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

29 May 2024

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

Over seven months have now passed since 7 October. The horrific terror attacks perpetrated by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups and the ensuing Israeli military campaign and relentless hostilities in Gaza have caused widespread suffering on every scale imaginable.

There are reports more than 36,000 Palestinians and over 1,500 Israelis and foreign nationals have been killed, 125 hostages are still held in Gaza and tens of thousands of people injured, the vast majority Palestinian.

Nearly two million Palestinians have been displaced from their homes in the Gaza Strip many of them multiple times, and some one hundred thousand Israelis have been displaced from communities in Israel's north and south.

Agreement on a deal to achieve a ceasefire and secure the release of hostages is blocked and as Israel rolls out a significant ground operation in and around Rafah, the devastation is only intensifying.

The appalling incident on Sunday when a reported 45 Palestinians were killed and 200 injured as the tents they were sheltering in burned around them does not stand alone amid shocking numbers of civilian casualties. I remind all parties of their obligations to protect civilians.

At the same time, the occupied West Bank remains a pressure-cooker of negative trends. The risk of a regional conflagration is constant and is mounting every day this war continues.

This trajectory must change if we are to avoid further catastrophe.

I urge all parties to return to the negotiating table immediately and in good faith. I reiterate my and the Secretary-General's repeated calls for the immediate release of all hostages held in Gaza and for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

Mr. President,

Palestinians in Gaza face another round of mass displacement, with one million fleeing from Rafah, many being displaced multiples times. Overcrowded conditions and acute shortages of food, water and medicine have led to misery and the spread of disease. The humanitarian response is woefully inadequate to address these needs.

On 24 May, the International Court of Justice delivered its Order on the Request of South Africa for the modification of the Order of 28 March in the case concerning *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip*, reaffirming its previous provisional measures and indicating new measures.

Humanitarians are heroically continuing to deliver life-saving assistance in an incredibly difficult environment. Unsafe conditions resulting from a dangerously deficient humanitarian notification mechanism are compounded by overcrowding, desperation and a breakdown of law and order, imperiling humanitarian operations and costing the lives of humanitarian workers – including some 200 UN staff. Just hours ago, this breakdown of law and order has resulted in a well-organized looting of the UNRWA Rafah log base, making it more or less inoperative. This a key center for our operations. While we are investigating the circumstances, I condemn any violations of UN premises.

As I briefed this Council a little over a week ago, the opening of two crossings in Gaza's north, alongside the entry of humanitarian goods arriving from Ashdod and from Jordan, as well as through the U.S. built floating pier via Cyprus – which is now under repair - are positive developments, but not sufficient. I reiterate the Secretary-General's calls for an immediate re-opening of the Rafah crossing and for unimpeded humanitarian access throughout the Gaza Strip.

Mr. President,

Let me also focus on the occupied West Bank, where violence and other negative trends continue at an alarming rate. Large-scale Israeli operations persist, which are often met by lethal exchanges with armed Palestinians, as well as a spike in settler violence and attacks by Palestinians against Israelis. Friction points around settlements are getting worse as the settlement enterprise expands in a very well-planned manner.

I am particularly concerned by Israel's lifting of the military order banning Israelis from entering three evacuated settlements in the northern West Bank, a policy in effect since the 2005 disengagement law was put in place, and I do take note of the subsequent

military order declaring the area a closed military zone, effectively preventing the entry of Israelis and Palestinians.

Around the region, the threat of a serious escalation has intensified. Exchanges of fire across the Blue Line between Israel and Hizbullah and other non-state armed groups in Lebanon continued. In addition to the deeply concerning escalation between Israel and Iran witnessed last month, aerial attacks toward Israel from militants in the region and Houthi attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea persisted. This is a combustible mix.

Mister President,

It is clear that all sides must urgently change course.

It is right that we are all focused on preventing a further deterioration or looking for solutions to the most pressing needs, yet without linking these urgent efforts to a longer-term political strategy, any solution will be short-lived or even counterproductive.

No attempt to address the humanitarian and security challenges will be sustainable unless it is part of a broader approach that addresses Gaza's political future. That future is as an integral part of a single, unified Palestinian state, which is a crucial foundation for realizing a two-state solution.

This has been and will continue to be a key focus of my own efforts.

Throughout the past months, the Secretary-General and I have engaged extensively with the parties, the region and international actors to encourage a common approach to addressing the complex humanitarian, security and political crises affecting not only Gaza, but the whole of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Israel and the region.

We must reach an agreement to release the hostages and put in place an immediate ceasefire.

There is absolutely no time to lose.

The UN remains in regular contact with the mediators and parties, and we are committed to support the implementation of an agreement. A sustained ceasefire will be critical to a full-scale humanitarian and early recovery response to meet the immense needs in Gaza.

At the same time, we should be putting in place the framework for Gaza's recovery and doing so in a way that tangible for moves forward, rather than away from a long-term political resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I have previously outlined some of the key principles that should guide us in that work - allow me to reiterate and expand on several of them here:

There should be no long-term Israeli military presence in Gaza, while at the same time Israel's legitimate security concerns, particularly in the wake of the acts of terror committed on 7 October, must be addressed.

Gaza is and must remain an integral part of a future Palestinian State – with no reductions in its territory.

Gaza and the West Bank must be unified politically, economically, administratively. They must be governed by a Palestinian Government that is recognized and supported by the Palestinian people and the international community. If transitional arrangements are required, they must be designed to achieve a unified Palestinian Government within a precise and limited timeframe.

There can be no long-term solution in Gaza that is not fundamentally political.

Mr. President,

My message in Brussels at the International Partners Meeting on Palestine was as follows, and it is the same message I am giving you here today:

– we must strengthen and preserve the institutions of the Palestinian Authority (PA) before it is too late, while rejecting any steps that seek to systematically undermine its viability, such as Israel's withholding of the PA's clearance revenues.

The fiscal situation for the PA is very serious, Mr. President.

I warned over a year ago that thirty years of state-building in Palestine were at grave risk. That is even more true today and the consequences are even more serious.

Affirming a path to the two-State solution means preserving and safeguarding the very institutions that are meant to govern such a state. Moreover, these institutions will be vital to the essential objective of ensuring Palestinian-led governance in Gaza.

The new technocratic Palestinian Government under Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa, with eight ministers from Gaza - represents an important opportunity for us all to support tangible steps in the right direction, and in line with the principles for Gaza's future as I just outlined.

The international community should provide support to, and work with, the new Government to address the PA's dire fiscal crisis, strengthen its governance capacity

and prepare it to reassume its responsibilities in Gaza and, ultimately, govern the whole of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Political, institutional and economic reforms will be needed – but they must be achievable, credible and financed. We should ensure that the Palestinian Authority is an integral part of planning for Gaza’s recovery and reconstruction.

I urge all actors to recognize the critical role of the PA and how that should play out in Gaza and work toward enabling its return because there is actually no other credible alternative.

We already know the scale of damage is immense - the World Bank and the United Nations, with support from the EU, conducted an Interim Damage Assessment of the impact of the first four months of conflict in Gaza - quantifying the cost of the physical damages to critical infrastructure like hospitals, housing and roads to be at around US\$ 18.5 billion. The final cost will likely be multiples of this figure.

The massive scale of this effort will clearly require mobilization of the widest possible coalition of donors, private sector sources of financing, and significant improvements in how the necessary reconstruction materials should be able to enter Gaza.

We know already that donors and investors will not be forthcoming without concrete steps by the parties to find a political solution and ensure that Gaza is not rebuilt only to be destroyed yet again.

Let me be clear: The political framework and structures we establish now will play a significant role in the success or failure of what follows. This requires us to plan and act deliberately and thoughtfully, knowing that today’s decisions will not only shape the future of governance in Gaza, but also determine the trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more broadly.

Mister President,

I am aware of the many challenges in trying to achieve these objectives while war rages in Gaza and while our attention is rightly focused on urgent needs on the ground.

But it is a time for making difficult political choices. If we neglect to lay the foundations of a lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and end the occupation, the price of failure will reverberate for generations.

These foundations will not only be laid in Gaza, but also in the occupied West Bank; and they must be set in place not just by donors and the international community, but by committed leaders on all sides of this conflict. The drivers of the conflict must be

addressed, including violence, settlement advancements and militant activity. Israeli measures that undermine the PA must halt now. Without progress on each of these, we will begin the process of undermining what we have not yet even started.

After the horrors of the past seven months, and past days, Palestinians and Israelis desperately need a political horizon. Without it, there is no sustainable path out of the suffering and misery we are witnessing now.

Thank you.