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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST, REPORTING ON UNSCR 2334 (2016)
26 MARCH 2019**

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Vice Foreign Minister of Indonesia,

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I will devote my regular briefing on the situation in the Middle East to presenting the ninth report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), the report covers the period between 15 December 2018 and 15 March 2019. Before I provide an update on the developments related to the provisions of the resolution that have taken place following the submission of the written report of the Secretary-General to the Council, I would like to address the situation on the ground in the past 48 hours.

On 25 March, a rocket was launched from the Gaza Strip, directly hitting a house in central Israel. Seven family members were injured, including three children. Over the following 24 hours, at least 103 rockets and mortars were fired from Gaza towards Israel, some of which were intercepted by the Iron Dome system, while others caused material damage to a house in Sderot or hit uninhabited areas. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) conducted 42 strikes on various locations in Gaza, while some 16 shells were fired by the IDF and the Israeli navy towards the Gaza strip. According to local sources, seven Palestinians have been injured as a result of the strikes. Several buildings were destroyed, including Hamas offices and security buildings. As at 06:00 this morning local time, a fragile calm seems to have taken hold.

In the past ten days there have been two rockets attacks from Gaza, targeting the Tel Aviv area. They represent a very serious escalation. Since the early hours of yesterday, my team and I have been working intensely with Egypt and all concerned parties to ensure that the situation does not spiral out of control. As I have said many times in this Council, but I will repeat it here today again — nobody has an interest in a full military confrontation in Gaza.

A new conflict will be devastating for the Palestinian people, it will have consequences for Israelis, who live in the vicinity of the Gaza perimeter, and it is likely to have regional repercussions. This is why I ask you all today to join the United Nations in condemning the continued indiscriminate firing of rockets towards Israel. Such acts of provocation only dramatically increase the risk of escalation and ultimately damage our collective efforts to support the people of Gaza and intra-Palestinian reconciliation. We must also call on all sides to exercise maximum restraint as the situation remains extremely tense.

Mr. President,

Returning to the report under resolution 2334, I have to begin by saying that once again no steps have been taken by Israel to “immediately and completely cease all settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem” as called for by Security Council resolution 2334. Since the end of the reporting period the government has announced the construction of 840 new units in Ariel. This decision was presented as a response to an attack on 17 March.

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures also continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Since 15 March and additional seven Palestinian-owned structures were demolished or seized by the Israeli authorities. This has resulted in the displacement of nine people. A water cistern in Susiya, three structures belonging to communities in southern Hebron and an elementary school building under construction in the Shu’fat refugee camp in East Jerusalem are among the buildings demolished.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 also “calls for immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians.” However, even the brief period since the submission of this report, as witnessed by recent events, has been characterized by escalating violence.

Beginning on 14 and 15 March, thousands of Palestinians in Gaza demonstrated under the slogan “we want to live.” They protested the dire socio-economic circumstances in Gaza and “the injustice due to the Palestinian division and the Hamas takeover of Gaza by force and violence”. Although the protests were generally non-violent, Hamas security personnel violently dispersed participants and many, including women, children, journalists and human rights activists, were beaten and hospitalized. Tens of homes were raided in search of demonstrators. Local human rights monitors reported that over a thousand people, including children, were arrested, with many reportedly beaten. The crackdown was condemned by all Palestinian factions.

Meanwhile, protests at the Gaza fence, which had subsided for a couple of days, also resumed. At least eleven incendiary devices were launched from Gaza towards Israel since 15 March only. In response, IDF shelled or conducted airstrikes against targets in Gaza on four occasions, causing no injuries. This of course does not include the rockets fired in the past 48 hours.

Mr. President,

Tensions in the occupied West Bank also continued. Four Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces, in various security operations and other incidents, while two Israelis, including one soldier and one civilian, were killed by Palestinians.

On 17 March, a Palestinian stabbed an Israeli soldier near the Ariel settlement, took his rifle and shot him and an Israeli civilian, killing both and severely injuring another soldier. In the subsequent search operations, 15 homes were raided, a temporary security cordon was imposed on several villages and three of the suspect’s family members were arrested. Two days later, the suspect was killed by the ISF in the village of Abwein.

Another incident took place on 19 March, when Jewish worshippers, accompanied by Israeli security forces, entered Nablus on their way to visit Joseph's Tomb — a monthly practice that is consistent with previous agreements between the parties. While the details of the ensuing clashes remain disputed, two Palestinians were killed by the ISF, and at least 27 others were injured.

In Bethlehem, on 20 March, a 26-year-old Palestinian was shot and killed by ISF and another was injured while driving near a partial military checkpoint under disputed circumstances. In Beit Sira village near Ramallah, a Palestinian man was similarly shot and injured near a checkpoint. Israeli authorities have launched investigations into both events.

On 24 March, two Israeli prison guards apparently were stabbed by Hamas inmates in Ktzi'ot Prison in southern Israel. Following this, twelve prisoners were reportedly injured in ensuing clashes between guards and inmates.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls upon the parties “to refrain from provocative actions, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric.” Unfortunately, such actions and rhetoric have continued. On 17 March, both Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad praised the attack near the settlement of Ariel, and called it a “heroic operation”, while Fatah social media pages praised the perpetrator as a “heroic martyr”. Israeli political leaders have continued to call for targeted assassinations of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials and for annexation of the West Bank.

Mr. President,

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated calls by the Middle East Quartet for “affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-State solution.” No such steps have been taken during the reporting period.

Meanwhile, the situation at Jerusalem's Holy Sites continues to be tense. On 17 March, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court reinstated for 60 days an order to close the building located at the Bab al-Rahma (Mercy Gate) in al-Haram al-Sharif / Temple Mount, which has been closed by the Israeli authorities since 2003 on security grounds. The Islamic Endowment (the Waqf) – echoed by the Palestinian and Jordanian Ministries of Foreign Affairs – maintains that Israeli courts lack jurisdiction over the holy site, which lies in the territory occupied in 1967, and warned against any changes to the historical and legal status quo.

Israel, however, considers the establishment of a mosque at the Mercy Gate area a violation of the status quo. As at 20 March, the Jerusalem Magistrate court order has not been executed. Daily prayers continue at the Mercy Gate area, while discussions between Israel and Jordan are ongoing.

Mr. President,

The past few days have not seen a resolution to the funding crisis created by Israel's decision to withhold 6% from revenues it collects on behalf the PA, and the Palestinian leadership's refusal

to accept any clearance transfers unless the full amount is reinstated. The Palestinian Government has begun implementing extremely severe austerity measures. The measures include a 50% salary cut for some 60 % of Palestinian Government employees, and overall ceiling on salary payments, cessation of promotions, appointments and bonuses, purchase of property and cars and a 20 percent reduction in operational expenses across the board including reduced expenses on travel and fuel. In addition, the PA plans to borrow from domestic banks between now and the month of July. This will have a substantial impact on the Palestinian economy resulting in reduced purchasing power and further reduction in the GDP growth both in West Bank and Gaza.

Mr. President,

In closing, I would like to reiterate some of the observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of resolution 2334.

The expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is continuing unabated. The advancement, approval or tender of more than 3,000 units in the occupied West Bank, reported in the written report you have received, is the largest batch since May 2018. This includes the latest announcement of over 800 units in Ariel. I reiterate that the establishment of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, has no legal effect and constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, as stated in resolution 2334. It must cease immediately and completely.

The demolition and seizure of Palestinian structures also continues. The demolition of structures linked to vital water connections in Area C of the West Bank communities already suffering water shortages is particularly troubling. I am concerned by the continued pressures being placed on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Such policies must be reversed, and Israel should abide by its obligations under international law.

I am saddened by the persistent violence that continues to result in the tragic loss of Palestinian and Israeli lives. Recent incidents in the West Bank and Gaza highlight the mounting tensions across the occupied Palestinian territory and the risk of a broader escalation of the conflict. I call on the parties to reject violence and to work to reduce tensions. There is no justification for terror and I call on all to join the United Nations in condemning it unequivocally.

I am concerned that we may once again be facing another very dangerous escalation of violence in Gaza with potentially catastrophic consequences. The last two days have shown how precariously close we are to the brink of war once again. The indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars against Israeli towns and villages violates international law and places civilian lives at great risk. The launching of incendiary and explosive devices towards Israel must also stop.

I remain gravely concerned by the number of deaths and injuries of Palestinians along the Gaza perimeter fence as well. Israeli security forces have the responsibility to exercise restraint and lethal force must be used only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

I strongly condemn the campaign of arrests and violence inside Gaza against protesters, including women and children, in Gaza. The brutal beating of journalists, human rights workers and the raiding of homes is particularly alarming. The long-suffering people of Gaza have a right to protest without fear of reprisal and I call on all Member States to join the UN in condemning such actions.

As I have repeatedly emphasised, the situation in Gaza is untenable and the latest protests, further highlight the need for the return of a unified Palestinian Government to Gaza. I call on all Palestinian factions to engage in earnest with Egypt in order to implement the 2017 Cairo Agreement and end internal divisions. While the United Nations is continuing its efforts to de-escalate the situation, progress on the reconciliation track and the lifting of closures on Gaza remain essential. I encourage Member States to support these vital efforts.

The lack of resolution of the PA's funding crisis threatens to further destabilize an already volatile situation. Both parties should continue to implement their bilateral agreements and avoid taking unilateral actions that undermine the two-state solution.

The situation in the Old City of Jerusalem, Mr. President, remains a serious concern. I urge all parties to work towards a de-escalation of tensions. I encourage Israel and Jordan to work together to uphold the status quo at the Holy Sites, noting the special and historic role of the Hashemite Kingdom as custodian of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem.

Lastly, I remain deeply concerned by the lack of progress towards the realization a two-state solution in line with relevant UN resolutions, long-standing international parameters and prior agreements. There is no viable alternative to the two-state solution. Given the interconnected nature of conflicts throughout the region and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict's potential to fuel extremist narratives, creating the conditions for the parties to return to meaningful negotiations remains critical.

What is needed however first and foremost, is the necessary leadership and political will to take concrete steps in support of ending the occupation and realizing a lasting peace. Until that can be found, another generation of Israelis and Palestinians is destined to spend their lives searching in vain for an elusive peace.

Thank you.