

**NICKOLAY MLADENOV SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST  
PEACE PROCESS BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE  
SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**23 NOVEMBER 2016**

Mr. President, members of the Security Council,

As we stand here today, the continuing status quo in the occupied Palestinian territory reduces the prospect for sustainable and just peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Rarely have the risks to the two-state solution been greater.

How many times have we said in this Chamber, that we must move past the blatant obstructionism, the false starts and the perpetual claims that the time is simply “not right” for action?

Inaction has a cost. A cost measured in human lives and suffering. The situation on the ground is changing steadily, dangerously, as proponents of Israeli settlement expansion feel emboldened, internal divisions among Palestinians flare up, and the prospect of a future Palestinian state comes under threat like never before.

The proponents of the status quo, Mr. President, the critics of the two-state solution offer no viable alternative that meets the legitimate national and historic aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians. The alternative is an open ended occupation, a perpetual conflict which breeds anger among the people of Palestine and Israel, and feeds radicals across a Middle East torn already by ethnic and religious strife.

Mr. President,

Socio-economic despair, underpinned by the persistent hardships of the occupation and fragile democratic institutions, are affecting stability in the West Bank and threatening to erode the achievements of the Palestinian state-building agenda.

This stark reality is most visible in the Palestine refugee camps, which remain a symbol of the failure to produce a sustainable political solution to end the conflict and Palestinian suffering.

I visited the West Bank city of Nablus twice this month to meet with the Governor, as well as residents and representatives in the Balata refugee camp. Established in 1950 to serve some 5,000 refugees, Balata today is the home of almost 30,000 people living on just 0.25 square km of land.

Some 50 per cent of its residents are reportedly unemployed, the majority of them youth. Poverty and food insecurity rates are the highest in the West Bank.

The harsh conditions, combined with regular Israeli incursions and the lack of a permanent home, create the potential for violence. With growing political tension in the West Bank over the past months, we have witnessed a series of clashes between Palestinian security forces and residents of the camp and in the nearby Old City. During recent operations, regrettably one woman, caught in the crossfire, was killed, and 15 people were injured, including four security personnel.

The Palestinian Authority has an obligation to maintain law and order, including in the refugee camps, which they continue to do effectively and professionally under very

challenging circumstances. It is critical that should force be used, it must be done judiciously. Those charged or arrested must be afforded due judicial process and treated equally under Palestinian law.

The problems in the camps are a reflection of deep socio-economic and political challenges, the resolution of which is not in the hands of vulnerable Palestine refugees — they are foremost in the hands of Palestinian and Israeli political leaders.

Left without hope, mired in poverty, Palestine's most traumatised— its refugees, have seen their needs outpace the resources available to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Generations of residents have been educated by UNRWA. Thousands have gained employment and a sense of security through its various activities. The most destitute have benefitted from its relief programme.

Mr. President,

I appeal to the international community to support UNRWA so that it can carry out its activities effectively and predictably. I welcome the generous commitments made by the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait in addition to Canada's resumption of support for UNRWA. This support is indispensable to maintaining the lives of Palestine refugees and to stability in the region.

Mr. President,

The situation in the camps, however, is only part of the story. If current socio-economic trends continue, the potential for a serious deterioration of the situation in the West Bank will grow.

The Palestinian Authority faces fiscal difficulties as international assistance this year is down by some 30 per cent. The PA is dependent on Israel for clearance revenues, and on the international community for financial support. Economic development in the West Bank remains constrained by Israeli restrictions on access to the most fertile lands, water, and mineral resources in Area C, which constitutes some 60 per cent of the West Bank.

While Israel has made important positive gestures, including retroactively legalizing two Palestinian schools and advancing a community outline plan for a Palestinian village in Area C near Jenin, such steps are only the beginning. They need to be expanded and encouraged.

I welcome important discussions being held between the parties on critical issues, such as water and electricity, that build on agreements from the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting in September here in New York. While progress is being made, it remains slow. It is critical that these discussions become operational realities in order to meet the dire needs in the West Bank and Gaza.

It is in no one's interest to allow the Palestinian economy and stability to crumble. Only significant policy shifts by Israel and action by the Palestinians to strengthen their institutions and the rule of law can sustainably reverse this course.

Mr. President,

In its July report, the Middle East Quartet underscored that the need for Palestinian unity – a single, democratic and legitimate government that unites Gaza and the West Bank – this remains critical for the fulfillment of Palestinian national aspirations. Sadly, this unity continues to remain an elusive goal.

On 29 November Fatah is scheduled to have its 7th Party Conference. This should be used as an opportunity for promoting unity, for strengthening the mainstream centre of Palestinian politics and paving the way for elections. I urge all to conduct the proceedings in a fully transparent and representational manner that encourages moderate voices and respects opposing views.

Mr. President,

Recent developments in Israel are increasingly worrying. Last week, despite strong opposition, the so-called “Legalization bill” passed a preliminary vote in the Knesset. If adopted, the bill would enable an expansion of illegal settlements and outposts on private Palestinian land. If ratified, it would constitute a breach of international law and, according to Israel’s Attorney General, it would also be unconstitutional.

Today, the local planning committee in Jerusalem decided to advance plans for 500 new housing units in the existing settlement of Ramat Shlomo, further encroaching into the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Beit Hanina. I, once again, urge Israel to adhere to the repeated calls to cease illegal settlement construction in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

In recent weeks, Israel has also conducted over 80 demolitions of Palestinian structures in Area C and East Jerusalem for a lack of building permits that are next to impossible for to obtain. In this latest round 122 people have been displaced. This year to date, over 1,020 structures have been demolished, which is nearly twice last year’s total.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn to Gaza, where I continue to be deeply concerned by the continuing militant buildup, smuggling and increased restrictions on the movement of people and goods in and out of the Strip. As I briefed this Council last month, the amount of construction materials entering Gaza is woefully inadequate in order to meet the vast reconstruction needs. Due to limitations imposed by Israel on imports of materials and approvals of construction projects, the volume of such building materials – primarily cement – has now fallen well behind demand. This creates tensions among approved beneficiaries over the limited availability in the market. At today’s import rates, ladies and gentlemen, it would take at least seven months to clear the current backlog of 33,000 households in Gaza who have been approved to purchase cement to repair or reconstruct their house. Thousands of households have been waiting for months to access the material they need; and economic activity is slowing down ominously.

In October, at least 50 per cent of permit applications to exit Gaza were denied for national staff of international aid agencies alone – in sharp contrast to the average of less than five per cent of denials in 2015. This has significant impact for the ability of the UN and the humanitarian community's ability to deliver and monitor ongoing programmes. While acknowledging Israel’s security concerns, I urge Israel to address this pressing issue without delay.

I also welcome recent Egyptian efforts to relieve the suffering of the people in Gaza. The opening of the Rafah crossing for ten days this month enabled thousands, including students and those seeking urgent medical attention, to cross into Egypt and over 2,000 Palestinians to return back home in the Gaza Strip.

Mr. President,

Turning to Lebanon, there have been further signs since the Council was last briefed on 10 November of the country overcoming its political crisis. Following the election of President Aoun, progress has been made towards the formation of a Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Saad Hariri. It is hoped that this positive momentum will translate into a full reactivation of institutions, including parliamentary elections by May 2017.

The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remains unchanged, mostly quiet with some violations by both sides. UNIFIL's investigation into the firing incident across the Blue Line on 26 October near Kafer Kela is ongoing. In a tripartite meeting, Israel and Lebanon reaffirmed their commitments to the calm and stability along the Blue Line.

On the Golan, I remain concerned by the current precarious situation which undermines the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement and clearly jeopardises the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. I urge both parties to maintain liaison with UNDOF and to refrain from any action that could escalate the situation across the ceasefire line and the already volatile regional environment.

Mr. President,

As the situation in the West Bank continues to deteriorate, as Gaza's chronic challenges show little sustainable progress, and as the voices of extremism on all sides intensify their efforts to destroy any remaining hope in the two-state solution, I would like to conclude with a call to both parties and all stakeholders to stand up to those promoting a hate-driven agenda that threatens to prolong this conflict.

A carefully worded statement or a well-crafted speech will not reverse the current trajectory.

What people long for is concrete action.

They need to see a plan to rebuild trust and create the conditions for a return to meaningful negotiations by focusing on positive changes on the ground and an engagement with the region.

They need the international community to restate its consensus that the two-state solution is the only outcome that legitimately meets the national aspirations of both peoples, and to speak clearly against the obstacles to peace: settlements, the taking of land, violence and incitement.

They need to hear from us that development cannot be a substitute for statehood, that democracy, human rights and the rule of law must be respected.

They need courageous Israeli and Palestinian leaders who together can chart a clear strategy to peace and security.

I urge all those who are committed to ending this conflict, including this Council, to consider carefully what it will take to advance the prospects for peace and to begin, in consultation with the parties, to develop an agreed path forward. Time is running out. Palestinians and Israelis deserve to live in peace, and we must spare no effort in helping them reach that goal.

As ever, the United Nations remains committed to advancing this objective.

Thank you.