDOF saw the Syrian armed forces at a position in the area of separation fire shots across the ceasefire line towards an aircraft flying on the Alpha side. These developments have a potential to escalate the situation between the two sides. The parties have an obligation to respect the terms of the Disengagement Agreement.

In Lebanon, since the Government declared a state of general mobilization because of the public health emergency on 15 March state security forces have enforced lockdown measures and distributed aid to vulnerable Lebanese households. In parallel, the deteriorating socio-economic situation has led to renewed demonstrations in parts of the country. The Palestine refugee camps are increasingly volatile as the population has been severely impacted by the economic crisis and is now facing the mounting threat of the COVID-19 virus, with the first case in a refugee camp confirmed this week. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Hassan Diab's promised economic rescue plan remains under Cabinet discussion.

Mr. President,

As we continue our collective efforts to contain COVID-19, we must not lose sight of the critical decisions that lay ahead for Israeli political leaders, decisions that may impact the trajectory of this conflict for years to come.

Moves to annex land and to accelerate settlement expansion, combined with the devastating impact of COVID-19 can ignite the situation and destroy any hope of peace.

The path of unilateral action will only lead to more conflict and suffering.

However, there is a different path— one of working together to modernize and expand existing agreements, of solidifying the current relative calm in Gaza. A path of implementing the recommendations of the 2016 Middle East Quartet report and actively taking steps towards a negotiated two-state solution that is based on relevant UN resolutions, bilateral agreements and international law.

Mr. President,

Today however I would like to end my briefing today by conveying my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the entire United Nations family, particularly to the World Health Organization team and Deputy Special Coordinator McGoldrick, who have been working tirelessly on the ground since the onset of COVID-19. They continue to demonstrate, on a daily basis, their unwavering commitment to support efforts to contain this deadly pandemic, protect the most vulnerable and uphold the values of the United Nations, never losing sight of our common path to sustainable peace.

Thank you.