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SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
UNSCR 2334 (2016)

26 March 2024

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Before turning to the report, I wish to acknowledge the important message from this Council in yesterday's passage of resolution 2728 (2024) – we need a ceasefire now; we need the release of all hostages now. The suffering must end.

Mr. President,

This is the twenty-ninth quarterly report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016). It covers the period from 8 December to 18 March.

The resolution calls on Israel to “immediately and completely cease all settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem” and to “fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard.” Nevertheless, settlement activities have continued and intensified.

In total some 4,780 housing units were advanced or approved in settlements in Area C in the occupied West Bank and in East Jerusalem. Of these, the Higher Planning Committee (HPC) advanced approximately 3,420 housing units in three settlements in the occupied West Bank, including 2,400 in Ma'ale Adumim settlement on 6 March. Another 580 housing units were approved in two plans in Area C in Revava and Mevo'ot Jericho. In occupied East Jerusalem, 700 housing units were advanced and approved in Givat Hashaked settlement. In addition to this, tenders for approximately 430 housing units were announced for settlements in Area C in the West Bank.

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Citing the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, Israeli authorities demolished, seized, or forced people to demolish 300 structures, displacing 314 people, including 137 children. Sixteen structures were donor funded.

In a continuing trend, 35 Palestinians, including 17 children, left their West Bank communities citing violence and harassment by settlers and shrinking grazing land.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for “immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction.” Unfortunately, the devastating conflict in Gaza has continued, alongside daily violence in the occupied West Bank.

Mr. President,

In Gaza, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health (MOH), from 8 December to 18 March, at least 14,550 Palestinians were killed, including approximately 4,200 women and 6,000 children, and at least 27,800 were injured. This brings the total reported by the MOH, since 7 October, to more than 31,790 Palestinians killed, a majority of whom are reportedly women and children.

According to Israeli sources 134 hostages are still being held captive, of some 250 taken hostage. Israeli sources also report over 1,461 Israelis and foreign nationals killed by Hamas or other Palestinian armed groups, including at least 338 women, 37 children and 633 members of the security forces, since 7 October, inclusive.

Hostilities remained intense across Gaza, with Israel conducting strikes from air, land and sea, resulting in tens of thousands of casualties, massive displacement of civilians and widespread destruction, including of civilian infrastructure. Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups continued to hold civilians hostage, launch attacks at Israeli forces and fire indiscriminate rockets towards Israel.

The Israeli operation in Khan Younis continued, driving tens of thousands more Palestinians to Rafah, including those already displaced multiple times, where airstrikes have intensified amid concerns of a major Israeli military operation. The fighting has seriously impacted the remaining functioning hospitals in Gaza.

The IDF stated that its operations are targeting Hamas fighters and equipment, as well as tunnel networks and other facilities used for military purposes, including in or under civilian infrastructure.

Law and order are rapidly breaking down in Gaza as desperation grows. On 29 February, more than a hundred Palestinians were killed, and several hundred more injured, in an attack involving Israeli forces during an Israeli-coordinated aid delivery operation in northern Gaza. At least 26 attacks have occurred on people at aid distribution points since mid-January.

Repeated attacks on health-care facilities have been reported in Gaza, resulting in the deaths of health-care workers, patients and internally displaced people sheltering in those locations.

On 15 March, the Prime Minister's Office announced approval of plans for an Israeli military operation in Rafah, including steps to evacuate civilians from combat zones.

In the reporting period, 39 UN personnel were killed in Gaza, bringing the total number of UN staff killed since October 7 to 171.

Meanwhile, violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, continued at alarming levels.

159 Palestinians, including two women and 43 children, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) during search-and-arrest operations, armed exchanges, airstrikes, demonstrations and other incidents. One Palestinian was killed by Israeli settlers, and another was killed either by Israeli forces or by settlers. A total of 1,150 Palestinians were injured, including 240 by tear gas inhalation and 394 by live ammunition.

According to Israeli sources, ten Israelis, including two women, one child and three security forces personnel, were killed and another 74 were injured by Palestinians in shooting, stabbing and ramming attacks and in rock- and Molotov cocktail-throwing and other incidents.

Israeli security forces carried out 1,937 search-and-arrest operations in the occupied West Bank, resulting in 2,119 Palestinians detained including at least 72 children. Israel currently holds at least 3,558 Palestinians in administrative detention.

The high number of fatal incidents during the reporting period precludes me from detailing all but allow me to highlight a few.

Most Palestinians were killed by ISF in the context of Israeli operations in Area A, including during subsequent exchanges with armed Palestinians, marked by the use of increasingly lethal weaponry. Incidents include six Palestinians, including a 14-year-old, killed on 8 December, in al-Far'a refugee camp in Tubas; 11 more, including three children, killed during a three-day Israeli operation and ensuing armed clashes from 12 to 14 December in Jenin; and four Palestinians, including two children, were killed in Tulkarem refugee camp, with five others killed in Nablus' Balata refugee camp on 17 January. On 30 January, inside a hospital in Jenin, ISF killed three Palestinians, one of whom was a patient. The IDF said that the three were planning an attack against Israelis. On 4 March, a 16-year-old was killed in the al Am'ari refugee camp in the largest Israeli operation in and around Ramallah for years.

Settler-related violence continued, including several attacks recorded in the Jordan Valley, where herding communities are at risk of displacement. On 28 February, Israeli authorities extended the administrative detention of a prominent settler by three months.

Violence against Israelis by Palestinians also continued in shooting attacks in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem and in Israel. Three Israelis were killed near Ashdod on 16 February; another was killed on 22 February, near the Ma'ale Adumim settlement in a shooting attack on cars; and, on 29 February, two others, including a 16-year-old, were killed near the Eli settlement.

Despite some restrictions, on 15 March, thousands of Muslim worshipers participated in Friday Ramadan prayers in Jerusalem's Old City, with minimal confrontations.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for the parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric. Nevertheless, such acts continued.

Marking 100 days since its 7 October attack, a senior Hamas official celebrated and vowed to repeat the event, calling it "a scaled-down model of the final war of liberation." Ahead of the start of Ramadan, Hamas also called on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, to escalate confrontations with Israel.

A number of Israeli officials called for the "voluntary migration" of Palestinians from Gaza and the reestablishment of settlements there, with a minister posting on social media that Israel "should compel them until they say they want it. Continue to pressure them, using force, starvation, [and] difficult conditions." An Israeli Member of Knesset called on Israel "To occupy, to annex, to destroy all the houses [in Gaza], to build large and spacious neighborhoods, large settlements."

Mr. President,

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated calls by the Middle East Quartet for "affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-State solution." Negative trends continued.

In Gaza, the humanitarian impact of the hostilities has been cataclysmic and is worsening daily.

Nearly 1.7 million people have been displaced, with almost 1 million sheltering in Rafah.

More than one million people in Gaza are projected to face catastrophic levels of food insecurity by the end of May, and famine in the northern part of Gaza is imminent according to the latest IPC analysis. Indeed, starvation-related fatalities have already been reported. Most people have no access to adequate food, clean drinking water, or effective sanitation services, amid a decimated health system.

The levels of humanitarian access and safety of humanitarian workers remain alarming, negatively impacting the humanitarian response, alongside operational constraints and pipeline limitations. Near daily Israeli denials and delays of coordinated movement including detentions of humanitarian workers and ineffective deconfliction mechanisms and the lack of approval for adequate communications equipment and armored vehicles make humanitarian work extremely dangerous. Aid convoys continue to face attacks, damaged roads and unruly mobs, amid a security vacuum.

Some progress was made on a maritime corridor from Cyprus, with a first shipment arriving on 15 March, alongside the opening of an access point in the north of Gaza.

On 29 December 2023, the Republic of South Africa instituted proceedings against Israel before the International Court of Justice concerning alleged violations in the Gaza Strip of Israel's obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. On 26 January, the ICJ indicated provisional measures in the case.

On 29 January, Palestinian Prime Minister Shtayyeh announced a Government reform program centered on improving accountability, reducing deficits, enhancing revenue and upgrading services. Following Prime Minister Shtayyeh's resignation, President Abbas announced Mohammad Mustafa Prime Minister-designate on 14 March.

On 29 February, per an arrangement agreed to between Norway, Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), the PA started to receive the clearance revenues that Israel collects on its behalf. The revenues exclude an amount Israel says the PA transfers to Gaza, which the parties agreed would be held in a trust fund in Norway. The fiscal situation of the PA nevertheless remains extremely precarious with soaring unemployment and poverty rates, in the context of increased movement restrictions.

Intra-Palestinian discussions took place in Moscow on 1-2 March.

During the reporting period, Israel provided information alleging 12 UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attacks. The employment contracts of the active staff members were terminated and the Secretary-General immediately activated an internal investigation, which has delivered an interim report. He also appointed an independent review group, which visited Israel and Palestine in March, to assess whether the Agency is doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and to respond to allegations of serious breaches.

Mr. President,

In resolution 2334 (2016), the Security Council called upon all States "to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967."

On 7 March, the Norwegian Government issued a statement outlining that “Norwegian businesses should be aware that, through economic or financial activity in the Israeli settlements that violate international law, they risk contributing to violations of international humanitarian law or human rights.”

Resolution 2334 (2016) also called upon “all parties to continue, *inter alia*, to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations.”

In the context of the current hostilities in Gaza, intense negotiations between international mediators and the parties continued to formulate a deal for the release of the hostages and a ceasefire.

On 1 February, the U.S. issued an Executive Order imposing sanctions on “persons undermining peace, security and stability in the West Bank.” Additional sanctions on two outposts and settlers were announced on 14 March. In total, seven Israeli settlers have been sanctioned under the order. The UK, France and New Zealand also subsequently announced sanctions against settlers.

On 23 February, reverting to U.S. policy announced in December 2016, the U.S. Secretary of State stated that the U.S. views Israeli settlements as “inconsistent with international law.”

On 4 March, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict released findings that there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred in multiple locations during the 7 October attacks in Israel and that there was clear and convincing information that sexual violence has been committed against hostages and reasonable grounds to believe that such violence may be ongoing against those still in captivity. While the scope of the visit in the occupied West Bank did not include verification, the Special Representative stated that she received information about various forms of sexual violence as well as sexual harassment and threats of rape against Palestinian men and women in detention settings, during house raids, and at checkpoints in the West Bank.

Mr. President,

In closing, allow me to share the Secretary-General’s observations on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016).

1. I once again condemn the horrific armed attacks by Hamas and other groups on 7 October. Nothing can justify these acts of terror. The remaining hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally. While in captivity, hostages must be treated humanely and allowed to receive visits and assistance from the Red Cross. I am horrified by the findings of SRSG Patten regarding the use of sexual violence during the 7 October attacks and sexual violence committed against hostages, which may well be ongoing. All perpetrators of such acts must be fully prosecuted and held to account. As hostilities continue, I reiterate that there is no justification for the acts of terror that were committed and the deliberate killing, maiming and abduction of civilians and other protected persons and using sexual violence against them. The use of human shields, and the firing of indiscriminate rockets towards Israeli population centers are violations of international humanitarian law and must cease completely.
2. I am appalled by the immense scale of death, destruction, and human suffering wrought by Israel’s military campaign in Gaza, with civilian killings at a rate that is unprecedented. I

condemn the killing of the thousands of civilians in Gaza, a majority of whom are reportedly women, children, and protected personnel.

3. Nothing can justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people. I am concerned over what may be violations of international humanitarian law, including possible non-compliance with the requirements of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack. I reiterate that ordering the massive displacement of the population in Gaza without ensuring that basic humanitarian needs can be met raises serious concerns about compliance with the applicable legal requirements. The entry of humanitarian supplies has been far below what is required. Hospitals must be respected and protected by all parties and should never become battlegrounds. International humanitarian law cannot be applied selectively. It applies to all parties to a conflict at all times and the obligation to comply with it does not depend on reciprocity. I mourn the UN staff killed in Gaza. Their courage and dedication will not be forgotten. The inviolability of United Nations premises must be respected at all times.
4. The life-threatening conditions facing the more than 1.7 million internally displaced persons within an ever-diminishing space in Gaza must be addressed immediately. I am extremely concerned by the possible nightmare of more than 1 million people being displaced again if Israel proceeds with its planned ground operation in Rafah. The world's leading experts on food insecurity also clearly document that famine in the northern part of Gaza is imminent. Palestinians in Gaza are enduring horrifying levels of hunger and suffering. I call on Israel to fulfill its obligations under international law, including allowing and facilitating the rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access into and throughout Gaza. The UN and humanitarian partners must be able to deliver assistance safely. This means that humanitarian locations, movements, and workers must be protected more effectively, and that the UN be allowed the equipment it needs to increase staff safety.
5. I welcome the opening of a maritime corridor to deliver much-needed additional humanitarian assistance by sea, but reiterate that for aid delivery at scale there is no meaningful substitute to delivery by land.
6. I reiterate my call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and urge all sides to redouble efforts to reach an agreement that will bring about a needed humanitarian ceasefire and the release of all hostages. I am engaged tirelessly with all stakeholders towards these objectives and stand ready to support the implementation of an agreement. I welcome the efforts, including by Egypt, Qatar and the United States, to reach a deal.
7. I am deeply concerned by continued high levels of violence and casualties in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Israel. Intensive Israeli security operations and heavy exchanges with armed Palestinians are leading to rising levels of casualties and decimating many West Bank refugee camps. Security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when it is strictly unavoidable to protect life. I call on Israel to abide by its obligations under international law, including with regard to the proportional use of force, and ensure thorough, independent and prompt investigations into all instances of possible excessive use of force, holding those responsible to account.

8. I am alarmed by attacks carried out by Israeli settlers against Palestinians, including in the proximity of Israeli Security Forces. I urge Israel, as the Occupying Power, to take immediate steps to abide by its obligations under international law to protect the Palestinian population against all acts or threats of violence. I note the measures announced by several Council members and other States against extremist settlers. Attacks by Palestinians against Israelis must also cease. All perpetrators must be held accountable.
9. In the spirit of this Holy month of Ramadan, I reiterate the utmost need to uphold the status quo at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem, taking into account the special and historic role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as custodian of the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. I note that prayers at the Holy Sites have proceeded with some minimal confrontations thus far, and welcome all efforts to preserve calm. All sides must refrain from unilateral steps that would escalate tensions during this sensitive time.
10. I remain deeply troubled by the relentless expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The ever-expanding settlement footprint, including outposts, further entrenches the occupation, while severely impeding the exercise by the Palestinian people of its right to self-determination. I reiterate that all Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, have no legal validity and are in flagrant violation of international law.
11. The demolition and seizure of Palestinian structures, including internationally funded humanitarian projects, entail numerous human rights violations and raise concerns about the risk of forcible transfer. I call upon the Government of Israel to end this practice, in line with its international obligations, and to allow Palestinian communities to build and address their development needs.
12. I am disturbed by the multiple instances in which officials have engaged in dangerous provocations, incitement and inflammatory language, which must be rejected by all.
13. I am encouraged by steps taken by the Palestinian Authority demonstrating its readiness to reform and welcome the implementation of the arrangement facilitated by Norway and agreed to by Israel and the PA that enables revenue transfer to the PA. However, the Palestinian economic and fiscal situation remains in crisis, putting the PA at existential risk. I urge the international community to extend immediate fiscal relief to the PA and for the PA to continue carrying out crucial reforms.
14. I was appalled by the allegations that 12 UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attacks. These are being thoroughly and independently investigated, while a review on UNRWA's neutrality is also ongoing. I underscore that UNRWA remains the backbone of the UN humanitarian response in Gaza. The Agency remains indispensable and irreplaceable, a lifeline for millions of Palestine refugees, and critical for regional stability. I welcome the resumption of funding by some donors and continue to call on donors to resume funding, as the continuity of UNRWA operations must be guaranteed.
15. The enormity of the humanitarian, security and political challenges we are faced with requires a collective, creative, and immediate response. We must urgently address the

catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza. I regret that, despite intensive diplomatic efforts, we have not seen an agreement on a ceasefire and the release of hostages.

16. It is also important to support efforts to strengthen the PA to enable it to effectively govern across the whole of the OPT. Ultimately, any sustainable solution for Gaza and the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict is political. It is imperative to set the conditions for an agreed political framework that outlines tangible, irreversible steps towards ending the occupation and establishing a two-State solution – Israel and Palestine, of which Gaza is an integral part, living side-by-side in peace and security, on the basis of United Nations resolutions, previous agreements, and international law, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

Thank you.