

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

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

**25 August 2020**

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I address you today following the agreement that was reached between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that stops Israeli annexation plans over parts of the occupied West Bank and includes the normalization of relations between the two countries.

The Secretary-General has welcomed this agreement, hoping it will create an opportunity for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to re-engage.

Israel's commitment to suspending annexation removes an immediate threat that had the potential to upend the peace process and regional stability. The Secretary-General has consistently called for Israel to abandon these plans. Annexation would constitute a most serious violation of international law, effectively close the door to a renewal of negotiations and destroy the prospect of a viable Palestinian State and the two-State solution itself.

The Israel-UAE deal also has the potential to change dynamics across the region. It creates new opportunities for cooperation at a time when the Middle East and the world face grave dangers from the Covid-19 pandemic and radicalization. It will create economic opportunities and opportunities for peace.

I hope it will inspire leaders on all sides to re-engage constructively in meaningful negotiations to resolve the Israeli Palestinian conflict. The terms of reference of resolving the conflict have not changed — they are based on the relevant UN resolutions, bilateral agreements and international law. Only a two-State solution, in which Israel and Palestine live side-by-side in peace, security and mutual recognition, can lead to sustainable peace.

Today is not the time to despair about the Palestinian cause. Annexation plans have been stopped. In fact, today is the time to redouble efforts, to reach out more actively than ever to leaders in the Middle East, and for the Palestinian and Israeli leadership to re-engage constructively.

Mister President,

Regrettably, we continue to confront a series of multi-layered challenges on the ground as the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and in Israel continues to be a major concern.

The UN and its partners have continued to support Palestinians in responding to the pandemic, including by addressing critical gaps in medical supplies and equipment.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian economy is in freefall. Now that the imminent threat of annexation has been removed, I hope that the Palestinian leadership will resume accepting its clearance revenues and provide some breathing space for the battered economy.

Recently, the security situation in Gaza has also deteriorated; a trend which soon may become irreversible.

It is essential that the ceasefire agreement brokered by Egypt and the UN, which has proved effective since August 2018, be reaffirmed. Mediation efforts will continue; however, I am concerned that militant activity, incendiary balloons, rockets and a deteriorating humanitarian situation inside the Strip are rapidly eroding existing arrangements.

During the past months, Gaza's economy has deteriorated dramatically. Compounding the impact of continued closures, intra-Palestinian division and more than a decade of Hamas rule, COVID-19-related restrictions have halted the crossing of workers and traders into Israel and inhibited revenue transfers to Gaza's exporters. The current absence of cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel has also slowed implementation of critical infrastructure projects and jobs have been lost.

UNSCO continues to work with the UN Country Team (UNCT), donors, and the parties to address the needs in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. On 28 July, the UN Country Team released its COVID-19 Development System Response Plan, outlining critical interventions that the United Nations will implement in the coming 12 to 18 months in support of the Palestinian Government. I encourage Member States to support these efforts.

Mister President,

The UN is deeply engaged in efforts to mitigate the economic and humanitarian consequences of the PA's decision to halt all coordination with Israel in response to the threat of annexation.

As reported last month, the UN reached agreements with the Palestinian government to facilitate vital deliveries of humanitarian aid and related equipment. Agreements were also reached with Israel to streamline its administrative procedures for these imports in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

I am pleased to report that coordination between the UN and all sides on the importation of humanitarian supplies is proceeding well. But coordination levels between Israel and the PA remain far below normal. This has impacted the delivery of assistance as well as the provision of services to the Palestinian population.

Fortunately, after minor delays, a mechanism that supports the transfer of patients requiring medical treatment outside of Gaza has also been established.

Let me reiterate that any increased responsibilities for the UN should be limited and time-bound and not designed to replace the roles and responsibilities of the Palestinian Authority or of the Government of Israel.

I remain very concerned that the suspension of coordination and, in particular, revenue transfers cannot be sustained for much longer without severe humanitarian and economic consequences.

Mister President,

As I noted earlier, tensions in Gaza are rising again.

Over the reporting period, militants fired some 20 rockets towards Israel and launched some 270 balloons carrying incendiary devices, causing hundreds of fires and forcing some civilians to be evacuated from their homes.

Shrapnel from rockets intercepted by the Iron Dome damaged a car and two houses in the Israeli town of Sderot. Six civilians were lightly injured while running for shelter.

Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) responded by striking Hamas targets and agricultural fields, firing some 80 missiles and shells, with five people reported injured, including four children and one woman. Following one of these strikes, an unexploded Israeli missile was found in an UNRWA school in the ash-Shati refugee camp. The IDF has classified this as an accident that is under review.

I reiterate that the indiscriminate launching of rockets and incendiary devices towards Israeli population centers violates international law and must cease immediately. Likewise, children and schools should never be targeted by any party, nor should children be exposed to violence.

In response to the sharp rise in the number of incendiary balloons, on 11 August, Israel limited the transfer of some goods and halted the transfer of construction materials through the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza. On 12 August, Israeli authorities stopped all fuel deliveries until further notice, including donor-funded fuel. As a result, the Gaza Power Plant has shut down, sharply reducing electricity provision to three hours per day. This is severely impacting critical infrastructure, including sewage treatment and provision of clean drinking water. It is also affecting health facilities, schools, and conditions at some of the quarantine centers that are critical to efforts to prevent an outbreak of COVID19 in the Strip, particularly concerning given reports yesterday of the first identified cases of COVID-19 outside of quarantine centers in Gaza. Additionally, on 16 August, Israel closed the Gaza fishing zone completely.

Yesterday after hearing the news of the new COVID19 cases in Gaza, the UN asked Israel to reinstate the delivery of Qatari funded fuel for the Strip in order to help prevent a major health crisis.

Mister President,

This latest escalation has once again demonstrated the urgency of implementing long-term solutions for Gaza.

The Israeli population in proximity to the Strip live in constant fear, watching their lands burn and their children run for shelter. The Palestinian population in Gaza endure unbearable economic

conditions, no freedom of movement and political isolation. Closures and rounds of escalation have defined their lives for over a decade.

There is a moral imperative to end all militant activity in Gaza, restore Palestinian national unity and lift Israeli closures.

But the political solutions that must be provided by leaders are nowhere in sight. Instead, we have a day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year patchwork of crucial humanitarian efforts to prevent war and to try and sustain the lives of two million desperate Palestinians in Gaza.

Mister President,

Turning to the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, three Palestinians, including one child and one woman, were killed and 47 injured, including two children and one woman, in clashes, attacks, search and arrest operations, and other incidents. Seven Israelis, including two soldiers and one child, were injured during the reporting period.

In one tragic incident, a 23-year-old Palestinian woman was killed by live fire in her home in Jenin during an ISF operation and ensuing clashes with local Palestinian residents. There are contradictory claims over responsibility for the shooting, with ISF and local residents denying the use of live ammunition.

On 13 August, Israel's prosecution authorities filed an indictment against five Border Police officers on 14 counts of serious abuse, including assault and robbery. A video subsequently released showed unacceptable, vicious beatings and humiliation of Palestinian detainees.

On 16 August, an 18-year-old Palestinian was shot and injured by ISF while reportedly attempting to throw a Molotov cocktail at Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem. The following day, another Palestinian man was shot and killed in Jerusalem's Old City while carrying out a stabbing attack against an Israeli Border Police officer, who was moderately injured.

In another unfortunate incident involving a disabled person, on 17 August, ISF shot and injured a 60-year-old Palestinian man with hearing and speech impediments at the Qalandiya checkpoint when he did not respond to their calls to halt.

On 20 August, a 16-year-old Palestinian boy died after reportedly being shot by ISF near the village of Deir Abu Mash'al, west of Ramallah. Two other Palestinians were reportedly injured. The ISF stated that the three were preparing to throw Molotov cocktails and set alight tires to attack passing vehicles.

I reiterate that lethal force should be used only as a last resort, against an imminent threat of death or serious injury and in accordance with the principle of proportionality. I call on Israeli authorities to investigate these incidents.

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, there has been a concerning increase in violent crime within Palestinian communities across the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, as well as violent

incidents involving Palestinian Security Forces (PSF) and civilians, with several people shot dead in recent weeks.

Palestinian organizations, meanwhile, focused on gender-based violence (GBV) in the West Bank have also reported a sharp increase in femicides. I urge Palestinian authorities, in line with their obligations, to enhance the protection of women and girls from GBV.

Meanwhile, settlers perpetrated 20 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in four injuries and damage to property.

On 12 August, settlers attacked Israeli Security Forces during an operation to demolish structures at an outpost near the settlement of Yitzhar.

Palestinians carried out 27 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians in the West Bank, resulting in five injuries and property damage.

Mister President,

During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished 72 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and East Jerusalem, displacing some 89 people, including 32 women and 40 children, and affecting 20 others. In addition, 11 Palestinians self-demolished their structures to avoid additional fines.

On 10 August, Israel's High Court of Justice overturned an order to punitively demolish the home of a Palestinian accused of killing an Israeli soldier in May 2020. The Court emphasized that the rights of the perpetrator's wife and children would be disproportionately harmed if the demolition were to proceed.

Mister President,

Briefly turning to the region, in Lebanon, over 180 people are dead following the explosion in Beirut port on 4 August, with 30 persons still missing and several thousand injured. Almost 300,000 people are in need of shelter. A Lebanese investigation into the explosion is ongoing, with the assistance of experts from France, Russia, Turkey and the United States. Following the 9 August international donors' conference co-convened by France and the United Nations, at which nearly \$300 million in aid was pledged, a UN Flash Appeal launched on 14 August raised another \$565 million to help address humanitarian and recovery needs.

Popular protests continued, while informal consultations on the formation of a new Government are ongoing, following the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab's Government on 10 August. At the same time, the COVID-19 outbreak has worsened, prompting a nationwide lockdown in Lebanon. On 18 August, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon delivered its verdict in the Ayyash et al case, concerning the 2005 attack that killed former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and 21 others, convicting Ayyash, while acquitting the three other defendants for lack of evidence.

While the situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained generally stable, tensions have been observed along the Blue Line, including a breach of the cessation of hostilities on 27 July. UNIFIL continues to maintain stability and defuse tensions, including through its liaison and coordination efforts with the parties.

On the Golan, tensions between Israel and Syria heightened on 2 and 3 August. On 2 August, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) carried out a strike killing four individuals from the Bravo side in the vicinity of the ceasefire line. The IDF informed UNDOF that they had carried out an attack on targets east of the Israeli technical fence to thwart an attempt to place explosives in that area. The following day, at the request of Syrian authorities, UNDOF facilitated the retrieval by the ICRC Syria of the remains of the four individuals that were killed. The IDF, on 3 August, also fired missiles from a helicopter across the ceasefire line onto the Bravo side, informing UNDOF that the IDF struck Syrian armed forces targets in response to the attempted IED attack the night before. UNDOF continues to engage with both parties to prevent an escalation of the situation and to remind them of their obligation to respect the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

Mister President,

In closing, let me urge that we not lose sight of the deteriorating dynamics on the ground. Gaza is teetering on the brink of another major escalation with Israel, the occupied West Bank is fracturing under a multitude of economic and political pressures, settlement expansion and demolitions continue, and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a devastating impact on Palestinian and Israeli societies.

This is the stark reality of the current situation.

Without resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, regional peace will not be complete. The legitimate national aspiration of five million Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza cannot be ignored.

It is well beyond time that we all work together with the parties for peace before it is too late. That is why every opening must be explored, every opportunity must be used, every idea must be discussed and debated if we are to get out of the cycle of statements, preventive diplomacy and conflict management and work towards a real solution that is sustainable and in line with relevant UN resolutions.

Thank you.