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

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Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

I am afraid that I must begin this month's briefing to the Council by focusing on the rising specter of violence in the West Bank and Gaza and the threat of a regional escalation. Both are happening against the backdrop of the complete political deadlock of the Middle East Peace Process and the lack of any perspective to revive it.

On numerous occasions the Secretary-General and I have warned that the lack of a political horizon towards resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of the two-state solution, unilateral moves on the ground, including settlement construction and expansion, terror attacks and a multitude of other factors create an explosive mix.

An explosive mix that can only be resolved by leadership that is willing and capable of returning to the table for meaningful negotiations towards a sustainable and just peace.

A leadership that can stand up to extremists and radicals and uphold what we in the international community, the Security Council, the region have said so many times – that lasting peace can only be based on the idea that Israelis and Palestinians live side-by-side in peace, security and mutual recognition, as both peoples have a legitimate and historic right to their own statehood.

This can be achieved on the basis of relevant UN resolutions and mutual agreements. If we stray from this framework, we will see the inevitable radicalization. We cannot give up on the goal of a peaceful resolution to this conflict. The alternative is too horrible to fathom.

In the past month we have seen an increase of violent incidents, including settler-related violence, in the West Bank and continuing tensions in and around Gaza.

On August 8th, a 19-year old Israeli was murdered in the West Bank, stabbed close to the settlement of Migdal Oz. Two Palestinian suspects were later arrested by the ISF.

On the 15th of August, two Palestinian teens stabbed and injured an Israeli police officer in Jerusalem's Old City. One of the assailants was shot and killed.

The following day two Israeli teens were injured in a car ramming attack near the settlement of Elazar, south of Bethlehem. The 26-year-old driver was shot and killed by an off-duty Israeli policeman.

On the 23rd of August, an improvised explosive device (IED) was detonated near the settlement of Dolev, northwest of Ramallah, killing a 17-year-old Israeli girl and severely injuring her father and brother.

I unequivocally condemn all attacks on Palestinian and Israeli civilians. Such dangerous attacks serve only those who want escalation.

Violence and terrorism must be condemned by all. Their glorification by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian factions is deplorable indeed.

In East Jerusalem, two months after the killing of a 21-year-old Palestinian in al-Issawiya, tensions remain high as ISF continues to carry out raids and arrests.

Overall in the past month in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, two Palestinians and two Israelis were killed and at least 102 Palestinians and seven Israelis have been injured.

Mr. President,

In response to the 23rd of August terrorist attack near the settlement of Dolev, the Israeli Government decided to submit to the High Planning Committee a plan for the establishment of a new neighborhood in Dolev with approximately 300 new housing units. This decision is part of a practice to expand settlements in the wake of attacks in the West Bank.

In addition, settlement expansion, demolitions, and seizures of Palestinian property have continued during the reporting period.

Citing the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain, Israeli authorities demolished or seized 22 structures in Area C, including 14 donor-funded aid structures and eleven structures in East Jerusalem. Among the demolished structures were four water cisterns serving two herding communities, which are already facing severe water shortages, in southern Hebron. According to OCHA, the demolitions have resulted in the displacement of 19 people, including six children, and affected the livelihoods of some 2,000 others.

I reiterate the statement by the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator that Israel's policy of destroying Palestinian property is not compatible with its obligations under international humanitarian law.

On the 5th and 6th of August, Israel's High Planning Committee advanced plans for some 2,400 housing units in Area C settlements, with 800 units reaching the final stage of approval. Some 200 units in East Jerusalem were also advanced during the reporting period. Further, the Security Cabinet had discussed on 30th of July the advancement of another 6,000 housing units and in a rare step, unanimously approved granting construction permits for 715 housing units for Palestinians in Area C.

The expansion of settlements has no legal effect and constitutes a blatant violation of international law. By advancing the effective annexation of the West Bank, it undermines the chances for

establishing a Palestinian state based on relevant UN resolutions, as part of a negotiated two-state solution.

Mr. President,

Despite the relative calm on the past two months, the situation in Gaza remains very fragile as violent incidents continue.

During the reporting period, some eleven rockets and mortars were launched from Gaza towards Israel. Most were intercepted—two landed in the Israeli town of Sderot on 17 and 25 August, causing material damage. In response just yesterday Israel decided to temporarily reduce the fuel transfer to Gaza by half. This unfortunate decision has already resulted in a reduction of energy supply to the Strip.

On several occasions during the reporting period, some 15 Palestinian militants from Gaza breached or attempted to breach the perimeter fence, triggering retaliatory fire or airstrikes by the IDF, in which nine militants were killed.

The weekly protests at the perimeter fence continued. Some individuals engaged in violent activities. The IDF responded mostly with riot dispersal means, however live ammunition was also used. One Palestinian was killed and 545 were injured, including over 150 children.

Although fewer incendiary kites, balloons and other devices have been launched from Gaza compared to the last reporting period, at least eleven incendiary fires were reported.

Israel must calibrate its use of force and use lethal force only as a last resort, and only in response to imminent threats of death or serious injury.

Hamas must prevent the indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars towards Israel. It must ensure that protests at the fence remain peaceful and prevent provocations.

I would like to also reiterate that the fate of two Israeli civilians and the bodies of two IDF soldiers missing in Gaza remain an important humanitarian concern for all of us.

Mr. President,

I am afraid that I also have to raise the alarm on the deteriorating situation in the health sector in Gaza, particularly the lack of resources, including medical supplies. According to WHO, in July, 254 items (or 49 per cent) of essential medications and 225 items (or 26 per cent) of medical disposables were reported to be at less than one-month supply at Gaza's Central Drug Store.

On the 20th August, Deputy Special Coordinator McGoldrick visited a hospital in Gaza and met with a group of women beneficiaries of projects supported by the UN Humanitarian Fund. He heard about the large number of health issues that Palestinian women are facing as a result of the humanitarian crisis. Doctors highlighted the scarcity of cancer drugs in Gaza and the unpredictable

referral system for treatment outside Gaza as serious challenges. The UN is committed to working with all parties, including donors, to prevent a health crisis in the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, access to drinking water has improved with the completion of a new desalination plant which will serve up to 200,000 people. I would like to express my appreciation to the State of Kuwait for generously funding this project through the Islamic Development Bank.

The past month also saw an increase in the number of permits given to Palestinian businessmen and laborers from Gaza.

While these efforts are not enough to fundamentally change the harsh realities of life in Gaza, they serve to lessen the impact of the ongoing humanitarian and economic crises.

The past month also saw serious movement and access constraints continue on national staff from UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in Gaza. These restrictions affect nearly all our national staff who are unable to leave Gaza for practically any purpose.

Israel must significantly improve the movement and access of goods and people to and from Gaza as a step towards lifting of the closures, in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

Mr. President,

This year, the Muslim Eid al-Adha and the Jewish commemoration of Tisha B'Av coincided on 10 August, this led to tensions at Jerusalem's Holy Sites. Israeli authorities allowed Jewish visitors to access al-Haram al-Sharif / Temple Mount on that day under police protection. In the days before the holiday, Muslim religious leaders had urged worshippers to come *en masse* to al-Aqsa Mosque for Eid prayers. In clashes between police forces and worshippers that took place before and during the entry of Jewish visitors into the compound, 29 Palestinians were injured, including the Chairman and members of the Islamic Waqf Council. According to media reports the ISF also sustained four injuries.

I reiterate the call for the status quo at the Holy Sites to be upheld in line with the special and historic role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as custodian of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem.

Mr. President,

Following the demolitions of Palestinian homes in Areas A, B and C of the West Bank on the East Jerusalem side of the barrier, which Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo briefed the Council on last month, President Abbas stated on the 25th of July that the Palestinian leadership would suspend compliance with agreements signed with Israel and start putting in place mechanisms to implement this decision.

For the sixth consecutive month, the Palestinian Government has refused to receive Israel's transfer of tax revenues less than the full amount owed to it.

On 22 August, however, following months of consultations, Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) agreed for the PA to receive approximately USD 568 million in reimbursed taxes levied by Israel on fuel.

This is an important measure that will temporarily relieve the PA's financial situation. Disagreement on the bulk of the tax revenue transfers, however, remains. In this context I reiterate my call on both sides to continue their engagement in a constructive manner and comply with the Paris Protocol on Economic Relations.

Mr. President,

Turning briefly to other developments in the region, on the 25th of August, media reported that two unmanned aerial vehicles had crashed in the southern suburbs of Beirut. On 26 August, also according to media reports, a military base of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) in the Bekaa Valley along the Lebanese-Syrian border was targeted in an air raid. President Aoun and constitutional leaders in Lebanon have referred to the drone incident as an assault on Lebanon's sovereignty and a blatant violation of resolution 1701 (2006). The United Nations takes note of these statements, as well as of the ongoing investigation into the incident by the Lebanese authorities.

The United Nations reiterates its appeal to all concerned to cease violations of resolution 1701 (2006) and to fully implement its provisions. The United Nations calls on the parties to exercise maximum restraint both in action and rhetoric.

Madam President,

In closing, I would like to repeat, as I said at the beginning of this briefing, that tangible steps can, and must, be taken to reverse the negative trajectory of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict urgently in order to counter the rising specter of violence and the threat of a regional escalation.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict based on international law, relevant UN resolutions and prior agreements, and realizing the vision of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

Thank you.