

NICKOLAY MLADENOV
UN SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS BRIEFING
TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

With no prospect for resuming negotiations in sight, developments on the ground continue to undermine an already precarious situation. Illegal settlement construction advances, Gaza remains beyond the control of the legitimate Palestinian authority and the political leadership on both sides continues to shy away from the steps that are necessary for peace. This is the reality which continues to erode trust in the prospect of a two-state solution, the constituency for which is dwindling both in Israel and Palestine.

Although the past month has been relatively calm in terms of the frequency and intensity of violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory a number of security related incidents continue to cause concerns.

Firstly, the apparent extrajudicial execution by members of the Palestinian Security Forces in Nablus on 23 August of a man, while in custody. He was suspected of orchestrating the killing of two security personnel earlier in the week. I welcome the announcement by Prime Minister Hamdallah of an investigation and call for a thorough, independent and transparent process in line with international standards in order to bring to justice the perpetrators of this crime.

On 21 August, militants in Gaza fired two rockets, one of which landed in a residential area of Sderot, causing no injuries. Israel responded by directing some 60 missiles and shells at 30 suspected military installations in Gaza. Once again I reiterate that such rocket attacks and the response they elicit risk lives of both Palestinians and Israelis and do not serve the cause of peace.

On 26 August a Palestinian man, who was reportedly under psychiatric care, was killed by members of the Israeli Security Forces. A preliminary investigation has established that he was unarmed and did not pose a threat. I call upon Israel to ensure accountability and take all necessary measures protect against the unjustified use of force.

It is against such backdrop that preparations are advancing for the 8 October Palestinian local council elections. In a positive development, on 25 July, political parties signed an electoral code of conduct, to which all parties and candidates must adhere. These elections are expected to be the first simultaneous polls in the West Bank and Gaza since 2006.

Conducting the local elections in line with established international standards can contribute to advancing Palestinian reconciliation. The lack of unity however, or any attempt to influence the outcome of the elections, including through intimidation, threats, violence or coercion, risks widening divisions and undermining the Palestinian national cause. In this respect, the recent decision by Fatah to bring the party together, a decision welcomed by Jordan, Egypt and the region, is an important step towards laying the groundwork for national reconciliation and unity.

Turning briefly to Gaza, Mr. President, three days ago we marked the two-year anniversary of the ceasefire of the last Gaza conflict. While progress has been made on reconstructing the physical damage, sadly we are miles away from repairing the psychological damage of the conflict. While

Gaza remains locked away from the rest of the world, in the grip of militants, and dependent on aid and humanitarian assistance, the status quo will sadly prevail.

We need a radical overhaul of how we deal with the problems of Gaza.

Until the closures are lifted, the militant buildup has ceased, and Gaza is back under the control of the legitimate Palestinian authorities, international funding and an uninterrupted flow of aid are a lifeline to over one million Palestinians in the Strip, who are struggling to survive within a dire humanitarian situation. In this context, I commend the Government of Palestine for enabling a much-needed humanitarian payment to over 20,000 unpaid civilian employees in Gaza, made possible by the generous donation of the State of Qatar.

Separately however, I am very concerned about the recent Israeli indictments of two aid workers accused of diverting funds and/or material to Hamas. These are very serious and deeply troubling accusations that must be investigated thoroughly, quickly and proven in a court of law. I welcome the commitment of the United Nations Development Program and World Vision International to uphold the highest standards of accountability. It is important that the international community continues to enforce its policy of zero tolerance for any wrongdoing and assures partners that robust measures are in place to ensure that aid goes to whom it is intended to.

Mr. President,

It has been nearly two months since the Middle East Quartet outlined spoke clearly of the threats to the two-state solution and offered practical recommendations to ensure an eventual return to meaningful negotiations to end the occupation that began in 1967.

Its recommendations continue to be ignored, including by a surge in Israeli settlement-related announcements and continuing demolitions.

Let me focus briefly on the expanding Israeli footprint in the occupied West Bank including East Jerusalem, which Russia, the EU, United States and the UN Secretary-General — all part of the Quartet, clearly condemned.

We heard that settlement construction is not an impediment to a two-state solution; that “a few houses” are not a problem for peace. Let me ask in return Mr. President: How will advancing the construction of over 1,700 housing units bring the parties closer to negotiated peace, how will it uphold the two-state solution, how will it create hope for the Palestinian people, or how will it bring security to Israelis?

Since 1 July, Israel has advanced plans for over 1,000 housing units in occupied East Jerusalem – in Pisgat Ze’ev, Ramot, Har Homa, and Gilo – as well as 735 units in Ma’ale Adumim and other settlements in the West Bank.

It has published tenders, some new, for 323 units in East Jerusalem settlements and reissued tenders for 42 units in Kiryat Arba, near Hebron, for which it also allocated over USD 13 million of new funding.

It is undertaking a new land survey to identify potential ‘state land’ in the sensitive E2 area. This step could enable the establishment of a new settlement on the outskirts of Bethlehem, further restricting that city’s development and contributing to the dismemberment of the West Bank.

It is also reportedly examining plans for new housing units for over 100 Israelis on a portion of a military compound in Hebron that it has allocated for this purpose.

Israel advanced the so-called retroactive 'legalisation' of the Horesh Yaron and Rechelim outposts and put forward a potentially precedent-setting proposal to relocate the illegal outpost of Amona – which is slated by Israel's High Court of Justice for dismantling by the end of the year – onto nearby 'absentee land'.

All of these plans Mr. President would essentially create new illegal settlements and I call on Israel to cease and reverse these decisions.

Let me be clear: no legal acrobatics can change the fact that all outposts – whether 'legalised' under Israeli law or not, whether located on state land, or absentee land, or private land - just like all settlements in Area C and East Jerusalem, remain illegal under international law.

It is difficult to read in these actions a genuine intention to work towards a viable two-state solution. This appears to reinforce a policy, carried out over decades, that has enabled over half a million Israelis to settle in territory that was occupied militarily in 1967.

Mr. President,

The Quartet highlighted that Palestinians living in Area C and East Jerusalem are also disproportionately denied Israeli building permits. The past two months have seen an increase in the enforcement of non-punitive demolition orders against Palestinian structures in East Jerusalem, with 43 structures demolished, affecting more than 340 people. According to our colleagues in OCHA, in Area C, in August alone, over 91 structures across 26 communities were demolished for the lack of Israeli building permits, displacing some 125 people and affecting the livelihoods of over 2,100.

The Bedouin in Area C are particularly vulnerable. Some communities, such as the herders in Susiya and those in the controversial E1 area around East Jerusalem, are particularly at risk, especially as settlement expansion plans move forward. Repeated rounds of demolitions of homes or livelihoods and restrictions on basic services are part of an environment that pressures these communities to move.

Susiya, for example, is built on private Palestinian land in the southern West Bank. It is sandwiched between a settlement and an outpost. For years, planning schemes submitted by the residents to the Israeli authorities have been repeatedly rejected, while the neighbouring settlement has been granted a generous planning scheme, and the nearby illegal outpost, is connected to water and electricity networks.

The demolition of this community would set a dangerous precedent for displacement and feed the perception that Israel aims at a de facto annexation of Area C.

Mr. President,

I note a new plan for the occupied West Bank, announced recently, promoting differential treatment to areas of the occupied West Bank from which perpetrators or suspected perpetrators of attacks against Israelis originate.

While measures that generate economic opportunities for some Palestinians are helpful, they cannot come at the cost of what may amount to collective punishment for others, or undermine the legitimate Palestinian institutions and aspirations for ending the occupation.

Mr. President,

Turning briefly to the Golan, the situation remains volatile and continues to undermine the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement. Fighting between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups in the areas of separation and limitation continues with several incidents across the ceasefire line reported.

I take the opportunity to also draw attention to a nearly 100 million dollar shortfall in UNRWA's core budget. This funding gap affects the Agency's key services for vulnerable Palestine refugees throughout the region and compounds regional instability. It must be addressed with utmost urgency.

Mr. President,

Let me say that more than 37 years ago, the Security Council determined that Israeli settlements in occupied territory have no legal validity and are an obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. That determination was true in 1979, and is equally true and even more urgent of a concern today.

For years we have been managing this conflict, while the occupation has continued, Palestinians have been dispossessed, and a one-state reality has been establishing itself on the ground. It is time for all of us — the leaders on both sides, with support from the region and the international community, to end the conflict on the basis of relevant UN Security Council resolutions, and in a manner that meets the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples.

Both sides should work to reverse the negative trajectory, to build trust and to restore hope that a negotiated two-state solution is not just a political slogan but a reality that can be achieved through negotiations in our lifetime.

Thank you.