

**TOR WENNESLAND
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS**

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

25 August 2022

Mr. President,

My last briefing took place just after Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad each independently declared a ceasefire, following three days of military escalation.

I am pleased to update the Council that the ceasefire remains in effect, and a fragile calm has been restored in Gaza. The Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings have remained open since 8 August, allowing for the entry of essential goods and materials. The UN is working with partners to ensure the delivery of urgent assistance to those who need it most.

The ceasefire prevented the situation from escalating into a full-scale war, which would have had devastating consequences. It also allowed for the resumption of the measures implemented over the past year that have resulted in much needed economic relief to the people in Gaza.

But a ceasefire is limited to ending immediate hostilities. The underlying drivers of the conflict are still unresolved.

Violence has increased across much of the occupied West Bank. Israeli settlement activities continue, along with demolitions and evictions. Fiscal and political challenges threaten the Palestinian Authority's effectiveness in delivering essential public services. The West Bank and Gaza remain politically divided. Palestinians in Gaza face the challenge of economic and movement restrictions linked with the Israeli closure regime, the nature of Hamas rule and the ever-present threat of violence.

Unless fundamental issues are addressed, the cycle of acute crisis followed by short-term fixes will persist. Concerted efforts are needed to restore a political horizon and resume meaningful negotiations.

Mr. President,

My briefing on 8 August provided an initial account of the three-day escalation. Overall, the Israel Defense Forces conducted some 147 airstrikes against what they said were militant targets in Gaza. Palestinian militants indiscriminately fired approximately 1,100 rockets from densely populated areas in the Strip towards Israel. Of these, Israeli officials reported that around 35 per cent were intercepted by the Iron Dome and 18 per cent fell short and landed within the Gaza Strip, causing damage and, reportedly, civilian casualties.

The violence took a severe toll on civilians. According to the most recent figures, 49 Palestinians were killed, of whom at least 26 were civilians, including four women and 17 children. According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, 360 Palestinians were injured during the escalation. Israeli officials reported 70 Israelis injured, including nine children. In Gaza, ten houses were completely destroyed, while another 48 were severely damaged. A reported 650 housing units were damaged.

On 5 August, Israeli forces carried out a series of airstrikes, killing a senior PIJ leader and other suspected militants. In the initial strikes, a five-year-old girl was killed in eastern Gaza City, along with two men; and a 22-year-old woman was killed east of Khan Younis.

On 6 August, a 60-year-old woman was killed and five children injured in an Israeli airstrike. One of the children, a 10-year-old girl, died in hospital on 8 August.

On the same day, seven other Palestinians were killed in an Israeli airstrike in Rafah, including a 13-year-old child, two women, and a senior PIJ commander. Thirty others were reportedly injured, including at least seven children and five women.

On 7 August, five children were killed and four others were injured in an explosion in al-Falouja cemetery, east of Jabaliya. On 16 August, media, citing Israeli official sources, reported that the IDF had concluded that the casualties were caused by an Israeli air strike. The IDF has not publicly confirmed this finding.

On two separate occasions Palestinian civilians were killed and injured in explosions, the cause of which has yet to be verified. On 6 August, seven Palestinian – all civilians, including at least four children, were killed in an explosion near Emad Aql Mosque in Jabaliya. Forty-three others, including 26 children, were injured. On 7 August, an explosion in al-Boureij killed three children and their 49-year-old father, whom al Qassam Brigades claimed as an operative. Israeli forces denied involvement in the incidents, which they said were caused by rocket launches from militant groups. Palestinian armed groups have made no public statements on these incidents.

I am concerned that airstrikes in densely populated areas resulted in civilian fatalities and injuries. Israel must abide by its obligations under international humanitarian law, including the proportional use of force and taking all feasible precautions to spare civilians and civilian objects in the conduct of military operations.

I condemn the indiscriminate launching of rockets by Palestinian armed groups from highly populated neighborhoods in Gaza into civilian populated centers in Israel, which violates international humanitarian law.

I reiterate that children must never be the target of violence or put in harm's way.

Mr. President,

Daily violence has also continued at high levels across the occupied West Bank. In total during the reporting period, 12 Palestinians, including four children, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) during demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged attacks against Israelis, and other incidents, and 289 Palestinians, including three women and 83 children, were injured. Israeli settlers or other civilians perpetrated 39 attacks against Palestinians resulting in eight injuries and/or damage to Palestinian property.

In all, 28 Israeli and other civilians, including at least four women and two children, and four Israeli security personnel were injured by Palestinians in clashes, shooting, stabbing and ramming attacks, the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails, and other incidents. In total, Palestinians perpetrated 75 attacks against Israeli civilians, out of which 57 were stone-throwing, resulting in injuries and/or damage to Israeli property.

On 22 July, Nasser al-Shaer, a Hamas-affiliated former official, was shot multiple times and injured by two unknown assailants in Kafr Qalil village, near Nablus. The Palestinian Authority ordered an investigation, and on 26 July, Palestinian Security Forces announced that they had arrested two Palestinian suspects.

On 24 July, Israeli security forces shot and killed two Palestinians and injured six others in an exchange of fire during an arrest operation in Nablus.

On 26 July, Israeli forces shot an unarmed 59-year-old man with a mental disability at Huwwara checkpoint, south of Nablus. The man died of his injuries on 29 July.

On 9 August, Israeli security forces shot and killed a 16-year-old Palestinian, and injured five others, during a clash in Hebron. Israeli officials said that the Palestinians had thrown stones towards Israeli forces, who responded with live fire.

On that same day, four Palestinians, including a 16-year-old, were killed, and 76 Palestinians were injured with live ammunition during clashes that erupted following an ISF military operation in Nablus. Another 16-year-old Palestinian subsequently died from his injuries.

On 14 August, a Palestinian opened fire at a group of Jewish worshippers in Jerusalem's Old City. Eight civilians, including a pregnant woman, were injured, two seriously. The assailant fled the scene but later turned himself over to the police.

On 15 August, ISF shot and killed a Palestinian during a search operation and subsequent clashes in Kufr Aqab, north of Jerusalem. Israeli police stated that the man was shot while attempting to stab officers. The man's father, who was present during the operation, denied this.

On 17 August, ISF shot and killed a Palestinian and injured five others during clashes in Nablus, which took place in the context of Palestinians throwing stones and reportedly firing towards buses transporting Israeli civilians to Joseph's Tomb for religious worship, this, in accordance with established procedures.

On 19 August, an unarmed 58-year-old Palestinian man was shot and killed. A video appeared to show the man was a bystander returning from dawn prayers when an exchange of fire broke out. There are conflicting accounts as to the source of the shot. Israeli authorities stated that they are investigating the incident.

Mr. President,

Settler-related violence also continued during the reporting period.

On 29 July, a 15-year-old Palestinian was shot during a confrontation between Palestinians and armed Israeli settlers accompanied by Israeli security forces outside al Mughhayyir village, near Ramallah. The boy subsequently died. According to witnesses, he had been throwing stones and was shot in the back while running away. It remains unclear whether Israeli settlers or security forces fired the shot. Two other Palestinians were injured with live ammunition.

In three separate incidents, Israeli civilians attacked Palestinian farmers while they were working on their lands, using batons and metal bars, and throwing stones, injuring five Palestinians, including an elderly man.

I reiterate that perpetrators of all acts of violence must be held accountable and brought to justice. Security forces must only use lethal force when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Mr. President,

Turning to settlement-related developments, on 25 July, the Jerusalem District Planning Committee advanced plans for the construction of 1,215 housing units at the Lower Aqueduct site, adjacent to Kibbutz Ramot Rachel and the Palestinian neighborhood of Umm Tuba. Some of the units are intended for construction across the Green Line, in occupied East Jerusalem.

On 27 July, Israel's Supreme Court reversed its previous ruling ordering the evacuation of settlers from the illegal outpost of Mitzpeh Kramim, near Ramallah. The Court accepted the Government's argument that the Palestinian land in the area had been allocated to the settlers in "good faith", and that the principle of "market regulation" should be applied. Rights groups expressed concerns that the ruling could pave the way for the retroactive legalization of other outposts under Israeli law.

On 28 July, Israeli settlers, accompanied by Israeli security forces, moved into an empty Palestinian house in the H2 area of Hebron City.

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

During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished, seized, or forced owners to demolish 78 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 18 in East Jerusalem, displacing some 103 Palestinians, including 50 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 25 July, ISF demolished two homes housing multiple families in Qarawat Bani Hassan village, near Salfit in Area B. Family members of the residents were accused of having killed an Israeli settlement guard in April 2022. The demolition resulted in damage to three additional neighboring homes and displaced 18 people, including ten children. Three Palestinians were injured in related clashes with Israeli forces.

On 8 August, ISF demolished two houses in Rummana village, near Jenin in Area B. The houses belonged to family members of Palestinians indicted for killing three people in Israel in May. Thirteen people, including four children, were displaced.

I call on Israeli authorities to end demolitions of Palestinian-owned property and the displacement and eviction of Palestinians, and to approve additional plans that would enable Palestinians to build legally and address their development needs.

I am concerned about the recent announcement by the Israeli Ministry of Education that it had given instructions to halt the granting of permanent licenses to six Palestinian schools in occupied East Jerusalem, due to what it said was incitement against Israel in the school curriculum. If a solution is not found, more than 2,000 students will be impacted.

On 17 August, the Israel Defense Forces Military Commander rejected objections by five non-governmental organizations against their proscriptions as “unlawful organizations” from November 2021. That same day, the Israeli Defense Minister announced that the terrorist designation of three of these organizations, issued in October 2021 under the Israeli Counter Terrorism law, had been made permanent. Three other organizations have appealed their designations.

On 18 August, Israeli forces ordered the closure of the offices of seven organizations, including all six NGOs designated as terrorist organizations in November 2021, and searched their offices in Ramallah. Equipment was confiscated, in some cases destroyed, and confidential files were seized. Israeli authorities also summoned the directors of three of these organizations for questioning.

I reiterate the Secretary General’s concern about the shrinking space for civil society in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Mr. President,

In Gaza, despite the disruptions caused by the escalation, some positive steps occurred during the reporting period.

As of 1 August, over 14,000 economic needs permits have been issued, including more than 11,000 permits for workers from Gaza to enter Israel and nearly 3,000 permits for traders and businessmen. Israel also extended social entitlements to workers from the Gaza Strip. Going forward, I welcome a steady increase in issued permits.

Since the resumption of movement into and out of Gaza on 8 August, progress has been made to restore the incremental easing of access restrictions we have seen over the past year. Nevertheless, delays in importing essential goods and equipment continue.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains deeply troubling. The escalation, along with the closures of Israeli-operated crossings between 2-7 August, exacerbated ongoing hardship and resulted in new immediate needs. The UN has identified approximately USD 15 million in additional funding requirements to provide psychosocial support, shelter, livelihoods, cash assistance, and essential medical assistance and medicines.

In addition, the humanitarian response across the Occupied Palestinian Territory continues to face chronic funding gaps. As of mid-2022, only 25 per cent of the requirements of the Humanitarian Response Plan had been met. Meanwhile, global price rises for key commodities have strained the resources of humanitarian partners and placed vulnerable families at risk of food insecurity. The World Food Programme (WFP) is in immediate need of USD 26.5 million to support vulnerable households in Gaza and the West Bank. If funding is not received, support to these families will stop in October.

In a welcome step towards facilitating imports to the occupied West Bank via Jordan, on 1 August, the use of 40-foot containers was permitted for the first time for shipping goods via Allenby Bridge. I am hopeful that it will pave the way for addressing other significant obstacles to Palestinian trade.

Mr. President,

Turning to the region, in the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria was generally maintained despite several violations of the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement of Forces. It remains important that the parties respect their obligations under the terms of the Agreement and prevent risks of escalation.

In Lebanon, lack of progress with reforms, deadlock of Government formation, and increasing strain on institutions, including Lebanese armed and security forces continue to weigh heavily on state authority.

Heightened tensions persisted in the UNIFIL area of operations in south Lebanon. In recent months at least four firing ranges, unknown to Lebanese authorities, have been observed in regular use south of the Litani River. This is a blatant violation of resolution 1701 (2006). The rising number of incidents affecting UNIFIL's freedom of movement is unacceptable. Access throughout its entire area of operations, including the full length of the Blue Line, is critical to mandate implementation. Regular and ongoing violations of Lebanese airspace by Israel also remain of concern and constitute violations of resolution 1701 (2006).

Mr. President,

The measures taken by Israel towards easing conditions in Gaza since the May 2021 escalation have improved the lives and livelihoods of many Palestinians, and I am encouraged that they are being restored following the most recent escalation. The UN will continue engaging with the parties to expand on the progress made over the past year with the aim of solidifying the ceasefire and enabling further economic development.

But the events of the past weeks have shown, yet again, managing the conflict is no substitute for a real political process. We must turn our attention, once again, to the broader strategy of ending the occupation and realizing a two-State solution in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

Such a strategy will require significant steps from all sides. This must include the strengthening of the Palestinian Authority and its ability to engage with Israel on the political, economic and security fronts as well as working towards the return of the legitimate Palestinian Government to Gaza.

Crucially, we must work towards restoring a political horizon. As a first step, tensions and violence across the OPT should be stopped or significantly reduced, especially in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Unilateral steps that perpetuate negative trends need to stop.

The space for Palestinian economic activity and further improvements to access and movement in Gaza and the West Bank should be expanded.

At the same time, the Palestinian Authority, including its institutional capacity, needs to be strengthened.

Given what I regularly report to this Council, the status quo is not a strategy nor a strategic option – not for positive change on the ground nor for a restart of talks between the two sides. I urge the Israeli and Palestinian leadership, regional countries and the broader international community to take firm action to enable a return to meaningful negotiations.

Thank you.