

JEFFREY FELTMAN

UNDER SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

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

24 JUNE 2015

Mr. President,

Let me open with best wishes to our Muslim colleagues on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan.

The Secretary-General is encouraged by the recent reaffirmations by Prime Minister Netanyahu of his commitment to “the idea of a sustainable two-state solution” but notes that this must be translated into actions. This includes a halt to sensitive and unilateral activities in the West Bank, including settlements, which could prejudice a final status agreement or prevent the establishment of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state. This message was reaffirmed by major donor countries at the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting in Brussels on 27 May.

The Secretary-General welcomes Israel’s measures to ease some restrictions on Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, in particular during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, although some measures have been revoked in response to repeated rocket fire from Gaza. He encourages Israel to sustain and expand these confidence-building measures, which enable the legitimate movement of people and goods in and between Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and improve the quality of life of Palestinians.

Mr. President,

The security situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, remained tense. A total of 186 Palestinians were injured, including 28 children and two women. Five members of the Israeli security forces were also injured. Israeli security forces conducted some 400 search-and-arrest operations, resulting in the arrest of 510 Palestinians. In three separate incidents on 20 May, 10 June and 14 June, three Palestinian men were killed by the Israeli security forces: first, a man was killed when an Israeli military jeep overturned during an operation to arrest suspected militants; the second incident occurred as a result of clashes with Israeli military forces; and the third was killed after ramming his vehicle into two Israeli policewomen.

On 19 June, a Palestinian shot at an Israeli vehicle travelling near a West Bank settlement close to Ramallah, killing one Israeli civilian and injuring another. While claims of responsibility have not been confirmed, some Palestinian factions, including Hamas, praised the attack. The United Nations immediately condemned the attack. On 22 June, an Israeli policeman was critically wounded when he was stabbed at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, while the attacker remains in critical condition after being shot by the policeman. In total, six members of the Israeli security forces were injured.

The Secretary-General remains deeply concerned about the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israel, notably those in administrative detention, including Khader Adnan, detained since 8 July 2014 and on hunger strike now for 51 days. The Israeli Government's decision on 14 June to re-introduce draft legislation to permit force-feeding of prisoners on hunger strike under certain conditions, if approved by the Knesset, would be in contravention of international standards.

The demolishing of homes and structures in the West Bank has also continued. This month, 52 structures, including 17 residences, were demolished, leading to the displacement of 29 Palestinians, including 17 children. On 9 June, the Israeli High Court of Justice rejected a petition to restore planning authority to Palestinian villages in Area C of the West Bank. The planning and zoning system as it stands makes it virtually impossible for Palestinians to build or develop their land in Area C.

I reiterate our concerns over the fate of 7,000 Palestinian Bedouins and herders in 46 residential areas in the West Bank, who may be at risk of forcible transfer as Israel advances its plan to relocate these communities into three sites in Area C – a plan which may be linked to settlement expansion in E1 and other areas and which would seriously jeopardize the realization of the two-state solution.

Mr. President,

In the Gaza Strip, the desperate situation was exacerbated by a number of security incidents. During the reporting period, ten rockets were fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza, thankfully without casualties or damage. The Secretary-General has publicly condemned these incidents. A further 11 rockets were test fired towards the sea. Israeli security forces responded by conducting eleven airstrikes on militant sites in Gaza, again, without resulting in injuries.

Concerns are also mounting around internal divisions within Gaza, including a potentially developing threat from militant Salafist individuals or groups. On 2 June, Hamas security forces reportedly killed a Salafist accused of firing rockets at Israel and arrested a number of others suspected of carrying out these attacks.

12 Palestinians were shot and injured by Israeli security forces: I call on Israel to implement measures to minimize incidents which result in injuries in the Access Restricted Areas on land and at sea.

The Secretary-General is closely following media reports which suggest that a flotilla is expected to group and head towards Gaza in the coming days. He continues to believe that a flotilla will not help to address the dire situation in Gaza and reiterates his calls on the Government of Israel to lift all closures, with due consideration of Israel's legitimate security concerns.

Mr. President,

The ever challenging circumstances in Gaza highlight the urgent need for strengthening Palestinian unity. Conflicts, poor governance and the closures have crushed Gaza's economy. Unemployment spiked to 43 per cent at the end of 2014.

I am, nevertheless, encouraged by Prime Minister Hamdallah's commitment to overcome these obstacles, including the issue of public sector employees in Gaza, by reintegrating the governance framework under a single authority. The willingness and capacity of all Palestinian factions to resolve their differences, including on border crossings with Israel and Egypt, is integral to lifting the blockade of Gaza and advancing Palestinian efforts to achieve statehood.

I note the decision on 22 June of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization to form a committee to consult with all Palestinian factions in order to form a national unity government. I encourage all factions to maintain a positive approach to these discussions which are critical to the future of Palestinian reconciliation.

The Secretary-General welcomed Egypt's decision – following consultations with President Abbas – to open the Rafah crossing from 13 to 19 June and for three days this week in both directions. Recognizing that such decisions critically depend on the security environment, and without diminishing the United Nations' primary objective to see the full lifting of all closures within the framework of Security Council resolution 1860 (2009), it is our hope that the Rafah crossing can be opened on a regular basis to help relieve the suffering of the people of Gaza.

While overall progress on Gaza's reconstruction remains far too slow, the establishment of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism has been vital to facilitating the entry of material. As of 23 June, over 88,500 homeowners have procured construction material. Furthermore, 135 construction projects have been approved by the Israeli authorities out of 202 submitted. I welcome that today the Government of Palestine approved the entry of material under the Mechanism for constructing 16,000 new homes to help address the housing gap.

With major construction work expected to begin imminently, there is an urgent need for additional funding for the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, which will exhaust its funds in September.

The Secretary-General took note of the release on Monday of the Human Rights Council's independent Commission of Inquiry's report on Gaza. While we do not comment on the substance of such reports, it is our hope that this report will contribute to bringing justice to victims of last year's war and encourage the parties to engage in serious and credible examinations of their own behaviour.

Mr. President,

A few words about the situation in Lebanon and Syria.

Lebanon has now been without a President for over a year. The vacuum has prevented the parliament from legislating on urgent issues, affecting the economy and the Government's ability to function effectively. Prime Minister Tamam Salam has suspended regular Cabinet meetings since 4 June to ease political tensions over upcoming senior appointments in the Lebanese Armed Forces.

Along the eastern Lebanese-Syrian border, Hizbullah has reportedly seized a number of positions from armed extremist groups, including ISIL and the Nusra Front, in the region of Qalamoun up to the outskirts of Aarsal. The Lebanese Armed Forces are deployed in and around Aarsal to prevent the fighting from reaching the town.

Six months after the launch of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, we urge donors to fulfill existing pledges for assisting the 1.2 million registered refugees and Lebanese host communities.

General calm remained in the UNIFIL area of operations, despite escalatory rhetoric on both sides and security concerns in the Golan Heights. Israel continued violating Lebanese airspace on an almost daily basis.

On Syria, the Secretary-General's Special Envoy continues the Geneva Consultations with Syrian, regional and international delegations with a view to developing recommendations on the operationalization of the Geneva Communique. On 4 June, he held discussions with the Syrian Opposition Coalition in Istanbul and from 15 to 17 June with Syrian officials in Damascus. In Damascus, he also raised issues related to the protection of civilians, including the unacceptable use of barrel bombs by government forces while also condemning the use of gas canisters by opposition groups.

The Turkish Government has raised concerns about refugee flows resulting from efforts to oust ISIL from the Tal Abyad area in Syria. According to information available to the United Nations, approximately 25,000 Syrians from this area sought refuge in Turkey, although we believe that 2,000 refugees have reportedly already crossed back into Syria. It is neither just nor possible to expect from Turkey to continue to face the refugee pressures alone. OHCHR is investigating allegations of forceful displacement of Arab and Turkoman populations. To date, we are unaware of evidence that this has taken place on a wide scale or systematically.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, let me reiterate our concern that accepting a fatalistic narrative on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only accelerate a deterioration of the situation. It will also constitute a grave injustice to those on both sides who want to live peacefully and securely as neighbors – as two peoples whose pasts will be forever linked by their ancestral ties to the region, and whose futures stand only to benefit, including economically. This conflict can also not be viewed in isolation from the regional turmoil. The risk of radicalization in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is heightened by the continued lack of a political horizon. Absent courageous leadership, a sustainable solution will remain a distant and unachievable goal.