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

**25 February 2025**

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

The Middle East today is undergoing rapid transformation—its scope and impact remain uncertain, but it presents a historic opportunity. The people of the region can emerge from this period with peace, security, and dignity. However, this may be our last chance to achieve the two-State solution.

Mr President,

It cannot be repeated enough; nothing justifies the appalling October 7 terror attacks executed by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups. I welcome the implementation of the first phase of the ceasefire including the release of 34 hostages. I echo the Secretary-General's condemnation of the public parading of hostages released by Hamas, including statements made under duress, and the appalling display of the coffins of deceased hostages. I think none of us will forget the harrowing pictures of the coffins of the Bibas children taken hostage with their mother and killed while in captivity. The images of Israeli hostages released show clear signs of ill-treatment reflecting the very dire conditions they were subjected to in Gaza. I reiterate that all hostages must be released unconditionally and while in captivity, they must be allowed to receive visits and assistance from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Mr President,

The trauma is undeniable on both sides.

In Gaza, death, destruction, and multiple displacement has been inflicted upon the Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip. While the first phase of the ceasefire has provided a surge of much-needed relief, far more remains to be done to address over 15 months of deprivation of basic human necessities and above all a loss of human dignity. In my last visit to Gaza, soon after the ceasefire came into effect, I was once again moved by a sense of utter devastation, young and old, and despair due to loss, trauma and a sense of abandonment by the international community.

As part of the ceasefire deal, 1,135 Palestinian prisoners and detainees have been released so far. Reports of serious ill-treatment and humiliation during their detention are concerning.

Mr President,

Since the first phase of the ceasefire came into effect on 19 January, the United Nations, NGOs and member states have expedited and scaled up life-saving humanitarian assistance into Gaza. Improved access and security conditions have allowed for the delivery of assistance and services.

Medical evacuations through the Rafah crossing began on 1 February, facilitating the transfer to Egypt of sick and injured patients in accordance with the ceasefire deal.

Mr. President,

The resumption of hostilities must be avoided at all costs. I call on both sides to fully honor their commitments to the ceasefire deal and conclude negotiations for the second phase.

I commend the mediators Egypt, Qatar, and the United States for their steadfast work in securing the first phase and pursuing the second phase.

Mr. President,

As we address the immediate needs in Gaza, we must also build a future that offers protection, recovery, and reconstruction.

As you know, the World Bank, EU, and UN have released an updated Interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment for Gaza's recovery and reconstruction. Initial estimates indicate that \$53 billion will be required for this effort. Arab states are leading the efforts to devise a plan for rebuilding Gaza, with Egypt planning to host a conference dedicated to Gaza's reconstruction.

The UN is ready to support reconstruction efforts. Palestinians – Palestinian civilians – must be able to resume their lives, to rebuild, and to construct their future in Gaza. There can be no question of forced displacement.

Mr. President,

While international attention is focused on Gaza, I am concerned about military operations, attacks and mounting violence in the West Bank. Casualties, destruction, and displacement continue to be reported, particularly in Jenin, Tubas, and Tulkarm governorates, where refugee camps and infrastructure are heavily impacted. Many of these areas are in Area A under the Palestinian Authority's civil and security responsibility.

Israeli forces have deployed airstrikes and other heavy weaponry, whilst Palestinian militants have used improvised explosive devices and carried out shooting attacks. This takes place alongside continued violence and intimidation by Israeli settlers against Palestinians and attacks by Palestinians against Israelis. Following the detonation of three bombs on empty buses near Tel Aviv in a suspected terror attack, the IDF has increased its troop presence in the West Bank.

I am alarmed by the killing of a pregnant woman and young children during these operations. These incidents must be thoroughly investigated and those responsible held to account.

Mr President,

Regarding continued illegal settlement activity, approximately 2,000 new housing units have been advanced in recent weeks, mostly in Area C.

State land declarations and settler outposts impede Palestinian land use for farming, while demolitions and evictions have been accelerated. Severe movement restrictions continue to paralyze daily life for many Palestinians, hindering access to essential services and economic activity.

These developments along with continued calls for annexation, present an existential threat to the prospect of a viable and independent Palestinian State and thereby the two-State solution.

Mr President,

Israeli legislation that bans UNRWA from operating in Israel and occupied East Jerusalem took effect on 30 January 2025. The Secretary-General has condemned the breach of inviolability of United Nations premises in occupied East Jerusalem. UNRWA's work remains essential and must be allowed to continue unimpeded.

Mr President,

The Palestinian Authority, as has been reported, continues to implement agreed-upon reforms, including fiscal and public finance policy, governance and rule of law, for the investment climate, and basic service provision.

In early February, the Palestinian Authority issued a decree cancelling financial payments to families of Palestinians killed during or imprisoned following attacks on Israelis. This represents an important step in the Palestinian Authority's reform agenda and should be fully implemented.

Mr President

Turning briefly to the region. In Lebanon, the election of the President and formation of the new Government provide an opportunity to fully empower state institutions in laying the foundation for greater stability, to extend state authority and address the country's multifaceted challenges.

I call upon Lebanon and Israel to uphold their commitments under the cessation of hostilities and undertake meaningful steps towards the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 to restore stability and allow the people on both sides of the Blue Line to return home.

In southwest Syria, the UN is concerned by violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement, and I urge the parties to uphold their obligations under the Agreement.

Mr. President,

Since assuming the role of Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process ad interim, my team and I have actively engaged with all relevant parties. I have initiated consultations in the region and will continue to engage with key stakeholders.

These consultations have reaffirmed that there is no sustainable resolution to the current war or wider conflict that is not fundamentally political. As we engage in planning for Gaza's future, we need to ensure that:

1. Gaza remains an integral part of a future Palestinian State.
2. Gaza and the West Bank including East Jerusalem are unified politically, economically, and administratively.
3. There will be no long-term IDF presence in Gaza and Israel's legitimate security concerns are addressed.

We need to commit to ending the occupation and a final resolution of the conflict based on UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

I would like to make four key requests:

First, continued support for the full realization of the ceasefire deal, including the release of all hostages. This is critical.

Second, it is crucial not to lose sight of the dangerous dynamics in the West Bank and urgent de-escalation which is needed.

Third, the international community must continue to support the Palestinian Authority in its reform efforts and its resumption of responsibilities in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian security forces should also be empowered to carry out their responsibilities in areas under their control.

Fourth, politically and financially support Gaza's recovery and reconstruction efforts.

Mr President,

Peace in the Middle East is possible. We can achieve a future where a safe and secure Israel exists alongside a viable and independent Palestinian State. This requires continued, concerted effort, dedication, and political courage by all parties. The United Nations will continue to play its role in the pursuit of lasting peace.

Thank you.