

**TOR WENNESLAND
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

26 January 2021

Mister President, State Minister Nafti [of Tunisia],
Foreign Minister Coveney of Ireland,
Foreign Minister Lavrov of the Russian Federation,
Foreign Minister Eriksen Søreide of Norway,
Foreign Minister Ebrard of Mexico,
Deputy Foreign Minister Tammsaar of Estonia,
Foreign Minister Malki of the State of Palestine,
League of Arab States Secretary-General Aboul Gheit,
Members of the Security Council,

I am honored to address this Council for the first time in my capacity as the Secretary-General's Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and by the trust bestowed upon me in this role by the Secretary-General, the parties and you, Members of this Council.

I thank the Palestinian and Israeli Governments for their warm welcome and look forward to our initial meetings in the coming days and weeks.

I wish to join the Secretary-General in welcoming the Presidential decree issued by President Mahmoud Abbas to hold legislative, presidential and Palestinian National Council elections this year. The holding of elections in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza will be a crucial step towards Palestinian unity, giving renewed legitimacy to national institutions, including a democratically elected Parliament and Government in Palestine. The United Nations stands ready to support efforts for the Palestinian people to exercise their democratic rights. Elections are a crucial part of building a democratic Palestinian State built on the rule of law with equal rights for all. The forthcoming talks in Cairo to resolve outstanding issues related to the holding of elections will be important for the planned preparatory process to move forward.

Mister President,

The COVID-19 crisis continues to take a staggering toll across the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Israel. Concerted efforts to contain and halt the spread of the virus have succeeded in lowering the overall number of active cases in the West Bank and Gaza, but the cost in lives and livelihoods remains high, particularly in the Gaza Strip.

As a result of the ongoing spread of the pandemic, Israeli and Palestinian authorities extended or tightened movement restrictions in most areas during the reporting period, significantly impacting daily life and limiting access to basic services.

The UN and its partners continue to support the Palestinian Government's effort to control the COVID-19 pandemic through the delivery of personal protective equipment (PPE), oxygen therapy machines, testing materials and other critical equipment.

Through the efforts of the World Health Organization and UNICEF, the UN is also supporting the Government's preparedness to receive and eventually administer vaccines. The Palestinian Government is working to procure a supply of vaccines and anticipates support through the global COVAX-AMC facility. The initial allocations of vaccines to cover priority groups are expected in the first half of 2021.

At the same time, Israel has launched a large-scale vaccination campaign for its citizens and residents. In this context, the UN continues to encourage Israel to help address the priority needs of Palestinians in the OPT and to support COVID-19 vaccine availability more generally. This will be critical for the broader efforts of both Governments to control the pandemic and is also in line with Israel's obligations under international law.

Israel has worked closely with the UN and its partners throughout the course of the pandemic to ensure that equipment and supplies have been delivered throughout the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza. It is important that the same level of engagement and cooperation be sustained with regard to the delivery of vaccines.

Mister President,

As noted in my opening remarks here today, President Abbas issued a long-anticipated presidential decree on 15 January stating that legislative, presidential and Palestinian National Council elections would be held later in the year. According to the decree, legislative elections

will take place on 22 May, followed by presidential elections on 31 July and PNC elections on 31 August.

I also note the amendment of the elections law raising the quota for female representation from 20 to 26 percent. I welcome this step and join the Secretary-General's call on Palestinian authorities to take further steps to facilitate, strengthen and support women's political participation, including as voters and candidates, throughout the electoral cycle.

The UN has continued its engagement with the Palestinian Central Elections Committee in support of free and fair elections and stands ready to support the Committee and the Palestinian people as plans for elections progress.

In a separate development in Israel, on 23 December 2020, the Israeli Knesset dissolved after failing to pass a budget and general elections were scheduled for 23 March.

Mister President,

In a concerning development, on 17 January, Israeli authorities advanced plans for some 800 housing units in Area C settlements. The following day, on 18 January, Israeli authorities published tenders for some 1,900 units in Area C and an additional 210 units in East Jerusalem. Of the units advanced and tendered, the majority are in settlements in outlying locations, deep inside the occupied West Bank. Over 200 units are located in illegal outposts that Israeli authorities are retroactively regularizing under Israeli law.

On 19 January, the Jerusalem District Court denied a request for an interim injunction to freeze the tendering process for some 1200 units in Givat Hamatos. The bidding period for the tender closed on 18 January and winning bids were announced on 20 January.

I reiterate that settlements are illegal under international law and are a major obstacle to peace. They undermine the prospect of achieving a two-State solution. I urge the Government of Israel to cease all settlement activity in the occupied territory, including in East Jerusalem.

During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished, seized or forced owners to demolish 71 Palestinian-owned structures, including 19 residential structures, displacing 73 Palestinians, including 17 women and 37 children. The demolitions and seizures were executed due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

Israeli forces also bulldozed agricultural land and uprooted over 2,000 Palestinian-owned trees claiming they were planted on state land.

On 23 December, the Magistrate Court in Jerusalem ruled in favour of a settler organization, upholding an eviction order against four Palestinian families in the Batan al-Hawa section of the Silwan neighbourhood in East Jerusalem.

I urge Israel to cease demolitions and seizures of Palestinian property, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law, and to allow Palestinians in Area C and East Jerusalem to develop their communities.

Mister President,

Violent incidents unfortunately continued throughout the reporting period.

On 25 December, Palestinian militants in Gaza fired two rockets towards Israel, which were both intercepted by the Iron Dome system. On 26 December, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) retaliated against what it said were Hamas targets in Gaza. As a result, three Palestinian civilians were injured, including a six-year-old girl, and damage was caused to civilian structures.

On 18 and 19 January, three additional rockets were fired from Gaza towards Israel, with two landing in the sea off Israel's southern coast, and one reportedly landing in an open field, causing no damage or injuries. The IDF retaliated by striking what it said were Hamas targets in the Strip, with no injuries reported.

On 23 January, an explosion reportedly caused by materials stored in a house in Beit Hanoun resulted in the injury of 47 people, including 19 children and 15 women.

Turning to the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, two Palestinians, including one child were killed after reportedly carrying out attacks against Israelis and 63 Palestinians were injured, including two children and two women, in clashes, attacks, search and arrest operations, and other incidents. Eight Israelis, including two soldiers, two women and one child were injured by Palestinians during the reporting period.

On 21 December, a 52-year-old Israeli woman was found killed in a forest near the settlement of Tal Menashe in the occupied West Bank, having been attacked with a stone. On 24 December, Israeli forces arrested a Palestinian man in the village of Tura, near Jenin, on suspicion of the killing in a premeditated attack. According to Israeli authorities, he subsequently confessed to the killing. Four other Palestinian men were also arrested in connection with the killing.

On 21 December, a 17-year-old Palestinian opened fire at an Israeli police post in the Old City of Jerusalem and was subsequently shot and killed by Israeli Security Forces.

On 1 January, a Palestinian man was left paralyzed after being shot by live ammunition by Israeli forces in the al-Rakeez community in the southern West Bank, during a dispute between Palestinians and the Israeli forces over the seizure of an electricity generator. An initial Israel Defense Forces internal probe found that the shooting was accidental and happened in circumstances where the soldiers feared for their lives, an account disputed by Palestinian eyewitnesses. The IDF opened a further enquiry into the incident.

On 5 January, a Palestinian man was shot dead by ISF at the Gush Etzyon junction in the West Bank after he allegedly attempted to carry out a stabbing attack. The man's body is being withheld by Israeli authorities.

Mister President,

I reiterate that Israeli security forces must exercise maximum restraint and may use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. Particular care should be taken to protect children from any form of violence. Furthermore, the indiscriminate launching of rockets towards Israeli population centers violates international law and must stop immediately. There can be no justification for attacks against civilians.

Mister President,

There was an increase in settler-related violence throughout the reporting period. This increase took place in the aftermath of the death of a 16-year-old boy from the settlement of Bat Ayin while being chased by Israeli police on suspicion of throwing stones at Palestinians.

During the reporting period, OCHA recorded 45 incidents where Israeli settlers and others injured Palestinians or reportedly damaged their property, resulting in 22 injuries and damage to property. In two separate incidents in East Jerusalem and Al Lubban ash Sharqiya, near Nablus, a boy and a man were physically assaulted and injured.

Meanwhile, Palestinians perpetrated some 55 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians in the West Bank, resulting in 6 injuries and damage to property. On 3 January, a woman was critically injured by a thrown rock while driving near Deir Nidham, close to Qalqilya.

All perpetrators of violence must be held accountable.

Mister President,

On 23 December, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet met virtually to discuss the prospect of Israeli-Palestinian peace and the latest developments on the ground. I look forward to engaging with my counterparts very soon to identify concrete steps to bring the parties back to the path of meaningful negotiations.

On 11 January, the foreign ministers of Egypt, France, Germany and Jordan met in Cairo to discuss ways to advance the Middle East Peace Process. In their joint statement following the meeting, the ministers emphasized their support for the two-State solution based on the 1967 lines, UN resolutions and international law, rejected unilateral steps, and urged all parties, including the Quartet, to take steps towards launching negotiations.

Mr. President,

Briefly turning to the region, on the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained despite the continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement by the parties leading to increased tensions.

There were also reports of airstrikes attributed to Israel on locations in Syria on 25 and 30 December and 6, 13 and 22 January resulting in casualties. On 6 January, UNDOF personnel observed kinetic activity in the UNDOF area of operation involving the firing of anti-aircraft tracer rounds from the northeast across the area of separation, with two of them exploding mid-air. UNDOF personnel heard aircraft activity on the Alpha side and explosions on the Bravo side.

UNDOF continues to liaise with both parties to remind them of their obligation to respect the terms of the Disengagement Agreement and prevent escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line.

In Lebanon, consultations to form a Government continue. Participants of the 2 December Paris Conference co-chaired by the UN and France, expressed support for the Lebanese people and took stock of the response to the 4 August Beirut Port explosion. Participants expressed concern about the political deadlock and worsening socio-economic situation.

While the situation in the UNIFIL area of operations was generally stable, tensions remained high. There were increased violations of Lebanese airspace by Israel and incidents of weapons pointing between the Israel Defense Forces and Lebanese Armed Forces across the Blue Line.

Mister President,

As we contend with one urgent crisis after another, we must not lose sight of our overarching goal: supporting Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict, end the occupation and achieve the vision of two States living side by side in peace and security, based on the 1967 lines, UN resolutions and international law.

A solution that reflects that both peoples have an undeniable historic bond with this place, that its Holy Sites are deeply important to three world religions, and that both peoples have a right to live on it independently and as a free people.

Despite the significant challenges, achieving this outcome remains possible and there are opportunities unique to this moment that should not be missed. I join the Secretary-General in welcoming the agreement signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. I hope that the promise of the recent agreements made between Israel and Arab countries will lead to a situation where a more peaceful Middle East can be realized. However, it requires leaders on all sides to re-engage meaningfully and return to the path of negotiations. I look forward to working with Palestinians, Israelis and Quartet partners, along with Egypt, Jordan and other regional and international stakeholders to ensure that we create and preserve the necessary conditions for progress.

In this context, allow me to reiterate that the financial situation of UNRWA remains a serious concern. The Agency is not only a lifeline for millions of Palestine refugees but is also critical for regional stability. I renew the Secretary-General's appeal for support.

Mister President,

I assume this role with deep appreciation for the crucial work that is being carried out every day by United Nations personnel on the ground and I look forward to working with Deputy Special Coordinator Lynn Hastings and together with the entire UN family to support the peace process and redouble our collective efforts to support strengthening the institutions of the Palestinian Authority in line with our respective mandates.

I wish to acknowledge and thank my predecessor for his perseverance in his role and his friendship to me personally, both now and in my previous capacity. Nickolay Mladenov's performance as Special Coordinator is a hard act to follow.

I intend to continue Nickolay's efforts to speak openly and frankly with all sides. I will support and encourage Israelis and Palestinians in pursuit of peace, urge them to refrain from damaging unilateral steps, and help to create an environment conducive to dialogue. I humbly request your support in these efforts.

Thank you.