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

20 November 2019

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

We meet today in the aftermath of the most serious recent escalation between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza. Although the immediate crisis was diffused, the situation remains highly volatile.

Following Israel's targeted killing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Commander Baha Abu al-Ata in Gaza, Palestinian militants launched more than 500 rockets towards Israel. This latest escalation was preceded on 1 November by some ten rockets that were launched from Gaza towards Israel, one of them hitting a house in Sderot City.

While according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) 90 per cent were intercepted by the Iron Dome, those that landed caused damage to residential and commercial property. 78 Israelis were treated for injuries or shock.

The indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars at civilian population centres is unacceptable and must stop immediately.

In response to the rocket attacks, the IDF conducted a number of strikes against PIJ and militant targets in Gaza. 34 Palestinians were killed, more than 20 of them identified by the IDF as militants, and three women and eight children. One of the fatalities was reportedly caused by a Palestinian rocket falling short inside Gaza. In total, 109 people were injured as well.

Among the people killed in Gaza were eight members of a family, who were killed in a single Israeli strike. The IDF has reportedly admitted that their home was mistakenly targeted. This is a tragic and heinous incident and must be thoroughly and impartially investigated.

There is no justification for the killing of civilians anywhere.

Madam President,

I want to recognise the extraordinary effort by Egypt, working closely with the UN, to ensure that calm in Gaza was restored after 48 hours of hostilities. Had our efforts failed, we would certainly be in the midst of another war that would be far worse than the terrible conflict in 2014.

The dangers have not passed. Although for now, the arrangements that came into effect in the early hours of 14 November are holding, sporadic rocket launches have continued, prompting Israeli retaliation.

There are also other risks.

Israeli closures and intra-Palestinian division feed a desperate reality. Militant activity, rocket fire, and retaliatory air-strikes constantly risk more violence. Over the past year and a half, the UN has worked hard to prevent escalation and implement the UN package for Gaza as endorsed by the AHLC. As a result of this work, electricity supply was restored to an average of 13 hours per day, more than 16,000 temporary jobs were created, and work is progressing on reviving an industrial zone to create long-term economic opportunities. All these measures have admittedly eased tensions, but they fall short of what is required both in terms of financial resources, political commitment by Palestinian leaders, and measures by Israel.

Gaza ultimately requires a political solution.

Militant activity cannot continue to undermine the chances for peace and development.

Israel cannot continue with its policy of closures that stifles development.

Palestinian leaders cannot continue to avoid the devastating consequences of their internal political division.

I take this opportunity to thank those in the international community who have contributed to the implementation of the AHLC plan and call on all to increase their support to UN programmes on the ground. Most urgent is the need to address the collapse of the health system in Gaza.

Nevertheless, Madam President, our important humanitarian engagement must not divert us from the political goal of helping Palestinians to develop freely, without relentless occupation, and Israelis to live in security, free from the fear of terror and rockets. The only way to ensure this goal is to work towards — and achieve — a two-state solution, based on relevant UN resolutions; a two-state solution, in which Gaza is an integral part of the future state of Palestine.

Madam President,

Protests at the Gaza perimeter fence have also continued with a small number of participants engaging in violent activities. The IDF responded with riot dispersal means and live fire, injuring over 300 people, including women and children.

Israeli security forces (ISF) must exercise maximum restraint and only use lethal force when strictly necessary, as a last resort, and in response to an imminent threat of death or serious injury, in accordance with international law.

Hamas must ensure that protests at the fence remain peaceful and prevent provocations.

Madam President,

If we want a way out of the crisis – a way out that leads to something more than yet another ceasefire, the road is clear: stop firing rockets, retaliatory strikes and provocations, uphold the understandings that sustain calm in Gaza, redouble efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and lift the closures, and focus on a long term, sustainable political solution that includes allowing the Palestinian people across the occupied territory to vote and elect their leaders for the first time since 2006.

In recent weeks, I have engaged with senior Palestinian officials and different factions and am encouraged that all sides have moved from their entrenched positions and made important concessions toward making elections a more realistic prospect.

Renewing the legitimacy of all national institutions is important for the future of the Palestinian people.

In my discussions, I emphasized to all the critical elements required for elections to be credible:

First, they must be organized across the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) – in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza – in line with the Palestinian Basic Law, electoral legislation and international best practices;

Second, both legislative and presidential elections are necessary and should be held within a clearly identified and reasonable timeframe;

And third, broad intra-Palestinian agreement must be reached on the modalities of holding elections.

Madam President,

As Palestinians hopefully accelerate their efforts to hold elections, the Israeli-Palestinian political deadlock continues to manifest itself in the continuation of negative trends on the ground.

On 1 November, some 2,600 housing units were advanced by the Civil Administration High Planning Committee, including 182 units in Mevo'ot Yericho, an outpost in the Jordan Valley that the Israeli Government decided in September to retroactively legalize as a new settlement. Other notable plans include 382 units in the Dolev settlement, west of Ramallah, and 609 units in the large urban settlement of Beitar Illit, west of Bethlehem.

I take this opportunity to reiterate that we regret the announcement made on 18 November by the United States that it no longer views settlements as inconsistent with international law. The UN position remains unchanged. As per UNSC Resolution 2334, Israeli settlement activities are a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.

Madam President,

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures also continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Citing the absence of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain in Area C and East Jerusalem, Israeli authorities demolished or seized 48 structures resulting in the displacement of 101 Palestinians, including 46 children.

This practice must immediately cease.

Madam President,

Violence continues across the OPT.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, 46 Palestinians, including 9 children, and three Israelis were injured in various incidents, including during clashes, search and arrest operations, and settler-related violence.

On 11 November a 22-year-old Palestinian man was killed in circumstances that indicate that he did not pose a threat. Such acts must be thoroughly and impartially investigated, and the perpetrators held accountable. The IDF has reportedly launched an investigation into this incident.

Four days later on 15 November, a Palestinian journalist lost an eye after being reportedly shot by ISF while covering a demonstration in Surif village, north of Hebron.

I remain concerned by continuing, and sometime escalating, settler-related violence. Attacks on Palestinians and their property in the context of the annual olive harvest have continued despite preventive measures adopted by the Israeli authorities. These attacks, along with restrictions on Palestinian farmers' access to their land in areas adjacent to Israeli settlements and behind the West Bank barrier, have undermined agricultural livelihoods.

Madam President,

Despite the agreement reached last month between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which resulted in the transfer of some USD 425 million of clearance revenues to the Palestinian Authority, the underlying disagreements between the two parties remain, including over Israel's deductions. It remains critical that both sides engage in a constructive manner with the goal of restoring the revenue transfers in full line with the Paris Protocol on Economic Relations. The UN stands ready to assist this process.

In a positive development, on 11 November, UN-Women, with support from the Government of Norway, launched a USD1.2 million programme to support the

advancement of the Women Peace and Security Agenda in Palestine, including the development of the Palestinian National Action Plan for the next four years on the implementation of UNSCR 1325.

Madame President,

We have regularly updated the Council and its members on the financial challenges UNRWA continues to face. Cash flow is reaching a record low. I welcome the extension of UNRWA's mandate until 2023, as adopted by the 4th Committee of the General Assembly on 15 November. Given the stakes, I urge the swift mobilization of support to enable the Agency to sustain its operations.

Madam President,

Turning now briefly to other developments in the region, on the Golan the situation remains calm. However, the continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement remain of concern particularly in this volatile time for the region. On 19 November, UNDOF observed two unidentified objects being fired from a location on the Alpha side and heard three explosions. The IDF informed UNDOF that it had intercepted rockets fired from Syria. The Syrian authorities informed UNDOF that they had no knowledge of any firing of rockets. On 20 November, the IDF carried out airstrikes against what it described as Iranian Quds Force and Syrian Armed Forces targets in Syria.

Further details of the developments on the occupied Golan will be reported in the Secretary-General's Report on UNDOF due to the Security Council on 3 December.

In Lebanon, peaceful nationwide and non-sectarian demonstrations triggered by frustration against government policies led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on 29 October. Security forces have largely responded with restraint allowing peaceful demonstrations to continue despite heightened tensions at roadblocks. After one month of unabated protests, a political deadlock hinders the nomination of a Prime Minister-designate and the formation of a new government, amidst a rapidly deteriorating economic situation. The United Nations has called for a swift formation of government that is responsive to the protestors aspirations and which has the parliament's backing. The UN also encourages the Lebanese security forces to continue to protect peaceful demonstrators.

In the UNIFIL area of operations, following decreased joint operations with the Lebanese Armed Forces prompted by the popular protests, UNIFIL's operations in close coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces returned to normal levels in early November.

The Council will be briefed on resolution 1701 on 25 November.

Madam President,

In closing, I would like to return to the issue of the long overdue Palestinian elections. The Palestinian people have a right to vote and elect their leaders. For too long they have been denied that right and division has set in. A whole generation's voice for the future has yet to be heard. Intra-Palestinian division is like a cancer eating away at the aspiration for statehood, peace and the commitment to democracy, rule of law and human rights.

Elections are not a gift. They are a right. If elections are to build unity, they must take place in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. How can you heal the devastating division if people in Gaza are not able to vote for their future?

The United Nations will do all that is necessary to support a successful Palestinian election process.

But, ladies and gentlemen, we must be cognizant of broader risks as well.

The continuing risk of war threatens to upend all our efforts to prevent escalation and revive a political process. The UN will continue our efforts to prevent another devastating conflict despite all odds.

Upholding the international consensus on resolving the conflict and all final status issues on the basis of the two-state solution as per relevant UN resolutions, international law and mutual agreements is just as important. Unilateral moves fuel anger and disillusionment and significantly undermine the prospects for establishing a contiguous and viable Palestinian state with Jerusalem as the future capital of both states.

Thank you.