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

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Madame President,

Members of the Security Council,

Allow me first to extend my deepest condolences for their profound loss to the family of former Palestinian Chief Negotiator and Secretary General of the PLO, Dr. Saeb Erekat, to the Palestinian Government and to the Palestinian people.

Saeb, as we all know, dedicated his life to the peaceful pursuit of justice, dignity and the legitimate rights of Palestinians. He never gave up on negotiations as the only means of ending the occupation and establishing an independent, sovereign and democratic Palestinian State. He stood proudly and firmly for his people.

Sadly, I must also extend my condolences to the families and colleagues of the seven peacekeepers of the Multinational Force and Observers who lost their lives in service last week.

May they all rest in peace.

Madame President,

We meet today as Palestinians and Israelis continue their efforts to prevent and control the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus. After weeks of declining numbers, however, active cases are again on the rise.

Gaza remains the most immediate and pressing concern. Its crumbling infrastructure, poor living conditions and fragile healthcare system make it ill-equipped to face a major spike in cases.

Already affected by severe movement and access restrictions, cycles of violent escalation and years of humanitarian and socio-economic calamity, the two million Palestinians living within Gaza's confines would face catastrophic consequences from a major outbreak.

Madame President,

For these reasons, I welcome the Palestinian Authority's (PA) decision to restart civilian and security coordination with Israel. I express my appreciation to Israel for confirming that existing bilateral agreements continue to govern relations between both parties, particularly in the context of economic, security and civilian affairs.

I want to thank all, particularly our Palestinian and Israeli colleagues as well as the entire team at UNSCO and our partners for working hard and putting forward creative and constructive ideas over the past six months so that this significant challenge could be overcome.

I have previously expressed hope that recognition of the interdependence of Israelis and Palestinians could, with political will and leadership, translate into tangible progress towards a resolution of the conflict. Both sides should understand the importance of respecting the validity and continuing force of the framework that they have agreed to govern their relations. Although the existing agreements fall short of meeting the aspirations for peace, security and statehood for the Palestinian people, they provide the basic foundation without which even the beginnings of a return to meaningful negotiations will not be possible.

Madame President,

Eight months into the pandemic, Palestinian unemployment levels are alarmingly high – 121,000 Palestinians lost their jobs in the wake of the first lockdown and employment figures declined by 17 percent in Gaza. Some 40 percent of Palestinian households lost more than half their income in this period and food insecurity rates have soared. The most recent reports suggest any recovery will be slow and partial. Women and children continue to bear the brunt of the combined effect of the pandemic and the socio-economic crisis across the OPT, facing an increased risk of violence within their homes and limited access to support services.

To address the emergency, the United Nations and its partners have continued to provide critical humanitarian and development assistance.

Since the start of the pandemic, close to 85,000 tests and advanced laboratory equipment components have been delivered, as well as over 5.5 million items for infection protection and control. UN agencies and partners have also delivered dozens of ventilators, monitors, beds and other crucial hospital equipment.

In addition, the UN has supported several quarantine facilities in Gaza with non-food items, bolstered public communication efforts and trained healthcare professionals.

Temporary arrangements by the UN and implemented by the World Health Organization continue to facilitate both the transfer of medical patients out of Gaza and the importation of humanitarian supplies for the Palestinian people. I hope that with the restarting of coordination these additional measures will no longer be necessary.

Madame President,

I again highlight the Secretary-General's call for Israeli and Palestinian authorities to re-examine and improve the nature of their economic relationship. It is as timely as ever and in the interest of both sides to take concrete steps toward addressing this common challenge. The United Nations stands ready to assist in this process.

All sides can take immediate steps to facilitate the movement of goods in and out of Gaza and to allow trade to increase between the Gaza Strip, Israel and the occupied West Bank.

When health conditions allow, Israel can issue a meaningful number of permits for Palestinian workers and traders from Gaza. Israel should also take steps to advance the many outstanding

fiscal files and ensure that sufficient revenues are transferred to the Palestinian Government each month – a minimum of 500 million shekels - to maintain its operations and address the COVID-19 crisis.

While its budget is currently reduced to a minimum, the Palestinian Authority should consider steps to reform its own expenditures, in line with World Bank recommendations, so that it can more effectively provide basic income support to all vulnerable households.

I take note of ongoing discussions on the prospect of Palestinian reconciliation and sincerely hope the parties will be able to overcome obstacles to holding long-overdue elections.

Madame President,

In a concerning development, on 3 November Israeli authorities carried out the most extensive demolition in the occupied West Bank in the past decade, destroying over 70 structures, including homes, in the Bedouin village of Humsa Al Bqai'a, in Area C. Seventy-three people were displaced, including 41 children. Their vulnerability is compounded by the onset of winter and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Home demolitions in East Jerusalem also resumed during the reporting period after a pause of several weeks.

In total, 153 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and East Jerusalem were demolished or seized. They displaced 96 Palestinians, including 22 women and 51 children, and affecting some 1,400 others. The demolitions and seizures were executed due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain. In addition, three structures were demolished by their owners to avoid the payment of additional fines.

On 28 October, Israeli authorities cut a donor-funded pipe supplying water to 14 herding communities in the Masafer Yatta area of Hebron, home to about 1,400 people. Amid the pandemic, depriving these communities of water could have particularly grave health consequences.

On 2 November, the Israeli Government informed the High Court of Justice that during the next four months it would not demolish the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar. In its explanation, the Government cited COVID-19 restrictions and “additional considerations” as reasons for the delay and said that it would use the additional time to exhaust efforts to reach an agreement with residents.

I reiterate my call on Israeli authorities to cease demolitions, seizures of Palestinian property and efforts to relocate communities in the occupied West Bank. Such actions are contrary to international law and could undermine the chances for the establishment of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state.

Madame President,

In another concerning development, on 15 November, Israeli authorities opened the bidding process for construction of 1,200 housing units in the Givat Hamatos settlement. If built, this

project would further consolidate a ring of settlements between Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. It would also significantly damage prospects for a future contiguous Palestinian State, and for achieving a negotiated two-State solution based on the 1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states. I call for this step to be reversed.

Madame President,

Sporadic violent incidents unfortunately continued in parts of the OPT during the reporting period as well.

In Gaza, militants fired two rockets and released two incendiary balloons towards Israel during the reporting period, with no injuries reported. The IDF fired five shells and missiles into Gaza in retaliation, also no injuries were reported.

Turning to the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, one Palestinian was killed and 21 injured, including eight children, in clashes, attacks, search and arrest operations, and other incidents. One Israeli soldier was injured in these incidents.

On 30 October, Israeli soldiers opened fire at a Palestinian vehicle travelling near Jenin, injuring three children. The circumstances surrounding the incident remain unclear, with the IDF claiming the vehicle posed a threat.

On 4 November, an off-duty officer in the Palestinian Security Forces, who according to the IDF shot towards Israeli soldiers, was shot dead near Huwwara, south of Nablus.

On 8 November, a Palestinian man, who reportedly attempted to carry out a stabbing attack near Hebron, was injured and arrested by the ISF.

Meanwhile, settlers perpetrated some 17 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in the injury of one child and damage to property.

Palestinians perpetrated 23 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians in the West Bank, resulting in four injuries and damage to property.

As the olive harvest season continues, there were incidents of settlers damaging Palestinian olive groves and agricultural fields. Over 190 trees were burnt or otherwise damaged and large amounts of produce were reportedly taken.

On a positive note, as in previous years, hundreds of Palestinian and Israeli volunteers joined Palestinian farmers across the West Bank to assist in the olive harvest and provide protection from harassment and violence.

All perpetrators of violence must be held accountable.

Madame President,

As of today, UNRWA's funding shortfall stands at a staggering USD 115 million for November and December. For the first time, UNRWA forecasts that it cannot pay salaries and expenses in full, impacting 28,000 staff.

UNRWA plays an essential part as the main provider of direct and often life-saving assistance to many of the 5.7 million Palestinian refugees. To sustain crucial assistance in the region, including food for 1.5 million destitute refugees in Gaza and Syria, frontline medical care vital to the fight against COVID-19 in 58 refugee camps, and education for over half a million students, UNRWA urgently needs USD 70 million to meet immediate obligations.

I take the opportunity to, once again, urge the international community to act swiftly and provide the necessary resources for UNRWA to continue delivering its vital services, helping prevent serious risks to stability that the region simply cannot afford.

Madame President,

Moving briefly to regional developments, let me begin by welcoming the first visit of the Foreign Minister of Bahrain to Israel today to meet with Israeli leaders and visiting U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo and to sign several bilateral agreements. I agree with the statement of the Minister earlier today that the future of peace in the Middle East requires a resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict and hope that this development will also contribute to that effect.

On the Golan, while the security situation remained generally stable, developments that occurred early today continue to show the volatility of the environment. The IDF struck targets in Syria in response to IEDs that they found in the vicinity of the ceasefire line. IDF informed UNDOF that in response to attempts to harm its forces, "Israel carried out a retaliatory operation against targets in Syria used by the Iranians and its proxies." The Syrian authorities informed UNDOF that two Syrian armed forces soldiers were killed by the IDF strike. UNDOF continues to engage both parties to exercise utmost restraint and remind them of their obligations to respect the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement and to avoid any activities that might lead to an escalation of the situation between Israel and Syria.

During the consultations on resolution 1701 held yesterday, the Special Coordinator for Lebanon and the Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific briefed the Security Council on the situation in Lebanon in detail.

The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations also remains calm.

Madame President,

In closing, I wish to emphasize that Israeli and Palestinian leaders have a responsibility to explore every opening that can restore hope in the two-State solution. We, in the international community must help them resolve the conflict in line with United Nations resolutions, international law and prior agreements.

As I have outlined, with the necessary political will, there are practical steps that can be taken by all. Steps that can begin to fundamentally change the dynamics between the two sides and set the stage for an eventual return to dialogue.

This work must begin in earnest and be accompanied by concrete actions to create a legitimate political horizon.

It is imperative that the Middle East Quartet, key Arab partners, and Israeli and Palestinian leaders build upon recent developments in the region and urgently re-engage on returning to the path of meaningful negotiations.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting Israelis and Palestinians in their efforts to return to a legitimate political process that will deliver the long-overdue peace both sides require and deserve.

Thank you.