[As Delivered]

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

22 May 2019

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

Just a few short weeks ago we teetered on the precipice of another devastating conflict, as we witnessed the most intense fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants from Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza since 2014.

The United Nations worked intensively with Egypt and all sides to calm the situation, but Israeli and Palestinian lives were - tragically – lost. My sincere condolences go out to the families and friends of all who have been killed, and I wish a speedy recovery to the injured.

While the situation has now stabilized, it remains very tense. One thing is clear, these dangerous cycles of escalation and de-escalation are not sustainable in the future.

Madam President,

On 3 May, thousands of Palestinians participated in the weekly demonstrations at the Gaza perimeter fence. Incendiary balloons were launched, stones and pipe bombs were thrown at Israeli soldiers, who responded with live fire, rubber bullets and tear gas, killing two Palestinians and injuring 49.

Later that day, a sniper reportedly from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad fired across the fence, injuring two Israeli soldiers. In response to the sniper attack, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched several tank shells and the Air Force targeted military sites in Gaza, killing two Palestinian militants and injuring two civilians. This was the beginning of the most serious escalation since 2014.

Over the course of the following 48 hours, 650 rockets were fired from Gaza. While some 240 projectiles were intercepted by the Iron Dome system, several houses, two kindergartens, a school and a hospital in Israel were directly hit. Four Israeli civilians were killed and over 200 were injured, according to the IDF.

During the same period, the IDF reported that it hit over 300 Palestinian militant targets in Gaza, including a senior Hamas official, who was targeted and killed by an airstrike. According to sources in Gaza 25 Palestinians were killed and over 150 were injured.

After intense efforts by the United Nations and Egypt, as of the early morning of 6 May a cessation of hostilities was established, ending the escalation.

I take this opportunity to once again urge all sides to use this period to reduce tensions, solidify the fragile calm and commit to implementing the understandings that have been established in the past few months.

Madam President,

Sniper fire from Gaza has been a constant threat that has, on at least four occasions over the past year, pushed both sides closer to confrontation. This latest incident followed a pattern that has been well established – the closer we get to consolidating an understanding that would relieve the pressure on people in Gaza and reduce the risk of rocket fire towards Israel, an incident like the last one would appear and undermine our careful and painstaking efforts.

Despite this, UN and Egyptian teams will continue to work intensely with all sides in order to use the window of opportunity to provide assistance to the people of Gaza and further reduce the risk of conflict.

Sustained calm is also crucial to supporting Egyptian-led efforts to advance intra-Palestinian reconciliation that should enable the return of a unified, legitimate Palestinian Government to the Gaza Strip.

I take this opportunity to welcome Israel's decision to lift the ban on accessing the fishing zone and expanding the zone to 15 nautical miles in some places, to reopen the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings as normal on 12 May and other steps that have been taken in the past few days. I also welcome the renewed commitment by the Palestinian government in Ramallah to engage constructively on addressing the situation in Gaza.

I also want to reiterate the call by the Secretary-General who condemned in the strongest terms the launching of rockets from Gaza into Israel, particularly the targeting of civilian population centres and also call on the Israel to exercise maximum restraint and refrain from using lethal force against protesters, except as a last resort.

Madam President,

Turning briefly to the humanitarian situation, Deputy Special Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick has warned that health providers in Gaza are struggling to treat the high numbers of injuries sustained during the weekly demonstrations. Many of the wounded require complex surgeries, not currently available there. Yet access to treatment outside of Gaza continues to be challenging as the lack of consistency in the approval process is having very serious and negative implications on people.

The international community has continued its efforts to address the dreadful situation in Gaza. The Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) met in Brussels on 30 April and reiterated its support for implementation of a package of urgent humanitarian and economic interventions in Gaza by the United Nations. Between October 2018 and April 2019, some USD 112 million were mobilized enabling a significant increase in electricity supply through the Gaza Power Plant, the creation of

thousands of temporary jobs in Gaza, and the delivery of essential medical supplies and other support for the struggling health sector.

Fuel deliveries for the Power Plant have been extended and we are moving forward on other more sustainable efforts for the energy sector as I speak, and focusing on renewable energy. On 13 May, I visited the second largest hospital in Gaza where a landmark World Health Organization-developed solar power plant will cover a substantial part of the energy needs of that hospital.

I appreciate the financial support provided by Japan and many others for these critical projects and urge other donors to further increase their support for our joint efforts to improve the situation on the ground.

To date, the most significant contribution remains that of the State of Qatar. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I would like to express our sincere appreciation to the assistance provided by Qatar, without which the situation in Gaza would have been untenable. On 6 May, His Highness the Emir announced an assistance package for the Palestinian people of some USD 480 million, USD 180 million of which is for Gaza, USD 250 million as loans for the Palestinian Government and USD 50 million as grants for projects in the West Bank. In relation to Gaza, some of this funding will allow the UN to provide fuel for electricity until the end of the year, expand temporary employment programmes and focus on permanent job creation.

Madam President,

While Gaza continues to command significant attention, the situation in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is of growing concern to all of us.

The prolonged absence of a political horizon to resolve the broader conflict has coincided with a steady deterioration of the living conditions of Palestinians. This, coupled with violence, settlement expansion, demolitions of Palestinian property, and the persistent threat of further economic decline, are creating an explosive mix that could have serious security implications.

During the reporting period 24 Palestinians were injured by Israeli forces, including 9 children during demonstrations, clashes, security operations and other incidents in the West Bank.

According to OCHA, four Palestinians were injured or had their property damaged by settlers, while one Palestinian attack against Israeli civilians in the West Bank was recorded resulting in one injury and damage to a vehicle.

I unequivocally condemn all attacks on Palestinian and Israeli civilians and call on all sides to refrain from violence. All perpetrators must be held accountable for their crimes.

Madam President,

Allow me to reiterate that settlements are illegal under international law and remain a substantial obstacle to peace.

During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished or seized 40 structures, displacing 31 people, overwhelmingly on the grounds of a lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 29 April, 31 structures were demolished in East Jerusalem, the highest single day total monitored by OCHA since 2009. On 3 May, a joint statement by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNRWA called for "an immediate halt to the Israeli authorities' destruction of Palestinian-owned property in East Jerusalem."

On the following day four structures were demolished in Silwan, displacing eleven Palestinians. According to OCHA, five people were seriously injured when Israeli forces reportedly beat, used stun grenades and sponge-covered bullets to push residents away as they tried to retrieve belongings prior to the demolitions.

Also in a worrying move, Israel's High Court of Justice (HCJ) upheld a new Israeli military order, which accelerates the demolition process for new structures built without permits in Area C of the West Bank.

Madam President,

Regrettably, the reporting period saw no resolution to the Palestinian Authority's financial crisis. For the third consecutive month, the Palestinian Government has refused to receive Israel's transfer of any tax revenues less than the full amount owed to it. I am concerned that, despite the PA's announced austerity measures and the support package committed by Qatar, the latter's survival remains at risk.

In March, I briefed the Council that the crisis would have a substantial impact on the Palestinian economy with reduced purchasing power and weakened growth. The first signs of this negative trend are already beginning to show.

A long-term resolution of the financial crisis is urgently required. Its continuation threatens to further destabilize an already volatile situation. Both parties should implement their bilateral agreements and avoid taking unilateral actions that undermine the stability of the Palestinian Authority.

Against this backdrop, an UNSCO team recently visited al-Fawwar Palestinian refugee camp, where the residents endure harsh living conditions, and UNRWA's ability to deliver essential services is hampered by its own financial crisis. High Commissioner Krähenbühl, who will also be briefing the Council today, will speak more on the severity of the current challenges facing Palestine refugees.

Madam President,

On a positive note, with the advent of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Muslims from the occupied West Bank were able to pray at the al-Aqsa Mosque

during this holy month. I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome the relative calm at the holy site and urge continued respect for the status quo and relevant agreements.

Madam President,

Turning very briefly to the region, the situation on the Golan is calm. However, the potential for heightened tension between the parties to the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement remains.

On 1 May, UNDOF observed some Israel soldiers, had been laying razor concertina wire in the area between the Israeli technical fence and an UNDOF position, had crossed the ceasefire line. During this activity, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces soldiers deployed close to that location to monitor their activities. UNDOF liaised with both sides to deescalate the situation.

In Lebanon, the Cabinet started reviewing the draft 2019 State budget on 30 April, as some protests over reported austerity measures continued. At stake in the ongoing budget discussions is meeting commitments from the 2018 CEDRE conference on economic development and reform, which include the need to reduce Lebanon's deficit.

Madam President, Members of the Security Council,

In closing, I would like to return to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The recent escalation in Gaza has once again demonstrated the urgency of solidifying and expanding the existing understandings on the ground.

We must ask ourselves, how many more years will Palestinians in Gaza be forced to live on pittance from the international community, under the control of Hamas, and suffer from Israeli closures?

How many more years will Israelis be forced to run for shelters as rockets launched by Palestinian militants in Gaza rain down indiscriminately from above?

The United Nations and its partners have - yet again – tried to mitigate the impact of the crisis in Gaza, but these efforts will ultimately fail unless there is progress on resolving the Palestinian divide, on lifting the closures and on charting a course towards the two-State solution based on long-standing international parameters, including relevant UN resolutions and previous agreements.

There are no shortcuts to sustainable peace.

I also take note of the invitation by the United States and the Kingdom of Bahrain to convene government, civil society, and business leaders to discuss the potential for economic investments and initiatives that would be made possible by a future Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement and a solution to the final status issues.

Humanitarian and economic support is very important for people, and it is also critical as for creating an environment conducive for viable negotiations. However, the solution to the conflict remains fundamentally political.

Thank you.