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

23 MAY 2018

Mme. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On 15 May, I briefed this Council on the deadly protests that took place in Gaza the day before. At least 60 people were killed and the number continues to climb. It was a tragic day in the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, another reminder of the need to bring peace to this troubled land.

It was also a reminder of how easily violence in Gaza flares up. It was a reminder that Gaza is on the verge of collapse, that its people – who have lived for more than a decade under the control of Hamas, with crippling Israeli closures and with diminishing hopes for an end to the occupation and a political solution, and who have survived three devastating conflicts – are increasingly desperate.

We must act urgently to avoid another war, to alleviate the suffering of the people and to empower the Palestinian Government to take up its responsibilities in Gaza.

Mme. President,

According to OCHA, in the past month 76 Palestinians, including 11 children, have been killed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and over 3,000 injured by live fire and other means. This period has by far seen the worst levels of violence since 2014. There have been no Israeli fatalities.

Following the 14 May violence, the Foreign Ministers of the League of Arab States held an emergency meeting in Cairo and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held an emergency summit in Istanbul.

I also take note of the adoption of the resolution of the Human Rights Council on 18th of May, which calls for the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into the events in Gaza.

Let me reiterate what I said last week in this Chamber, by calling on all to join me in condemning in the strongest possible terms the actions that have led to the loss of so many lives in Gaza. Israel has the responsibility to calibrate its use of force, to not use lethal force except as a last resort under imminent threat of death or serious injury. It must protect its citizens, but it must do so proportionally and investigate every incident that has led to a loss of human life.

Hamas, which controls Gaza, must not use the protests as cover to attempt to place bombs at the fence and create provocations; its operatives must not hide among the demonstrators and risk the lives of civilians.

Palestinians have a right to protest peacefully.

As demonstrations are likely to continue into the month of June, I again reiterate our call for all sides to exercise maximum restraint.

Mme. President,

In this chamber, Council Members have often spoken of the need to prevent war; and the Secretary-General has made preventive diplomacy the heart of his agenda. It is time for our words to be tested in Gaza.

I have taken note of the request last week by several Member States of the Security Council to bring forward proposals to address the situation in Gaza, in line with our commitment to advance urgent infrastructure and economic development projects, improve access and movement, and support the Egyptian-led reconciliation process.

Gaza's infrastructure teeters on the verge of total collapse, particularly its electricity and water networks as well as its health system. In the past, implementation of key infrastructure projects has faced significant delays and obstacles. Failure to implement immediately, over the next six to 12 months, a set of modest, achievable projects – already endorsed by all relevant stakeholders, and some already funded – will create an amplified humanitarian crisis with fewer means to address it effectively.

We have all the instruments in place to do address this challenge, we just need to organize them better.

As such, I plan to take the following actions:

First, prioritize projects identified and agreed over the past two years by the Ad-hoc Liaison Committee (AHLIC).

Second, to adopt a Fast Track modality, with an enhanced UN project management capacity, to speed up implementation of these projects on the ground in Gaza.

Third, strengthen our close coordination with the Palestinian Authority, with Israel, with Egypt to overcome any political, administrative and logistical blockages that may emerge.

The condition for success Madame President, and let me be very clear, is that the ceasefire achieved in 2014 be observed and that all factions in Gaza refrain from illicit arms build-up and militant activity on the ground.

If we are able to move quickly, we will reduce the chances of military confrontation and another devastating conflict. We will create the conditions for relaxing movement and access restrictions and preserve the fraying links between Gaza and the West Bank. We will also support Egyptian reconciliation efforts. And, most importantly perhaps, we will provide much needed breathing space for ordinary Gazans.

Ultimately, these efforts are meant to strengthen – not replace – overarching political objectives: the unification of Gaza and the West Bank under a single, democratic and legitimate Palestinian authority,

(As delivered)

in line with Quartet Principles; and an end to the occupation and resolution of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Mme. President,

We are currently discussing with key stakeholders how to move forward on this strategy.

I am encouraged by the positive engagement by all.

I particularly welcome Egyptian President Al-Sisi's decision to maintain the opening of Rafah Crossing throughout the holy month of Ramadan. This is an important step and I hope that the security situation will allow for more regular movement through the crossing.

I also want to acknowledge Israel's efforts to ensure the delivery of goods to Gaza, despite the serious damage done at the Kerem Shalom crossing by protesters during the recent weeks. I look forward to further measures that will enable an increase in the entry of goods and stimulate economic activity.

I also welcome the decision by the Palestinian Government to provide critical medical supplies and doctors to Gaza after the tragic events of May 14 as well as their engagement with the UN on facilitating much needed deliveries to Gaza.

The AHLC has identified several critical projects aimed at ensuring a long-term future for Gaza, and I am encouraged by ongoing work with our partners to prioritize a shortlist of key projects based on the conclusions of our recent meetings in Cairo, in Washington and in Brussels.

We are engaged constructively with Israel, the Palestinian Government and with Egypt to discuss how to improve coordination and move forward.

I also urge the international community to generously support these goals, both financially and politically. Progress is reliant on the coordinated action and sustained commitment of all stakeholders.

Mme. President,

Taking a step back from the immediate situation in Gaza, the confluence of conflicts in the Middle East is raising tensions on multiple fronts – in Syria, in Yemen, and, clearly, on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

Amid the political stagnation, frustration and disillusionment in the Palestinian diaspora is also mounting. People are watching events here very very closely. Confined to often squalid refugee camps, devastated by war, most notably and tragically in the Yarmouk camp in Syria, and with UNRWA experiencing a severe funding crisis, Palestinian refugees are increasingly facing an untenable situation, risking an expanded humanitarian crisis and further instability.

Developments in Jerusalem and in Gaza reverberated with some protests across Lebanon, mostly in refugee camps. Thankfully, no violent incidents were reported.

Mme. President,

In an important development on the 30th of April, the Palestinian National Council (PNC) convened in Ramallah for the first time in 22 years at which President Abbas was re-elected as chairman. While reiterating the commitment to a peaceful solution based on long-standing parameters and UN resolutions, *inter alia*, the final PNC statement urged, the suspension of the recognition of Israel, security coordination and the suspension of the Paris Protocol. It also outlined international moves to advance the goal of an independent Palestinian state and to seek protection for the Palestinian people.

Regrettably, the announcement that the salaries of the Palestinian Authority employees in Gaza will be paid is not being implemented, which further contributes to the explosive situation in the Strip.

On 15 May, Palestine acceded to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the Convention on the Prohibition, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons.

Meanwhile, Mme. President, in other developments,

I have to note that no settlements plans were approved and no new tenders were issued in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, during the reporting period. Settlement construction in Area C and East Jerusalem, however, has continued, and the Israeli Government has approved major plans focused on solidifying its control of East Jerusalem.

Israeli authorities have also demolished or seized some 30 Palestinian-owned structures across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. As a result, 43 Palestinians have been displaced and the livelihoods of over 140 have been affected.

On 2 May, Israel demolished or seized some 14 structures in the Massafer Yatta area of south Hebron, located in an Israeli-declared military “firing zone.” At least nine households had been impacted, with some 35 people displaced.

I am also concerned by developments regarding Khan al Ahmar-Abu al Helu, a vulnerable Palestinian Bedouin community east of Jerusalem, home to some 180 people – over half of them children – who also face an increased risk of demolitions and relocation.

In separate security incidents, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) targeted Hamas facilities in Gaza on at least ten occasions, with no injuries having been reported. During the reporting period, the IDF has also destroyed two tunnels it attributed to Hamas, bringing the total number of tunnels destroyed since October to ten. Amid Israeli reports of violence directed at Israeli forces, on May16, Palestinian militants reportedly fired machine gun rounds towards Israeli troops, hitting several houses in the Israeli town of Sderot, and this has caused damage but no injuries.

Mme. President,

I also note the move of Embassies to Israel of the United States, Guatemala and Paraguay from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. I reiterate the United Nations position, that Jerusalem is a final status issue that must be resolved through negotiations between the parties, based on relevant UN resolutions.

(As delivered)

Given its importance to Jews, Christians and Muslims, Jerusalem is a highly sensitive and charged issue for millions of believers around the world. Therefore, upholding the status quo at the Holy Sites remains critical for peace and stability.

Mme. President,

The Secretary-General voiced his utmost concern following reports of heightened tension and missile launch from Syria targeting Israeli positions and retaliatory strikes by the Israel Defense Forces.

In the context of the May 10 events, UNDOF personnel observed a high level of kinetic activity in the areas of separation and limitation, and across the ceasefire line, some of which impacted locations in the northern and central parts of the areas of separation. Throughout these events, UNDOF maintained liaison with the both sides to ensure that the parties respected the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

Mme. President,

In closing, I would like to say a few final words on the challenges and opportunities ahead.

We need a unified approach to change the current reality on the ground in Gaza.

While the international community has a central role to play, leaders on all sides of the conflict must show the political will and determination to achieve genuine progress.

Every day that the intra-Palestinian political paralysis continues, and every day that the closures persist, more lives are put at risk in Gaza.

Turning the Gaza tap on and off is not a sustainable strategy for anyone.

We must break this cycle or risk more lethal consequences.

Gaza is an integral part of the larger puzzle. Ultimately, the success of any initiative in Gaza is linked to a credible political horizon that unites all Palestinians.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where settlement construction continues and the situation remains fragile. Nor can we lose sight of the broader political picture and the need to bring the sides back to the negotiating table.

In this regard, and as discussed on my recent visits to the Russian Federation and Jordan, the Middle East Quartet remains a key forum to discuss perspectives for resolving the conflict, including within the broader regional context.

We must continue to work together to end the occupation and bring a just, lasting and comprehensive resolution to the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of two states, and in line with relevant United Nations resolutions and prior agreements. There is no alternative for achieving a peaceful future for all the people of this troubled land.

Thank you.