

**UNDERSECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS
ROSEMARY di CARLO
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

22 August 2018

Mme. President,

Members of the Security Council,

We meet today in the wake of yet another series of violent escalations that threatened to plunge Gaza into war.

Over the past several weeks, Special Coordinator Mladenov has led unprecedented UN efforts, with the Government of Egypt and other regional and international partners, to prevent another devastating outbreak of hostilities, respond to the most urgent humanitarian needs, and support intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

The recurring violence highlights the urgency of this initiative. In several rounds of hostilities throughout the reporting period, Palestinian militants fired some 195 rockets and mortars towards Israel. On 7 August, one Grad rocket reportedly landed in an open field near the city of Be'er Sheva, the furthest a projectile has been fired since the 2014 hostilities.

Israel targeted sites in the Strip on at least 125 occasions. Eight Palestinians, including a pregnant woman and her 18-month-old baby were killed, while 56 Palestinians and 28 Israeli civilians were injured. These exchanges, which have escalated in recent months, underline the fragility of the interim periods of calm and the need for longer-term solutions.

Mme. President,

In recent weeks, the humanitarian situation in Gaza had also deteriorated further, due in part to additional restrictions that Israel imposed on the movement of goods through the Kerem Shalom crossing. This was in reaction to the launching of incendiary kites and balloons from Gaza that have burned thousands of acres of Israeli fields, forests and agricultural land.

On 15 August, Israel fully reopened Kerem Shalom and expanded the fishing zone to nine nautical miles. The Secretary-General welcomed the decision as having a significant impact on the struggling Gaza economy and on efforts to de-escalate the situation. However, on 19 August, Israel closed the Erez pedestrian crossing to Gaza and West Bank residents, except for humanitarian cases, citing continued violent incidents at the fence.

As we work towards a full lifting of the closures on Gaza, in line with Security Council Resolution 1860, I call on all parties to ensure that urgently needed humanitarian supplies reach the Strip. These should not be held hostage to political and security developments.

I also reiterate previous calls by the Special Coordinator to Hamas to provide full information on the Israeli nationals who are being held in Gaza, as required by international humanitarian law.

Mme. President,

The UN is taking steps to increase its capacity on the ground to better support energy, water, health and job-creation projects endorsed by the Palestinian Authority and the international community. I am pleased to note that many donors and international organizations are looking into increasing their allocations for Palestine. This is the appropriate response to Gaza's crumbling infrastructure and collapsing economy.

In particular, I am encouraged by the World Bank's increased USD 90 million allocation for West Bank and Gaza, including for some 4,400 short-term employment opportunities.

UNDP is also accelerating its emergency economic assistance programme with support from several donors. Both efforts focus on employment for women and youth as a priority. The UNDP programme aims to have 40% of resulting job placements for women, a critical step, given that the unemployment rate for Palestinian women continued to be significantly higher than men, exceeding 78 per cent in Gaza in the second quarter of 2018.

This follows the launch in May of the "Decent Work for Women" programme, a joint Italian, UN-Women and ILO initiative to promote equal and decent work opportunities throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, as well as the launch last April of a Japan-funded UN-Women project to support women in Gaza. Improving women's socio-economic status is essential to peace and stability, as women remain more vulnerable throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory. These are also important efforts to strengthen women's role in preventing conflict, as per Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security.

I am however deeply concerned that funding for UN emergency fuel, which sustains some 250 critical facilities in Gaza has now run out.

Some USD 4.5 million are urgently required to ensure a minimum level of essential services through the end of the year. Also of concern is the dangerously short supply of essential medicines, with 40 per cent of essential drugs completely depleted.

The UN is working with the Governments of Israel and Palestine on reviewing the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism to improve its functionality, transparency and predictability. The Palestinian Authority has also made great efforts to re-assert its engagement in support of Gaza. I look forward to its full and active participation in this regard.

I also welcome Egypt's continued efforts to facilitate intra-Palestinian reconciliation, critical to advance not only Gaza's humanitarian and development objectives but also Palestinian national aspirations. I reiterate the Secretary-General's call on all parties to support these efforts.

Mme. President,

We have been regularly updating the Council and its members on the unprecedented financial challenge UNRWA faces this year.

The Secretary-General has warned that failing to address UNRWA's remaining USD 217 million funding shortfall will have serious humanitarian and developmental consequences, as well as implications for regional stability. I thank Member States that have taken steps to assist in closing this shortfall and call on others to increase their support to UNRWA. It is imperative to maintain the strong collective mobilization.

Mme. President,

Turning to the broader situation, violent incidents continued to take place throughout the Occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. In Gaza, 13 Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces during continued protests near the perimeter fence, including one medical worker and four children. Some 1000 Palestinians and one Israeli soldier were also injured.

On 21 August, Israel's Military Advocate General announced that military police investigations would be opened into the death of two Palestinians killed during protests near the fence in recent months.

While Israel has a duty to protect its citizens, it must exercise maximum restraint in the use of live fire, and refrain from using lethal force, except as a last resort. I further call on Hamas to avoid violence at the fence and refrain from putting children in harm's way. Children should never be targeted or instrumentalized in any way.

On 26 July, in the West Bank settlement of Adam, a 17-year-old Palestinian stabbed an Israeli civilian to death and injured two others. He was shot and killed by one of the victims. It is deplorable that Hamas and others once again chose to glorify this attack.

After a period of relative calm in Jerusalem, on 27 July, the one-year anniversary of the resolution of last year's unrest at the Holy Esplanade, clashes erupted at the site between Palestinians and ISF, during which ten Palestinians and four Israeli police officers were injured. On 17 August, an Israeli Arab man was shot dead by ISF in Jerusalem's Old City after attempting to stab them. Following both incidents, Israeli security forces closed the entrances to the compound for a few hours, before restoring full access.

With the celebration of Eid al-Adha this week, and the Jewish holidays approaching, I urge all to do their part to avoid provocations at Jerusalem's Holy Sites.

The Special Coordinator conducted a series of meetings with Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders in Jerusalem to discuss the importance of maintaining calm, rejecting violence, and ensuring the status quo is preserved at the Holy Sites. He will continue its engagement with all stakeholders.

Mme. President,

On 14 August, Israeli authorities announced they would publish a tender for 603 units in the Ramat Shlomo settlement in East Jerusalem, the first such announcement since 2016. In Area C, a tender for 511 housing units was published, and construction based on previously approved plans continued.

On 1 August, the Israeli Civil Administration confirmed its intention to expand the municipal boundaries of the Amichai settlement to include the outpost of Adei Ad. If implemented, this would result in the first outpost legalization, under Israeli law, since 2014. I reiterate the UN long-standing position that all settlement activities are illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace.

Israeli authorities demolished 18 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and East Jerusalem for lack of building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain. As a result, eight Palestinians were displaced, including six children.

On 1 August, Israel's High Court of Justice indicated it did not find sufficient reason to prevent the demolition of the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar. It instructed the State to present an alternative relocation site, on which the parties have not agreed. Demolition is on hold while the Court considers the case.

I reiterate UN calls on Israel to cease the demolition of Palestinian property and efforts to relocate Bedouin communities in the occupied West Bank. Such actions are contrary to international law and undermine the two-state solution.

Mme. President,

I would like to close by highlighting the efforts of ordinary women and men, Israeli and Palestinian, who overcome cynicism and despair by taking tangible steps to promote tolerance and forge a shared future.

They include volunteers who drive Palestinian patients to medical appointments in Israel; youth leaders finding creative ways to build a shared future amongst Jerusalem's communities; scientists working together to solve regional environmental challenges; and Palestinian and Israeli women mobilizing constituencies for peace and promoting the participation of women in the political process, in line with Security Council Resolution 1325. As outlined in the 2016 Quartet Report, such initiatives provide a crucial foundation for broader peace efforts. I invite Member States to continue generously supporting them.

Even as the international community focuses on resolving the current crisis in Gaza and returning the legitimate Palestinian Government to the Strip, the perseverance of these individuals reminds us of the need to view our efforts in the context of our broader goal – ending the Israeli occupation and achieving a future of two states, based on relevant UN resolutions and previous agreements, living side by side in peace, security and dignity.

Thank you.