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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

**STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN THE oPt**

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*Checked against delivery*

Mr. President and Members of the Council,

Last month, I provided an overview of the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. Today, I will focus my remarks on the increasing challenges humanitarian actors are facing in responding to the needs of these vulnerable Palestinians, and for which we need greater support from this Council.

Mr. President,

In the occupied Gaza Strip, 70% of the population currently receives some form of international assistance, mostly food aid. Yet our ability to deliver that assistance has become increasingly restricted.

Israel bans or restricts for import into Gaza certain goods on the grounds that they have a "dual" military and civilian purpose. Affected items range from communications equipment, to cement, wood and even water pumps, fire trucks and medical X-ray machines. Mr. Mladenov has already spoken about the growing and dramatic gap between how much material Israel is permitting to be imported to Gaza through the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, and the growing waiting lists of beneficiaries. This translates very directly into the humanitarian realm, with still 60,000 highly vulnerable, displaced persons in Gaza, waiting for their home to be rebuilt, and needing rental assistance and much more in the interim.

It's not just about concrete. Urgent projects which aim to reduce the risk of flooding that threatens nearly 500,000 people as winter approaches have been on hold for 10 months awaiting clearance of equipment. Projects to rehabilitate water wells and the construction of a neonatal intensive care unit are other examples of urgent needs suffering unnecessary, long delays.

And aid workers have also been caught in the increased restrictions. UN staff in Gaza require a permit in order to leave Gaza to meet with their managers in Jerusalem or Ramallah or to attend training programs elsewhere. Whilst these permits were relatively easy to receive in previous years when never more than 10% were typically rejected, last month more than half of our UN applicants were turned-away, with some advised not to apply for 12 months. No explanation other than 'security' is cited, leaving us at a loss as to how to respond and a growing morale problem. NGOs, Embassies and others are experiencing similar trends. These new access restrictions are hitting other Gaza residents hard as well of course – over half of the 2000 permit applications by patients seeking urgent medical treatment outside Gaza in October – most typically for cancer-treatment – were not approved by Israel.

Inside Gaza, the operating space for NGOs is also difficult. The de facto authorities, Hamas, regularly seek to do audits, review staff or beneficiary lists or introduce new permit requirements and restrictions on work in certain areas of the Strip. NGOs need to resist these pressures and navigate anti-terrorist legislation in place by many member states, which generate their own restrictions on the type of programming that is allowed and with whom one can and can't engage.

The ongoing internal divisions between the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and those in Gaza also inevitably transfer an increasing burden onto humanitarian actors and humanitarian budgets as unstaffed operating theatres, dilapidated equipment and breaks in fuel supplies take their toll on people and services.

Ultimately, real progress in Gaza requires a full lifting of the blockade by Israel, in line with the resolutions of this Council and the General Assembly. Until that happens, Israel must ensure that items needed for reconstruction, relief and emergency preparedness are allowed entry. And that aid workers are able to move about to do their vital work.

Whilst it is not a substitute for the opening of access to Israel, we also look to Egypt – in line with its own security considerations - to maintain the welcome increase in openings at the Rafah Crossing, which remains, literally, a life-line for some. And we must see greater action from Palestinian leaders in Ramallah and Gaza; internal differences must be resolved for the sake of Palestine's most vulnerable constituents.

Mr. President,

In the occupied West Bank, as the pressures increase on communities in Area C, so too do the obstacles to our operations there as well.

As I have reported to this Council before, the pace of demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian property by the Israeli authorities has far exceeded any previous years on record; more than double this year as compared to 2015. These have occurred mainly within herding communities in Area C, which count amongst Palestine's most vulnerable households. Obstruction to our operations in these areas is occurring in the most egregious way - with our relief items themselves frequently demolished or confiscated by Israeli forces; the rate of demolition or seizure of such donor-funded relief is on a trajectory to potentially triple as compared to 2015. Affected relief items include shelters and tents, water cisterns, animal pens and other basic structures for survival and livelihoods.

More fundamentally, Palestinians in Area C are living in an increasingly coercive environment created by discriminatory planning policies, demolitions, the active promotion of plans to relocate Bedouin to new townships and other practices that generate miserable living conditions and create pressure on people to move elsewhere. Much of this occurs in the line of sight of new or expanding Israeli settlements, illegal under international law as reiterated by successive resolutions by this Council. About one quarter of the structures targeted this year were in Palestinian Bedouin communities located within or near the area allocated to the E1 settlement expansion project on the outskirts of occupied East Jerusalem.

It is critical that the interests of these vulnerable Bedouin communities are placed first. They need and deserve our unequivocal support to resist these coercive pressures by the occupying power and must not be burdened by still more pressures from Palestinian leaders some of whom appear to view these communities as a key battleground in Palestine's long struggle. These vulnerable civilians have no place as instruments in a political strategy.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's call to Israel to end the policies and practices that place these Palestinians at-risk of forcible transfer. And I remind the Palestinian authorities also of the need to respect the principles of independence, impartiality, neutrality and humanity that are the bedrock of the humanitarian imperative.

Mr. President,

The continued lack of a resolution to the core drivers of this ongoing humanitarian crisis has left Palestinians stuck in a perpetual cycle of humanitarian relief, increasingly dependent on assistance, facing an ongoing lack of respect for their rights and heightened instability.

We need a coherent international response that will enhance the protection of civilians and

deliver accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. This is especially important in the absence of an active political process between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. Israel, the main duty bearer, is a signatory to the Fourth Geneva Convention and has clear obligations as an occupying power, and both Israel and Palestine have ratified the major human rights treaties. They are bound by customary international law as well, as are all countries. The members of this Council have a vital role to play in motivating the parties to respect their obligations. Similarly, all parties to the Geneva Conventions have an obligation not only to respect, but also to ensure the respect by others, of these Conventions.

Mr. President,

The challenges facing Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territory and those facing humanitarians trying to assist them require not only action from Israeli and Palestinian authorities, but from every Member of this Council. If we want to prevent further deterioration in a region already overwhelmed with humanitarian emergencies, your decisive collective action is vital.

If it would help the members of this Council to have a specific list of humanitarian relief actions that need to be taken or avoided, then I and my colleagues will be pleased to provide you with them. However, these actions notwithstanding, the principles of international humanitarian law do and must apply. This includes all members of this council, all those in the occupied Palestinian territory, both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and all who have signed international legal obligations to which they are and must be held accountable, namely;

We look to you to ensure greater respect for obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law and to enhance the protection of civilians.

We look to you to safeguard the operational space aid workers require to provide assistance to those most in need.

And we look to you to address the underlying driver of Palestine's protection crisis through a political resolve to end the occupation, now approaching its 50th anniversary.