

**The Secretary-General's
Remarks to the General Assembly Meeting
on the Situation in the Middle East and Palestine**

New York, 20 May 2021

[as delivered]

The past ten days have witnessed a dangerous and horrific surge in deadly violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly Gaza, and in Israel.

I am deeply shocked by the continued air and artillery bombardment by the Israeli Defence Forces in Gaza. As of 19 May, this had claimed the lives of at least 208 Palestinians, including 60 children, and injured thousands more.

The continued indiscriminate firing of rockets by Hamas and other militant groups towards population centres in Israel, resulting in at least 12 fatalities including two children, and hundreds of injuries, is also unacceptable.

My heart goes out today to the victims and their loved ones.

The fighting must stop immediately. I appeal to all parties to cease hostilities, now and I reiterate my call on all sides for an immediate ceasefire.

The hostilities have caused serious damage to vital civilian infrastructure in Gaza, including roads and electricity lines, contributing to a humanitarian emergency. Crossings into Gaza have been closed and power shortages are affecting water supplies.

Hundreds of buildings and homes have been destroyed, damaged, or rendered uninhabitable. Airstrikes have damaged several hospitals, which were already short of supplies due to years of debilitating closures exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fighting has left thousands of Palestinians homeless, and forced over fifty thousand people to leave their homes and seek shelter in UNRWA schools, mosques, and other places with little access to water, food, hygiene or health services.

I was horrified by reports that nine members of one family were killed in al-Shati refugee camp.

If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza today.

The destruction of media offices and the killing of a journalist in Gaza are extremely concerning. Journalists must be able to carry out their essential work, including in conflict zones, without fear of attack and harassment. They must be protected and respected.

I am deeply distressed by damage to United Nations facilities in Gaza. United Nations premises are inviolable, including during armed conflict. Humanitarian installations must be respected and protected.

United Nations agencies and our partners continue to provide aid to the people of Gaza.

UNRWA is providing drinking water, sanitation, and electricity generators for those sheltering in its schools, while the World Food Programme has provided electronic vouchers to 74,000 people in Gaza.

Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and I will launch a full humanitarian appeal for funding as soon as possible and in the meanwhile, to meet immediate needs, I am working on an allocation from the Central Emergency Response Fund, and the Humanitarian Coordinator intends to release \$14m from the Humanitarian Fund for the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

I urge donors to follow through on the pledges they have made.

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Access for humanitarian goods is paramount. Attacks by militant groups on areas surrounding crossing points are unacceptable.

At the same time, Israel has a duty to allow and facilitate rapid and unhindered access for humanitarian aid – including food, fuel and medical supplies – into Gaza.

Meanwhile, rockets fired by militants in Gaza have reached as far as Tel Aviv and its suburbs and Ben Gurion airport, claiming civilian lives, causing hundreds of injuries, and damaging residential and commercial property.

Even wars have rules. First and foremost, civilians must be protected.

Indiscriminate attacks, and attacks against civilians and civilian property, are violations of the laws of war.

So are attacks against military objectives that cause disproportionate loss of civilian life and injury to civilians.

There is no justification, including counterterrorism or self-defence, for the abdication by the parties to the conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law.

I urge the Israeli authorities to abide by the laws governing armed conflict, including the proportionate use of force. I call on them to exercise maximum restraint in the conduct of military operations.

I likewise urge Hamas and other militant groups to stop the indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars from highly populated civilian neighbourhoods into civilian population centres in Israel, also in clear violation of international humanitarian law. Densely populated civilian areas must not be used for military purposes.

But above all, what we must - and I am repeating my appeal - what we must achieve is an immediate ceasefire.

I am also deeply concerned by the continuation of violent clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinians across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where several Palestinian families are under the threat of eviction. These developments were preceded by weeks of tension, including around the Holy Sites.

I urge Israel to cease demolitions and evictions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

All settlement activities, including evictions and demolitions, are illegal under international law.

Jerusalem is a holy city for three world religions. I underscore that the status quo at the Holy Sites must be upheld and respected.

In Israel, communal violence and inflammatory rhetoric have added a further worrying dimension to the crisis. This localized violence has diminished over the past week, and I commend Jewish and Arab community leaders and civil society organizations for their positive contributions to peace.

Furthermore, with every day that passes, the risk that the violence could spread beyond Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory increases. This conflict creates an environment that is ripe for exploitation by radicals and extremists. We must prevent at all costs the emergence of a new locus of dangerous instability in the region.

It is imperative that we achieve de-escalation, to prevent an uncontrollable cross-border security and humanitarian crisis.

United Nations officials, including my Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and I myself, are undertaking extensive diplomatic efforts within the region, including with Egypt, Jordan and Qatar, and with key partners in the international community, to encourage all sides to halt the violence.

We are engaging directly with the parties to conflict, including Hamas, in our efforts to secure an end to hostilities.

I commend the ongoing efforts of Member States aimed at encouraging all parties to exercise restraint, de-escalate tensions and prevent further civilian casualties, and reach a cessation of hostilities.

I call on all members of the international community to do everything in their power to enable the parties to conflict to step back from the brink.

And I call on the parties themselves to allow for mediation efforts to intensify in order to bring the fighting to an end.

These horrific events did not arise in isolation. They must be viewed in the context of decades of military occupation, political deadlock, grievances and hopelessness, and a failure to address the core issues at the heart of the conflict.

We know far too well that violence begets violence. The unconscionable death, suffering and destruction of the past ten days only serve to push the prospect of sustained peace further into the future.

A revitalized peace process is the only route to a just and lasting solution.

It is imperative that we keep this long-term vision alive. It starts by replacing anger and disillusionment with hope for a future in which both Palestinians and Israelis live side by side, in peace and security.

We must work towards a resumption of negotiations that will address the status of Jerusalem and other final status issues; end the occupation; and allow for the realization of a two-State solution on the basis of the 1967 lines, UN resolutions, international law and mutual agreements, with Jerusalem as capital of both Israel and Palestine.

The United Nations is deeply committed to working with Israelis and Palestinians, and with our international and regional partners, including through the Middle East Quartet, to realize a lasting and just peace.

Only through renewing our commitment and redoubling our efforts towards a negotiated solution can we bring this cruel violence and hatred to a definitive end.

Thank you.