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

26 October 2020

Mister President, Deputy Minister Vershinin of the Russian Federation,
Foreign Minister Malki of the State of Palestine,
Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Nafti of Tunisia,
Deputy Foreign Minister Dang of Vietnam,
Members of the Security Council,

We meet this month as the COVID-19 pandemic continues across the Middle East threatening local health systems and fraying the social and economic fabric of societies as we struggle to meet the challenges ahead.

As the pandemic stretches on and its consequences accumulate, Palestinians and Israelis alike are feeling the effects. I remain particularly concerned about the spread of the virus in Gaza and the long-term damage to the Palestinian economy and social cohesion, including the effects on education, for the next generation.

Last month at the UN General Assembly, the Secretary-General renewed his appeal for a global ceasefire in response to COVID-19, calling for a major push to make this happen by the end of the year.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this means focusing on preventive diplomacy to avoid escalation and war in Gaza, working with all to alleviate the health and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, modernising the economic relationship between both sides and working towards re-establishing credible negotiations with the goal of a two-State solution in line with relevant UN resolutions. The commitment of the international community to support both sides in this process remains unwavering. What is required, however, is leadership from both Israelis and Palestinians to work together and advance the cause of peace.

Mister President,

During the reporting period, the resurgence of COVID-19 has seriously compounded the humanitarian and economic challenges on the ground, with a significant tightening of restrictions in Israel and Gaza, and an extension of the state of emergency throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) for 30 days from 2 October.

The humanitarian community has continued its efforts to address the pandemic, including by addressing critical gaps in medical supplies and equipment.

Responding to a severe shortage of equipment, including COVID-19 testing kits, across the OPT, UN Agencies, NGOs and international organizations have delivered materials for more than 100,000 tests, dozens of ventilators and oxygen therapy machines. These new supplies, along with millions of Personal Protective Equipment items, are crucial to efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

Arrangements brokered by the UN continue to allow the transfer of patients from Gaza for medical treatment outside the Strip and for importing humanitarian supplies into the Occupied Palestinian Territory, even as the PA's decision to halt coordination with Israel remains in place.

I wish to reiterate, however, that the UN cannot replace the roles and responsibilities of the Palestinian Authority or the Government of Israel. Any increased responsibilities for the UN in this regard should be limited and timebound.

I welcome the ongoing support from the donor community to the UN COVID-19 response efforts and urge increased assistance as this crisis extends into the foreseeable future.

Mister President,

As we remain focused on urgent health concerns, the viability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) is being severely undermined by an economic and fiscal crisis that has been exacerbated by the Palestinian decision to end civilian and security coordination with Israel.

The fiscal crisis derives primarily from a collapse in domestic tax revenues during the COVID-19 emergency and from the Government's refusal to receive its clearance revenues.

The United Nations stands ready to mediate solutions to the fiscal crisis and to get the Palestinian economy on better footing. I reiterate the Secretary-General's call for both sides to re-examine the nature of their economic relationship and improve it for the benefit of both peoples.

In this context, I appeal to the Palestinian leadership to resume its coordination with Israel and accept its clearance revenues – money that belongs to the Palestinian people and cannot be replaced by donor funding. When public health conditions permit, Israel should facilitate freer movement of Palestinian workers and goods into Israel and between the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. For its part, the international community should accelerate humanitarian and development initiatives in the OPT, including those outlined in the Humanitarian Response Plan and the United Nations COVID-19 response plan.

Mister President,

On 14 and 15 October, Israeli authorities advanced some 5,000 settlement housing units. This resumption of major settlement activity, which follows an eight-month break in Area C housing advancements, is of great concern.

The move by the High Planning Committee is one of the largest collective advancements to date. Approximately 85 per cent of these units are in settlements in outlying locations, deep inside the West Bank, all in areas impeding the contiguity of a future Palestinian state.

While the location of these units is particularly worrying, I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and remain a substantial obstacle to peace. Settlement-related activities should cease as they undermine the prospect of achieving a viable two-State solution in line with UN resolutions, international law and prior agreements.

During the reporting period, Israeli authorities also demolished or seized 59 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and three in East Jerusalem, displacing 82 Palestinians, including 23 women and 40 children, and affecting 200 others. The demolitions were performed due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

A donor-funded school in the Bedouin community of Ras Al-Tin in the Ramallah Governorate, faces an imminent threat of demolition due to the lack of a building permit. If demolished it would affect nearly 50 children. An Israeli court has issued an interim injunction halting the demolition pending further legal proceedings. There have been no demolitions of residential structures in East Jerusalem in the reporting period.

I urge Israel to cease demolitions and seizures of Palestinian property throughout the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law, and to allow Palestinians to develop their communities.

Mister President,

Over the past months, Israel has not responded to visa renewal requests for international staff members from the UN Human Rights Office. While the Office continues to deliver on its mandate, most international OHCHR staff members are now working from outside the mission area. After the release of the report to the Human Rights Council on business activities in Israeli settlements in February 2020, Israel has frozen its relations with OHCHR. I am deeply concerned that critical mandated work on human rights by the United Nations is obstructed in this manner. I urge Israel to facilitate the return of international staff members to the OPT.

Mister President,

On 24 September, Fatah announced that it had reached a series of understandings with Hamas, including an agreement to hold legislative and presidential elections under a proportional representation system.

These discussions are a welcome development and represent yet another effort at organizing long overdue and much needed Palestinian leadership elections, on the basis of the PLO platform. The Palestinian people have not been allowed to elect their leaders for too long. Democracy and elections are critical to enabling people to determine the direction of their national cause. The UN stands ready to support the Palestinian people in exercising their democratic rights.

Mister President,

Violent incidents unfortunately continued throughout the reporting period.

On 1 October, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) arrested two Palestinian men who had crossed into Israel through the Gaza security fence, carrying a homemade bomb. The next day, the IDF opened

fire towards a group of Palestinians who approached the security fence in Gaza, injuring one of them.

On 5 October, militants fired one rocket from Gaza towards Israel. The rocket landed in an open area in Israel, with no injuries or damages reported. In response, Israeli Air Force aircraft fired two missiles targeting a military observation post in Gaza; no injuries were reported as well.

On 20 October, the IDF announced that it had located and exposed a Hamas tunnel entering Israeli territory from the southern Gaza Strip. A few hours after the discovery, Palestinian militants fired one rocket from Gaza towards Israel. The rocket was intercepted by the IDF's Iron Dome air-defense system and no injuries or damages were reported. The Israeli Air Force responded by striking struck an underground structure in an agricultural field in Gaza. No injuries were reported.

In total, five rockets were fired by militants in Gaza towards Israel during the reporting period. IDF fired a total of 13 missiles into Gaza in retaliation.

While the calm understandings in Gaza have largely held, the arrangements and commitments from all parties must be reinforced if they are to be sustained.

Mister President,

Turning to the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, two Palestinians, including one child were killed and some 65 were injured in clashes and other incidents. Seven Israelis, including two soldiers, and one woman were injured during the reporting period.

On 4 October, Israeli forces shot and injured a 16-year-old Palestinian with a live bullet during clashes in Beit Ummar village, north of Hebron. On the same day, a 15-year old Palestinian boy was seriously injured in an incident in Hizma, near East Jerusalem.

On that day also a Palestinian armed with a knife attempted to stab an ISF officer near Hebron. The attacker was arrested and no injuries were reported.

On 5 October, Israeli security forces (ISF) shot and killed a Palestinian man and injured two others at a checkpoint southeast of Tulkarm, while they were reportedly throwing Molotov cocktails at passing vehicles.

On 25 October, a 17-year old Palestinian youth died during an encounter with the ISF near the West Bank village of Turmusaya, near Nablus. There are conflicting claims about the circumstances and cause of death. I urge a prompt and independent investigation into the events that led to the death of the boy.

Mister President,

Settlers perpetrated some 34 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in 30 injuries and damage to property. Palestinians perpetrated some 29 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians in the West Bank, resulting in five injuries and damage to property.

The olive harvest is a key economic, social and cultural event, but, each year, the ability of Palestinians to harvest is compromised due to access restrictions, attacks and intimidation. Since the harvest season began on 7 October, 23 farmers were injured, over 1,000 olive trees were burnt

or otherwise damaged, and several tons of produce stolen, in 19 separate incidents. Israeli authorities must ensure smooth access of farmers to their land and to protect all farmers and their property from attacks.

I am also deeply concerned over the deteriorating health condition of Maher Al-Akhras, a Palestinian detainee who has been on a hunger strike for over 90 days in protest of his administrative detention. On 12 October, Al-Akhras rejected an offer by the Israeli authorities whereby he would only be released on 26 November, the original end date of his detention order, in return for immediately ending his hunger strike. To date, there has been no agreement to end the standoff.

Let me reiterate that all held in administrative detention should be promptly charged and tried in a court of law or released without delay.

Mister President,

On the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, I want to acknowledge the efforts made by civil society and the Palestinian Government, in partnership with the UN, on advancing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda despite the challenging political and humanitarian context. This month, the Palestinian Ministry of Women Affairs completed development of its second-generation National Action Plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325.

Mister President,

On 18 October, at a ceremony in Manama, Israel and Bahrain established formal diplomatic relations signing eight bilateral agreements, including a “Joint Communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic, peaceful, and friendly relations.” The document affirms that the two parties will “continue their efforts to achieve a just, comprehensive, and enduring resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

On 20 October, the first official delegation from the United Arab Emirates visited Israel. The delegation signed four bilateral agreements with Israeli counterparts, including an agreement on mutual visa exemptions for Israeli and Emirati nationals.

On 23 October, the leaders of the United States, Israel and the Republic of the Sudan announced that the Governments of Israel and Sudan had agreed to end the state of belligerence between their countries and to normalize relations. I join the Secretary-General in expressing hope that this agreement will further cooperation, enhance economic and trade relations, and bring about new opportunities to advance peace and economic prosperity in the wider Horn of Africa and Middle East regions.

I am concerned, Mr. President, by statements by senior Palestinian officials saying that Muslims entering the al-Aqsa mosque on the basis of the recent normalization agreements are not welcome and warning of dangerous consequences of such visits. I note the delicate balance of the status quo at the Holy Compound. Any forms of politicization that may increase the risk of an escalation within the sanctity of its grounds must be rejected.

Mister President,

In Lebanon, Prime Minister-designate Mustapha Adib stepped down from his functions on 26 September, having been unable to form a government. Subsequently, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri was designated by the President to form a government. The one-year anniversary of the 2019 October popular protests was marked by peaceful demonstrations across the country.

On 14 October, representatives from the Governments of Israel, Lebanon and the United States met at United Nations premises in Naqoura, south Lebanon, to launch discussions aimed at reaching consensus on the delineation of the Israel-Lebanon maritime boundary. The negotiations were mediated and facilitated by the United States and hosted by the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon.

In follow-up to the Beirut port explosion of 4 August, on 27 September, UNIFIL deployed an engineering unit to Beirut to assist with clearance of debris and reconstruction, in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations, including along the Blue Line, remained generally stable.

On the Golan, while generally calm, the situation remained volatile, with continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement. On 20 October, UNDOF observed heavy explosions in the vicinity of Al Qunaytirah in the area of separation. Subsequently, the Israel Defense Forces informed UNDOF that they had carried out a “precision strike against military infrastructures” in the area. UNDOF continues to liaise with both parties to remind them of their obligation to respect the terms of the Agreement and prevent an escalation of the situation.

Mister President,

In closing, let me say that if the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the virus feeds off instability and expands absent a coherent, coordinated approach to contain it.

The United Nations will continue to advocate for increased cooperation in response to the health emergency, including urging the parties to work together to mitigate risks, save lives and avoid unilateral actions that undermine these efforts.

At the same time, the pandemic has heightened the urgency of exploring all avenues to make progress towards resolving the conflict and ending the occupation in line with relevant UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements in pursuit of achieving a vision of two States. The Palestinian President Abbas has called for an international conference to restart the peace process with this specific goal of two states in sight -- Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State – within secure and recognized borders, based on the 1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

Often in this Council we have spoken of the need to act, of the urgency to act, to prevent the collapse of the two-State paradigm and to give hope to the Palestinian people – particularly the youth – that, a quarter of century after Oslo, their right to statehood can be achieved through peaceful negotiations. This is something young Israelis want too. No one wants war and conflict. But if leaders are unable to deliver on the hope for peace, this will only feed radicals and extremists.

(As Delivered)

I sincerely hope that new avenues of cooperation to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace will emerge. The normalization agreements between Israel and three Arab States must help create such opportunities. As we have seen in statements from Amman to Cairo - from international partners and the League of Arab States - the commitment to the two-State solution, in line with UN resolutions and international law, continues to be affirmed by broad regional and international consensus.

Thank you.