

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

20 FEBRUARY 2018

Mr. President,

Your Excellency President Mahmoud ABBAS, President of the State of Palestine;

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We meet this month as regional tensions are taking an increasingly perilous turn. Fighting in Syria is increasing, endangering de-escalation arrangements and regional stability, as well as undermining efforts for a political solution.

Despite the positive news from Iraq and the defeat of Da'esh, much of the Middle East continues to be in the grips of an ongoing human tragedy of immense proportions.

Mr. President,

Against this backdrop and after over a century of hostilities including 50 years of continued military occupation, Israelis and Palestinians are still no closer to peace; many have lost hope that they will see it in their lifetimes.

The enemies of peace are growing more confident by the day.

They see every failure of the forces of moderation as a win for the forces of radicalisation.

They believe the political odds are turning in their favour. Day after day they are emboldened.

Hindering peace are also those who push facts on the ground, who promote unilateral moves blocking the pathway back to the negotiating table.

None of this will bring us closer to resolving the conflict. None of it will respond to the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to statehood or the Israeli longing for security. It will only drive us farther down the road of confrontation, suffering and a one-state reality of perpetual occupation.

Mr. President,

Last month the international community discussed key priorities to advance the goal of peace at the extraordinary ministerial meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLIC).

At the meeting, I was encouraged by widespread, unequivocal messages reaffirming support for the two-state solution, in line with relevant UN resolutions, and the need to resume meaningful negotiations over all final status issues, including the status of Jerusalem.

Participants also made a critical commitment to undertake efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, including support for projects focused on water, electricity and economic recovery.

My message to all was clear: first, we must clearly reaffirm that sustainable peace requires a two-state solution, one that can only be achieved through a negotiated process. Israelis and Palestinians have defined the final status issues and only they, together, can determine their resolution.

Second, efforts must continue to seek implementation of concrete and transformative steps on the ground – including ending Israeli settlement expansion and advancing policy shifts particularly in Area C of the West Bank – consistent with a transition to greater Palestinian civil authority, as called for in the 2016 report of the Middle East Quartet.

Third, the Palestinian Authority must continue to advance institution-building and service delivery to the Palestinian people and work towards bringing Gaza back under its control.

And lastly, it is critical that any future peace proposal focus on the two-state solution and all final status issues as per prior agreements and relevant United Nations resolutions. A failure to do so could have dangerous repercussions.

Mr. President,

Maintaining support for Palestine refugees is fundamental to the pursuit of peace and stability in the region. I reiterate my ongoing concern over UNRWA's sizeable funding shortfall, despite the welcome flexibility of some Member States in accelerating the disbursement of their funding commitments. In addition, the emergency appeals launched on 30 January seek to raise US\$ 800 million for the West Bank and Gaza, as well as for the Syria regional crisis, to meet the essential needs of some 1.5 million highly vulnerable people. I encourage Member States to consider urgently providing new funding for UNRWA's critical requirements.

As the peace process falters and the gulf between the two sides widens, Palestinians and Israelis continue to suffer the violent consequences on the ground.

Seven Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces in various incidents across the occupied Palestinian territory and one Israeli civilian was stabbed and killed by a Palestinian in the West Bank.

Three of the Palestinians killed died during violent clashes with security forces, one a 16-year-old was shot near Ramallah. He was the fourth child killed under such circumstances since the beginning of the year.

I once again emphasize that the use of force must be calibrated and that lethal force should only be used as a last resort, with any resulting fatalities properly investigated by the authorities. I urge Israeli security forces to exercise maximum restraint to avoid casualties under such circumstances.

I call upon all sides to reject violence, condemn terror, ensure accountability and work to reduce tensions.

In recent days we have also witnessed dangerous security incidents in and around Gaza. On 17 February four Israeli soldiers were wounded by an improvised explosive device placed at the Gaza fence. This was followed by Israeli airstrikes on some 18 Hamas targets, while Palestinian militants fired two rockets into Israel – one causing damage to a house in the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council. Two Palestinian teens were killed by Israeli security forces while reportedly attempting to approach the fence.

Prior to this latest flare-up during the course of the past month, three more rockets were fired towards Israel, with two Israeli retaliatory strikes, all without injuries.

I encourage the international community to join the UN in calling on militants in Gaza to refrain from such provocations and end the building of tunnels and the firing of rockets towards Israel. Such actions, and the response they elicit, only risk the lives of Palestinians and Israelis, undermine peace efforts and increase the likelihood of another devastating conflict.

I also take the opportunity to note the need to resolve the matter of the missing Israeli soldiers and civilians that are being held in Gaza.

Two additional incidents, Mr. President, highlight the risk of escalation and the need for continued Israeli-Palestinian security coordination. These were the discovery of 12 roadside bombs in the West Bank on 26 January and the foiled attempt on 4 February, to smuggle a dual-use component used to make explosives into Gaza within a shipment of medical equipment.

I also note that the trial of 17-year-old Palestinian girl Ahed Tamimi started on 13 February behind closed doors. She has been detained on remand for two months to date. As stated in my last briefing, the detention of a child must only be used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest possible time.

Mr. President,

Throughout the reporting period Israel's illegal settlement-related activities continued unabated. In response to last month's killing of a resident of the illegal Havat Gilad outpost,

on February 4th, Israel approved the establishment of a new settlement to absorb its residents. I strongly denounce the expansion of the settlement enterprise as compensation for Israeli deaths.

Settlement construction is not a morally appropriate way to respond to murder.

On February 12th, Israel also advanced two settlement plans for some 85 housing units near Bethlehem. I reiterate the long-standing UN position that all settlement-related activities are illegal under international law and are a substantial obstacle to peace; and I call on Israel to seize and reverse such policies.

Mr. President,

Demolition and seizure of Palestinian-owned structures also continued, with 31 structures affected, resulting in 33 Palestinians displaced. Particularly concerning was the demolition of two donor-funded classrooms serving Palestinian children in the Bedouin community of Abu Nuwar. This is the sixth demolition or confiscation in the school since February 2016.

Overall, according to OCHA, 44 schools in the occupied West Bank are currently at risk of demolition. I urge Israel to cease this practice.

Mr. President,

I briefed you last week on the situation in Gaza. Month after month, we have raised the alarm about the humanitarian, economic and ecological calamity underway. It bears repeating that the situation is unsustainable.

Continuing power cuts of up to 20 hours per day severely undermine the provision of basic services. Without additional immediate fuel deliveries, the situation could deteriorate with dramatic consequences.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's appreciation to the United Arab Emirates and to the State of Qatar for their support to deal with this emergency. Their immediate response to our appeal has helped stave off a further deterioration.

I am encouraged by the trilateral meeting I had last week with Palestinian Prime Minister Hamdallah and Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, Major General Mordechai in which we focused on the humanitarian problems in Gaza. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism and agreed on the need for a joint review to improve its functionality, transparency and predictability.

Mr. President,

As the humanitarian crisis in Gaza escalates, the implementation of the Egyptian-brokered intra-Palestinian agreement has stalled. Absent immediate steps to address the

humanitarian crisis and to revive the economy, we will face a total institutional and economic collapse in Gaza. This is not an alarmist prediction Mr. President – it is a fact.

I welcome the proposal of the Palestinian Government to incorporate into its 2018 budget some 20,000 civil service employees in Gaza. A positive outcome, however, is contingent, *inter alia*, upon the collection of taxes, the payment of salaries, the return of the Government administration, and ultimately, security control of Gaza.

I urge all sides to intensify their engagement and to move forward in this process.

Mr. President,

For a decade two million people have lived under the full control of Hamas with crippling Israeli closures and movement and access restrictions. Throughout this period the international community has provided aid and humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering and to rebuild what was destroyed in three devastating conflicts.

It is time to break this cycle. It is time to return Gaza back to the control of the legitimate Palestinian Authority, for there can be no Palestinian state without Palestinian unity.

Those who stand in the way of reconciliation hurt the Palestinian national cause and the price will be paid by generations of ordinary people.

Mr. President,

The security situation on the Golan is also of growing concern. A worrying escalation occurred on February 10th, when Israeli Defence Forces destroyed what they identified as an Iranian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle which had reportedly entered its airspace from Syria. Shortly thereafter, Israeli aircraft targeted a Syrian airbase. During the attack, one Israeli jet was hit injuring two pilots, which further prompted Israel to attack what it described as “12 military objectives” inside Syria. I urge all sides to work towards easing tensions in this highly volatile area.

Turning briefly to Lebanon. Heightened rhetoric was exchanged between Israel and Lebanon over disputed maritime areas. The United Nations continues to call on the sides to act responsibly, avoid security risks and explore with the support of the United Nations ways to resolve the issue.

Preparations continue for May parliamentary elections in Lebanon and for the upcoming Rome II and Cedre conferences to support the security sector and economy, respectively on 15 March and 5 April.

While the situation was generally quiet in the UNIFIL area of operation, heightened rhetoric relating to the Israeli Defense Forces proposed constructions in Lebanese “reservation areas” south of the Blue Line continued. The planned construction commenced in non-reservation areas on 7 February with no incidents reported.

Mr. President,

Returning to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, let me reiterate in closing that we in the international community must continue advocating for substantial Israeli policy changes related to the situation in the West Bank, including a halt to settlement construction, demolition of structures and prevention of Palestinian development in Area C. On Gaza, we must collectively work to alleviate the humanitarian disaster and provide full support to Egyptian reconciliation efforts. Our support to UNRWA also remains vital.

I also hope that we will be able to look beyond the closed, dark negotiating rooms that are currently empty of diplomats and politicians, to see that there are Israeli and Palestinian advocates for peace working tirelessly to promote change: civil society organizations; youth and women's groups; religious and community leaders – they all have a critical role to play and must be supported and allowed to express their views freely. We rarely discuss their role, we don't speak often enough of the challenges they face, but their efforts must be recognized and supported.

In this Chamber, Mr. President, we have often spoken of the need for leadership on both sides to reach a deal, a compromise, through negotiations that would allow Israelis and Palestinians to separate and be masters of their own fate.

But Mr. President, these negotiations would not be negotiations between equals.

For one side is under military occupation. Its leadership has committed to a peaceful solution to the conflict through negotiation. I urge the international community not to give up on support for the moderate Palestinian leadership or on building up the institutions that will increase the chances of success. Our window of opportunity is closing and, if we do not seize it quickly, the Israeli - Palestinian conflict will be engulfed in the whirlwind of religious radicalization that remains present in the region.

Thank you.