

**NICKOLAY MLADENOV
UN SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS**

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

24 February 2020

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

Two weeks ago, I briefed this Council following the release of the US “Peace to Prosperity” vision for Israelis and Palestinians.

Today, I will provide a regular briefing on the situation on the ground. However, let me begin by addressing the developing situation in and around Gaza.

On 23 February, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) said it had fired at two Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) militants who were attempting to place an explosive device along the Gaza perimeter fence. PIJ later stated that a member of its military wing had been killed in the incident, and Israeli officials confirmed that IDF had retrieved the body of one of the militants.

Since then more than 60 rockets have been fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad militants towards Israel. As of now the IDF is responding by conducting multiple airstrikes in the Strip. Five injuries have been reported inside Gaza. Yesterday, the IDF also struck what it said were PIJ targets in Syria, where two fatalities were also confirmed.

The situation is escalating as we speak with continuing projectiles being fired from Gaza and retaliatory Israeli airstrikes.

The UN team on the ground is in touch with our Egyptian counterparts in an attempt to restore calm.

Mr. President,

I take this opportunity to call for an immediate stop to the firing of rockets and mortars that only risk dragging Gaza into another round of hostilities with no end in sight. The indiscriminate launching of rockets against civilian population centres violates international law and must end.

Overall, during the reporting period over 110 projectiles were fired from Gaza towards Israeli communities, injuring four people, including a woman and a child. More than 100 incendiary balloons were released towards Israel, many carrying explosive devices. In response, the IDF fired 102 missiles against Hamas and PIJ targets in Gaza, injuring seven Palestinians, including two children.

In the same period three Palestinians crossed from Gaza into Israel and threw an explosive device at security forces, who shot and killed them.

On 31 January, a 14-year old Palestinian boy died from tear gas canister wounds he sustained during demonstrations held at the Gaza fence last year.

Mr. President,

On 1 February, Israel restricted the entry of cement into Gaza, suspended some 500 crossing permits, and reduced the permissible fishing area along Gaza's southern coast from 15 to 10 nautical miles. These decisions came one day after easing of restrictions on certain goods into Gaza was agreed.

By 18 February some of these restrictions were removed and agreement was reached to reverse the suspensions and also to increase business permits to 7,000, the highest since 2007, and the fishing zone back to 15 nautical miles.

Over the past two years I have briefed the Council on the continuing security, humanitarian and political crisis in Gaza and the UN's response to it on the ground. We have worked hard to provide electricity, ease restrictions and allow development in the Strip, while reducing the risk of a military escalation. Women increasingly bear the brunt of the dire humanitarian conditions in the Strip. They are required to support their families while men are unemployed, many live with extended families and struggle to make an income.

Amongst our many humanitarian concerns, today I must highlight the ongoing health disaster in the Gaza Strip. According to local interlocutors, as of the end of January, stock levels for 46 per cent of essential medicines have been completely depleted. On 18 February the IDF enabled a shipment of medicines worth some NIS 4 million (USD 1.2 million) to enter Gaza. This shipment will somewhat alleviate the dire situation. However, I take this opportunity to encourage the Palestinian Government to work with the UN and to increase its efforts to help resolve Gaza's ongoing health crisis.

Mr. President,

Turning to the West Bank, violence has also continued. During the reporting period, seven Palestinians, including one child were killed by Israeli Security Forces (ISF) and another 206 were injured in various incidents. Sixteen Israeli security personnel and seven civilians were injured by Palestinians.

On 5 February, a Palestinian teenager was killed by ISF after he reportedly threw a Molotov cocktail during clashes in Hebron. The following day, a Palestinian man was shot during clashes in Jenin, while in a separate incident, a Palestinian Authority policeman died after reportedly being hit by a live bullet while he was inside a police station. The ISF have opened an investigation into the second incident.

On 6 February in Jerusalem, 12 Israeli off-duty soldiers were injured, including one critically, in a car ramming attack by a Palestinian, who was later arrested.

Another Palestinian succumbed to his wounds after having been shot on 7 February during protests in the village of Qaffin in the northern West Bank.

On 19 February, a 14-year old Palestinian youth was killed by Palestinian Security Forces (PSF) in Qabatia, Jenin during clashes with residents.

I reiterate that violence against civilians, and particularly against children, is unacceptable, and must be condemned by all. Israeli security forces must also exercise maximum restraint and only use lethal force when strictly necessary. All incidents must be thoroughly investigated.

Meanwhile, the situation around the Holy Sites in Jerusalem remained tense throughout the reporting period. Amidst calls by religious and political leaders for Palestinians to pray *en masse* at the Muslim sites, there were limited clashes and arrests reported, including after Friday prayers. The Israeli police also issued orders temporarily restricting access to the site for several Palestinians, including a religious leader and former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, citing incitement and disturbance of the peace as reasons for the suspension. The police also arrested a former Israeli Knesset Member for ignoring police directives while visiting the site.

Mr. President,

With no meaningful bilateral negotiations on the horizon, developments on the ground continued to undermine prospects for a two-state solution.

Israeli authorities demolished or seized 28 Palestinian-owned structures, and 11 others were demolished by their owners following the receipt of demolition orders, displacing 47 people, including 12 women and 19 children. Of the structures demolished 18 were in East Jerusalem. Most of them were targeted due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

During the reporting period, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court ordered the eviction of two Palestinian families from their homes in the Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem, pursuant to a lawsuit brought by an Israeli settler-related organization. Some 80 other families in the area could be affected by similar eviction proceedings.

On 5 February, Israeli authorities demolished two structures at the settlement outpost Ma'ale Shlomo, near Kokhav Hashakhar settlement, and clashed with dozens of settlers who protested the move, leading to three arrests.

On 20 February, the Prime Minister announced that he had approved the construction of some 3,000 housing units in the settlement of Giv'at Hamatos, as well as some 1,000 units in Beit Safafa for its Palestinian residents. He also declared that he would also allow the commencement of planning processes for 2,200 housing units in the East Jerusalem settlement of Har Homa. These projects, if implemented, would consolidate a ring of settlements cutting between East Jerusalem and Bethlehem, significantly constraining the possibility of a future contiguous Palestinian state.

I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and remain a substantial obstacle to peace.

Meanwhile, the threat of annexation remains. Israeli and U.S. officials have said that such a step would only be advanced after a joint committee completes a process of producing detailed maps of relevant areas of the occupied West Bank. On 15 February, the U.S. confirmed the formation of the joint committee.

The Secretary-General has consistently spoken out against unilateral steps and plans for annexation. Such steps, including the possible annexation of territory in the West Bank or similar moves, would have a devastating impact on the prospect for a two-state solution. They would close the door to negotiations, have negative repercussions across the region, and severely undermine opportunities for normalization and regional peace.

Mr. President,

I also take this opportunity to remind the Council that UNRWA continues to face major financial challenges. Without further financial support, critical services in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, will be suspended as of late April. This would result in serious humanitarian repercussions, particularly for some of the most acutely vulnerable communities, among them female-headed households below the poverty line.

I urge member states to continue supporting UNRWA's core programs in order ensure the Agency remains operational beyond April.

Turning briefly to intra-Palestinian developments, I regret to note that the prospects of reconciliation and elections remain stalled. Renewing the legitimacy of Palestinian national institutions by holding legislative and presidential elections, which have not taken place since 2006, is critical indeed. Palestinians must be allowed to exercise their democratic right to vote and elect their leaders and representatives.

While the United Nations continues to support the Egyptian-led Palestinian reconciliation efforts, the Palestinian national movement continues to be weakened by the lack of progress on unity. It is time for leaders to engage positively with Egypt, reverse this negative trajectory and take concrete steps to end division.

Mr. President,

Turning to the region, in Lebanon, Prime Minister Hassan Diab formed a Government on 21 January, which subsequently secured the required vote of confidence from Parliament on 11 February. The new Government's stated priority is to address the socio-economic situation. Popular protests, however, continue throughout the country.

In the UNIFIL area of operations, a serious incident occurred on 10 February in which about 15 individuals blocked a UNIFIL patrol in Bar'ashit (Sector West). The individuals seized items, including one portable radio and one Global Positioning System device, from inside a patrol vehicle. One peacekeeper sustained minor injuries. Attacks on peacekeepers are unacceptable. UNIFIL has requested a prompt investigation of the incident, return of UNIFIL's property, and prosecution of the perpetrators by the Lebanese judicial authorities.

Turning to the Golan, recent developments involving the breach of the ceasefire line and military activities in the area of separation have shown the continued volatility of the situation in that area. On 6 February, UNDOF observed missiles fired from the Alpha side towards the Bravo side, as well as anti-aircraft fire launched from positions on the Bravo side. UNDOF also observed drones flying from the Alpha side across the ceasefire line with one drone being shot down on the Bravo side. On two occasions, the 13 and 23 February, UNDOF personnel observed two aircrafts from the Alpha side

[As delivered]

flying over the area of separation and anti-aircraft fire launched from the Bravo side. On all occasions, the Israel Defense Forces had carried out strikes on targets in Syria and not on the Syrian armed forces. UNDOF engaged both parties in order to prevent an escalation of tensions and reminded them of their obligation to respect the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

Mr. President,

As negative trends on the ground continue, I would like to reiterate what I said in front of this Council earlier this month. Today, it is not enough to reaffirm the internationally agreed parameters on how the conflict can be resolved. It is time to find our way back to a mutually agreed mediation framework that ensures meaningful Israeli-Palestinian negotiations can resume. While there may be different interpretations and proposals how to achieve a two-state solution, this remains our shared objective. As stated by the Secretary-General, the UN position on the two-state solution is defined by resolutions of the Security Council and General Assembly.

The past 48 hours have once again showed us how fragile the situation in Gaza is. Its population suffers under Hamas' rule and Israeli closures while militant activity forces Israeli communities to live in constant fear of the next rocket attack. No amount of humanitarian or economic support on its own will resolve either the situation in Gaza or the broader conflict. Gaza ultimately requires a political solution.

In the absence of progress towards resolving all final status issues, our preventive diplomacy efforts continue to play an integral role in helping ensure the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not escalate further and get pulled into the latest regional escalation.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis as they pursue a peaceful future.

Thank you.