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SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

27 May 2021

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

As I brief you today, a cessation of hostilities is holding between Palestinian militants in Gaza and Israel following eleven days of the most intense hostilities we have witnessed in years. I welcome this agreement as it brings a halt to the violent escalation and allows us to address the most urgent humanitarian needs of the people in Gaza.

At the outset, I wish to thank this Council for the support expressed to the UN efforts to de-escalate the situation, address urgent needs and respond to the aftermath. I also wish to commend the crucial role of Egypt and the United States, and the work of Qatar, who all in close contact with the United Nations were instrumental in bringing this latest round of violence to an end.

The United Nations is coordinating the delivery of urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza and I highlight the 95 million USD humanitarian flash appeal launched today. At the same time, we remain focused on the important political steps that are needed to solidify the cessation of hostilities that began 21 May.

Mr. President,

These recent events have made clear once again the costs of perpetual conflict and lost hope. The challenges in Gaza – like this conflict as a whole - require political solutions. As we look ahead, our approach cannot be business as usual and we cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Given their magnitude, I will focus today's briefing on the recent escalation and its consequences. Broader developments on the ground will be covered in the upcoming Report of the Secretary-General on UNSCR 2334.

The escalation that engulfed Gaza, the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and cities across Israel, led to terrible suffering and destruction and took the lives of too many civilians. I share my condolences with all who have lost loved ones or been affected by the fighting.

The hostilities spread amidst a spike in tensions in occupied East Jerusalem. Long-standing protests intensified over the potential eviction by Israeli authorities of several Palestinian families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. In parallel, tensions escalated sharply between Palestinians and Israeli security forces (ISF), and civilians, in and around the Old City, including at the Holy Sites, during the month of Ramadan, leading to clashes and hundreds of arrests and injuries.

The violence was accompanied, and amplified, by inflammatory statements and incitement, including violent threats issued by senior Hamas leaders, racist chants by Israeli extremists marching near the Old City and provocative visits to Sheikh Jarrah by far-right Israeli Members of Knesset and their supporters.

On 10 May, amid heavy presence of Israeli security forces ahead of the Israeli-organized Jerusalem Day march, thousands of Palestinians clashed with police in and around Jerusalem's Old City. ISF reportedly shot and injured over 650 Palestinians with rubber-coated metal bullets and other crowd-control means. Thirty-two ISF personnel were injured.

Although Israeli authorities took steps to reduce tensions – including re-routing the march, postponing a Supreme Court hearing on the Sheikh Jarrah evictions and barring Jewish visits to the Holy Sites – the violence and heavy security presence continued. That very same day, Hamas fired seven rockets towards Jerusalem, causing some property damage and setting off the escalation of hostilities.

Mister President,

From 10 to 21 May, during ensuing hostilities between Israel and armed groups in Gaza, 253 Palestinians, including at least 66 children, 38 women and three persons with disabilities, were killed during Israeli airstrikes and shelling. At least 126 of these were civilians. One journalist was also killed. In some cases, entire families, including women, children and infants, were killed in their homes.

Over the same period, nine Israelis, including two children and five women, and three foreign nationals were killed by indiscriminate rockets and mortars launched by Hamas and other militants in Gaza, and one soldier was killed by an anti-tank missile fired near the Gaza perimeter fence.

Hamas and other militants fired more than 4000 rockets from Gaza at an unprecedented intensity and scope with a significant number intercepted by Iron Dome and others landing short inside Gaza. In Israel, direct hits were reported in multiple locations, causing damage to residential and commercial property, as well

as a school and energy infrastructure, including power lines supplying Gaza. Hundreds of Israelis were injured in these attacks.

In Gaza, the IDF conducted over 1500 airstrikes against what it said were militant targets belonging to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Nevertheless, there was significant damage to homes and civilian infrastructure. During the hostilities, the UN and partners reported that at least, 57 schools, nine hospitals and 19 primary healthcare centers sustained complete or partial damage. Initial reporting during the hostilities indicate that at least 258 buildings, including four high-rise towers – one hosting international media outlets – were damaged or destroyed. This translates to nearly 2000 housing and commercial units. The UN and partners are currently undertaking a rapid damage and needs assessment to understand the full scale of destruction and needs on the ground.

According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, 1,948 Palestinians were injured in these strikes and over 112,000 people were displaced, with some 77,000 sheltering in nearly 60 UNRWA schools, where they had limited access to water and nearly no access to health care or food. The vast majority have returned home, but approximately 9,000 people remain displaced, with their homes destroyed or uninhabitable.

The violence we have witnessed, and its tragic consequences are unacceptable. Civilians should never be the target of violence. Children, in particular, must never be put in harm's way. Journalists must be able to carry out their work without fear of attack and harassment.

Mister President,

Throughout the hostilities, the United Nations worked tirelessly with all sides to restore calm, including calls from the Secretary-General upon Israel and Palestinian armed groups to take immediate and decisive steps to de-escalate the situation and prevent any further loss of life. This Council convened four times to discuss ways to end the hostilities, and the General Assembly held a special debate on the crisis. The sustained attention of the international community provided crucial momentum to ceasefire efforts at decisive moments in time.

On 20 May, Israel and Hamas announced that they had agreed to a cessation of hostilities, which went into effect in the early morning hours on the 21st May. It has since held, with no further rockets or airstrikes reported.

Mister President,

The humanitarian impact of the fighting on Gaza has been devastating, compounding an already dire situation. Humanitarian access was limited to only five trucks of fuel for UNRWA installations, which entered via Kerem Shalom on 18 May. Due to rockets fired from Gaza, the majority of planned humanitarian supplies on that day were not able to cross.

Following the cessation of hostilities, on 21 May, 40 truckloads of humanitarian supplies were permitted entry. On 25 May, Israel announced the opening of the crossings for certain humanitarian goods and personnel, including a shipment of over 46,000 COVAX vaccines. It is critical that a predictable schedule for the entry of all humanitarian materials and personnel is put in place at both crossings. In addition, Israel reinstated the fishing zone off the coast of Gaza on 25 May to six nautical miles, which had been fully closed during the hostilities.

Repair to some damaged sewage and water infrastructure has commenced. The entry of fuel purchased through the UN for the Gaza Power Plant has been barred by Israel since 10 May. Gaza authorities reported that fuel purchased from Egypt has been used to ensure that it continues to function, albeit at reduced capacity resulting in an average of 5 hours of electricity per day. The Gaza Power Plant is the only source of large-scale electricity supply within Gaza critical to ensuring that hospitals, health clinics, water and sanitation facilities can operate.

The health system, already overwhelmed by chronic drug shortages, inadequate equipment and the COVID-19 pandemic, will likely be unable to meet the needs of those injured during the violence.

Mister President,

Propelled by events in Gaza and East Jerusalem, there has also been a sharp rise in the number of clashes between ISF and Palestinians, settler-related violence, and Palestinian attacks against Israelis in the occupied West Bank as well as an apparent increase in the use of live ammunition by ISF against Palestinians participating in demonstrations.

I reiterate that all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable. Israeli forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Potential evictions in occupied East Jerusalem also continue to be a major concern. On 9 May, the Supreme Court temporarily postponed the eviction of several families from Sheikh Jarrah until a hearing is held on their appeal. Nevertheless, they and

many others in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan face the risk of displacement with eviction cases commenced by settler organizations currently pending before Israeli courts.

I reiterate that all settlement activity is illegal under international law; and I urge Israel to cease demolitions and seizures of Palestinian property, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law, and to allow Palestinians in Area C and East Jerusalem to develop their communities.

Mister President,

The violence in Gaza has reverberated in the immediate region, particularly in Lebanon. Since my last briefing on 16 May, UNIFIL detected several rockets fired from southern Lebanon towards Israel on 17 and 19 May, one of which impacted east of Haifa. The IDF fired artillery rounds in response, impacting north of the Blue Line. No injuries or damage were reported. In addition, a number of demonstrations have been organized throughout Lebanon to express solidarity with Palestinians. On 23 May, over 900 protestors gathered in demonstrations in southern Lebanon, including close to the Blue Line. In the Shab'a area, several individuals crossed briefly south of the Blue Line and placed flags on the Israeli technical fence. Throughout, UNIFIL and UNSCOL have engaged the parties to defuse tensions. As a preventive measure, UNIFIL, in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces, has maintained a strong presence along the Blue Line and remained in close contact with both parties.

Mister President,

This is not the first time we are witnessing the end of a war in Gaza. Each time, those who lose the most are the civilians. The loss and trauma extend far beyond the period of hostilities. Ending the violence and taking steps to urgently address the humanitarian consequences are crucial, but we cannot stop there. This reality – and avoiding its repetition - should be the point of departure for all of us as we look toward sustainable, long-term solutions to this conflict.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's appeal to the international community to work with the United Nations on developing an integrated, robust package of support for a swift recovery and sustainable reconstruction that supports the Palestinian people and strengthens their institutions. I am committed to ensuring that the United Nations plays its part.

We must avoid the pull of short-term fixes and focus on how we can work toward resolving the deadlock in Gaza and the Palestinian divide – situations that have been left unresolved for over 14 years and require real political solutions.

Palestinian national unity and the return of a legitimate Palestinian Government to Gaza is needed to move forward sustainably. At the same time, we must create a political horizon that allows the parties to return to the path of meaningful negotiations. I remain in close contact with my fellow Envoys in the Middle East Quartet, with key Arab and international partners, as well as with Israeli and Palestinian leadership to this end.

Mr. President,

At the end, it is the lack of the proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel” - of a political horizon - after decades of conflict, that kills hope and provides space for those not interested in sustainable peace.

Only through negotiations that end the occupation and create a viable two-State solution, on the basis of UN resolutions, international law and mutual agreements, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States, can we hope to bring a definitive end to these senseless and costly cycles of violence.

Thank you.