

**KHALED KHIARI
ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL**

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

27 July 2023

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

Since Special Coordinator Wennesland's last briefing to the Council on 27 June, the deterioration of the security situation in the occupied West Bank has continued, punctuated by a two-day Israeli operation in Jenin, the most intensive of its kind in nearly twenty years.

This deterioration is taking place alongside ongoing unilateral steps that undermine a two-State solution, the absence of a peace process and the continuing economic challenges facing Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority (PA). It is critical that all parties take urgent steps to stop the downward spiral and engage with each other to seek a constructive path forward.

Madam President,

From 27 June through 24 July, in the occupied West Bank, 21 Palestinians, including five children, were killed and 249 Palestinians, including five women and 22 children, were injured by Israeli security forces during demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged attacks against Israelis, and other incidents. Another 20 Palestinians, including one woman and five children, were injured by Israeli settlers or other civilians in shooting attacks, stone-throwing and other incidents.

According to Israeli sources, two Israeli security forces personnel were killed, while another 39 Israelis, including four women, three children and eight Israeli security forces personnel, were injured by Palestinians in shooting and ramming attacks, clashes, the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails, IEDs and other incidents.

The period saw a significant escalation in the ongoing wave of violence in the West Bank.

From 3 to 4 July in the Jenin Refugee Camp in Area A of the occupied West Bank, ISF carried out an operation, marked by multiple drone airstrikes and over 1,000 ground troops. Twelve Palestinians, including four children, were killed and over 140 injured – the most in a single operation in the West Bank since the UN began tracking casualties in 2005. According to eyewitnesses, a 17-year-old was killed was unarmed and not engaged in the fighting at the time he was shot. Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) Al-Quds Brigades claimed eight of the twelve fatalities as members, including the 17-year-old and other children. Israeli authorities said that none of the Palestinians killed in the operation had been noncombatants. One Israeli soldier was killed by live fire, in circumstances that IDF said were unclear, and another was injured.

ISF said that they destroyed multiple caches of explosives and weapons, including two under a mosque, as well as operation centers used by militant groups. Targeted sites included locations adjacent to UN facilities and a school. In addition, exchanges of fire took place near a hospital and other health facilities, with reports of ISF firing tear gas in or around the facilities. The only UNRWA health clinic inside the camp was damaged and remains closed.

In addition, on 3 and 21 July, two Palestinians – including one child – were killed by ISF in clashes following protests near Beit El checkpoint north of Ramallah and in the village of Umm Safa, respectively. Also in Umm Safa, on 7 July, a Palestinian was killed by ISF during clashes following a confrontation between Palestinians and Israeli settlers. On the same day, two armed Palestinians, whom ISF accused of having perpetrated a shooting attack, were killed in an ISF operation in Nablus. On 20 July, ISF killed a Palestinian man during an armed exchange in Nablus during a heavily secured visit by Israelis, including Israel's Police Commissioner and settler leaders, to Joseph's Tomb, in accordance with established procedures.

Palestinians carried out a number of attacks or alleged attacks against Israelis, including: a 4 July ramming and stabbing attack in Tel Aviv that injured eight Israeli civilians, including a pregnant woman; and a shooting attack near the Kedumim settlement on 6 July, in which an Israeli soldier was killed; an attack on 10 July near the settlement of Halamish in which a Palestinian man allegedly shot and threw an explosive device towards ISF; and on 21 July, an alleged ramming attack against Israeli soldiers in the village of Sebastiya. Four Palestinians were killed while carrying out such attacks.

In addition to the use of IEDs in Jenin, the period also witnessed Palestinians from the so-called al-Ayyash Brigades, for a second time in two weeks, attempting to launch rudimentary rockets from the Jenin area towards Israel or Israeli settlements on 10 July. Two rockets landed in open areas in Israel, with no damage or injuries reported.

Settler violence continued, albeit not at the scale witnessed in June. On the night of 3 July, Israeli settlers attacked Deir Dibwan village, near Ramallah; in subsequent confrontations, in the presence of ISF, Palestinians threw stones and settlers fired live ammunition, injuring one Palestinian. On 13 July, settlers assaulted Palestinian herders in Arab al-Kholi in the northern West Bank, injuring four elderly men, two in serious condition; at least one Israeli was injured.

Amid the escalating violence, Palestinian Security Forces (PSF) conducted a series of arrests across the occupied West Bank, including, on 17 July, of a senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader in Bethlehem accused of forming armed groups and a senior Hamas official from Tubas on 20 July. Both were subsequently released. In a 17 July statement, a PIJ spokesperson noted that ten of its members had been arrested by PSF to date.

While the situation in Gaza remained relatively calm, militants fired five rockets from Gaza towards Israel, responding to the operation in Jenin, on the night of 4 July. All were intercepted by Israel's aerial defense system, with shrapnel landing in the city of Sderot. In response, the Israeli Air Force carried out airstrikes against what it said were Hamas targets in the Strip. On both sides, property damage but no injuries were reported. On 3 and 4 July, during demonstrations near the security fence east of Gaza City, six Palestinians were injured by ISF, two by live ammunition.

Madam President,

Eight Israeli civilians were placed by Israeli authorities under administrative detention for their involvement in the violent attacks against Palestinians in June; and, on 12 July, Israeli authorities indicted an Israeli civilian and an off-duty Israeli soldier, on charges that include carrying out acts of terrorism against Palestinian civilians during the attacks in June.

Madam President,

I reiterate that acts of terror and the targeting of civilians are unacceptable and must be condemned and rejected by all. All perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.

Israel has an obligation to protect Palestinians and their property in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and ensure prompt, independent, impartial and transparent investigations into all acts of violence.

As the Secretary-General has noted, security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable to protect life.

I am appalled that children continue to be the victims of violence and that militant factions have claimed some as members. Children must never be the targets of violence, used or put in harm's way.

I also reiterate that the indiscriminate launching of rockets by Palestinian militants towards Israeli population centers is a violation of international humanitarian law and must cease immediately.

Madam President,

The humanitarian situation in the occupied West Bank remains concerning and the large ISF operation in Jenin Refugee Camp had a devastating humanitarian toll on the camp and its residents.

Over 460 houses were damaged, including 70 severely damaged or destroyed, and there was extensive damage to roads, as well as to water and sewage infrastructure. Around four kilometers of road were dug up by Israeli forces, which they said was to neutralize buried IEDs. Of the 3,500 residents who fled the violence, some 20 families remain internally displaced due to damage to their homes or lack of basic services.

Throughout the operation, access to the camp was limited by ISF to one entrance, initially hindering most ambulances from reaching casualties, and was fully restored on 5 July; though movement around the camp remains difficult due to the widespread damage and contamination by unexploded ordnance left by both sides.

Assessments by the UN and its humanitarian partners identified a number of priority needs, including: clearance of unexploded ordnance; restoration of water and sewage provision; food, rental and psychosocial assistance to the most affected families; restocking of medical supplies; and repair to schools and the UNRWA clinic.

The Palestinian Authority has committed to repairing the damages sustained in Jenin. Financial pledges have also been made by donors to help with the reconstruction, including USD30 million from Algeria to the Palestinian Authority and USD15 million from the United Arab Emirates through UNRWA.

Despite this generous response, severe funding shortages continue to curtail UN ability to provide support to Palestinians throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory. UNRWA faces a gap of some USD 200 million to maintain services from September onwards and USD 75 million to sustain the food pipeline in Gaza. In addition, the World Food Programme requires USD 41 million to continue providing assistance to the prioritized 350,000 Palestinians in need until the end of the year.

Madam President,

On 3 July, in response to the Israeli operation in Jenin, the Palestinian leadership adopted a number of decisions. These include freezing all contacts with Israel, including continuation of an announced suspension of security coordination, and stepping up Palestinian international efforts, including joining UN agencies and bodies and pursuing prosecution of Israel at the International Criminal Court. The leadership also called for a meeting of all Secretaries-General of Palestinian factions, scheduled for 30 July in Cairo.

On 12 July, President Mahmoud Abbas visited the Jenin refugee camp. He laid a wreath in memory of Palestinians killed and delivered remarks praising the camp as an “icon of struggle” and vowing that the Palestinian Authority would rebuild it.

Madam President,

On 9 July, Israel’s Security Cabinet voted to act to -- quote “prevent the collapse of the Palestinian Authority,” end of quote -- noting that the Prime Minister and Defense Minister would present the Cabinet with -- “steps to stabilize the civil situation in the Palestinian sector”.

Separately, Israeli authorities took some steps in recent weeks with a view to relieving pressure on the Palestinian Authority fiscal situation, including reducing the handling fee for fuel Israel transfers to the Palestinian Authority and expanding electronic payments to Palestinians working in Israel.

On 17 July, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke by phone with U.S. President Biden, and, between 18 and 21 July, Israeli President Herzog conducted an official visit to the United States. According to official readouts, the leaders discussed, *inter alia*, steps to restore calm in the West Bank, including through reconvening in the Aqaba-Sharm el Sheikh format, in addition to regional developments and proposed changes to the judiciary in Israel.

On 24 July, following months-long protests, the Israeli Knesset passed a law barring Israeli courts from reviewing the “reasonableness” of Government actions and appointments. The so-called “reasonableness standard” had been used by courts in the past to block or limit certain Government actions, including those related to policies in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Madam President,

As violence in the West Bank has surged, Israeli steps to expand settlements continued.

Israeli authorities demolished, seized or forced owners to demolish 44 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 12 in East Jerusalem, displacing 70 Palestinians, including 38 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 11 July, Israeli Security Forces evicted a Palestinian family from their home in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City and handed the property over to a settler organization, after a decades-long legal battle ended several months ago with the Supreme Court rejecting the family's last appeal. Close to 1,000 Palestinians, including 424 children, face possible eviction in East Jerusalem.

On 10 July, 36 Palestinians, including 20 children, left their community of al-Baqaa, near Jerusalem, following the establishment of a settlement outpost in their community on 21 June and subsequent settler attacks.

Madam President,

Turning to the region, on the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained despite continued violations of the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement of Forces by both parties. On 19 July, UNDOF observed the Israel Defense Forces fire at least 350 machine gun rounds, and on 24 July, five projectiles into the area of separation. UNDOF has continued to notice the presence of Syrian armed forces personnel also in the area of separation. UNDOF remains in contact with both sides to prevent any escalation of tensions.

As the Special Coordinator for Lebanon and USG Lacroix highlighted in their briefings to the Council on 20 July, tension along the Blue Line continued to be witnessed, in particular in the Shab'a Farms and Northern Ghajar related to the occupation of Northern Ghajar by Israel, and the construction works by the Israel Defense Forces in sensitive areas as well as the placement of a tent south of the Blue Line, claimed by Hezbollah. The United Nations reiterates the importance of all concerned parties exercising restraint and utilizing the liaison mechanisms of UNIFIL to de-escalate tensions.

Madam President,

I am deeply alarmed by the scale of violence and scope of destruction we have witnessed in recent weeks, particularly during the 3-4 July ISF operation and ensuing armed exchanges in Jenin, as well as the attacks this past month that have targeted Palestinian and Israeli civilians.

I reiterate the call on all parties to take concrete steps to deescalate tensions on the ground and ensure that all civilians are protected.

The UN remains engaged in extensive contacts with all parties, including regionally, to help lower tensions and prevent a renewed outbreak of violence.

As the Special Coordinator has emphasized, such steps must be integrated into a broader effort by all parties to restore a political horizon and address the underlying drivers of the conflict. The United Nations remains committed to helping Palestinians and Israelis resolve the conflict and end the occupation with the aim of achieving a two-State solution, in line with relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.

Thank you.