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

26 February 2021

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

Greetings to the young guests with us today, Oren and Malak,

Your voices are important and what I will say to the Council now will illustrate that point.

Significant developments in the coming weeks and months will influence the dynamics and the prospects for advancing peace going forward.

Palestinians and Israelis are fully engaged in their respective electoral processes. The COVID-19 crisis remains a persistent health threat that has triggered a massive economic fallout. Meanwhile unilateral steps on the ground are eroding the prospect of establishing a viable and contiguous Palestinian state, and are moving the parties further from constructive dialogue and compromise.

The United Nations is continuing its engagement to meet these challenges.

We are working actively with the parties, and with our partners in the international community, to address the pressing socio-economic needs of the Palestinian people, including in the context of the pandemic. We are also advancing the goal of ending the occupation and realizing a negotiated two-State solution based on UN resolutions, international law and prior agreements.

Madam President,

Palestinian factions are making progress towards holding legislative, presidential and Palestinian National Council elections. Earlier this month they met in Cairo, reaching agreement on several outstanding issues and advancing the election process. The factions also emphasized that elections must be held throughout the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, without exception. I welcome the positive steps to date and appreciate the leadership of Egypt in helping move this process forward.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian public is doing its part. On 17 February, the Central Elections Commission closed voter registration and announced 421,000 new registrants during the period, raising the total registered voters to over 2.6 million, 93 per cent of all eligible voters according to population estimates from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. An estimated 40 per cent of registered voters are under the age of 30 years old. It is encouraging to see such strong public participation in the democratic process.

The UN will continue to work collectively to support the Palestinian people, including through facilitating and supporting preparatory processes towards these important elections.

Madam President,

In a number of recent meetings, the international community has demonstrated that it is focused on helping the parties return to the path of negotiations and signaled its continued support to the Palestinian people and institutions, including in Covid-19 response.

On 8 February the League of Arab States issued a statement reiterating its support for the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian State based on the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

On 15 February, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet, from Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations, met virtually to discuss the latest political developments and the situation on the ground. All agreed to meet on a regular basis to continue their engagement.

On 23 February, members of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee met virtually in a meeting chaired by the Foreign Minister of Norway and the EU High Representative. The Chair's Summary highlighted that the parties expressed renewed commitment to enhance cooperation. The donor community called on the parties to take specific steps to improve their relations on the economic front, to facilitate critical infrastructure and assistance projects on the ground. They were also called to avoid unilateral actions that could undermine the resumption of negotiations. The donor community also pledged increased assistance to the Palestinians in a variety of areas including to support the Government's COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

In the UN's report to the AHLC meeting, it was clearly underlined that the Palestinian economy contracted - mostly due to the negative effects on the economy of the COVID-19 pandemic and to the Palestinian Authority's suspension of coordination with Israel. Let me be clear, it may take years for the economy of Palestine to recover.

The AHLC Chair also noted the critical importance of rolling out a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine program as rapidly as possible, both in the West Bank and Gaza.

In this respect, the UN welcomes the announcement of the Palestinian vaccination strategy and the initial allocation to the Palestinian Ministry of Health of at least 37,440 doses of vaccines by the COVAX-AMC facility. In addition, in February, 30,000 doses of vaccines were delivered to Palestinians, including in Gaza, by Russia and the United Arab Emirates. This is in addition to the Israeli's earlier transfer of 5,200 vaccines to the Palestinian Authority, the vaccination of 5,000 Palestinian educational and health workers working in Israel and efforts to vaccinate the population in East Jerusalem, which is 50 per cent completed.

The Palestinian Government's efforts to prepare and plan this vaccination efforts are to be commended, as is the dedication of UN agencies, in particular WHO, UNICEF, UNRWA, and their partners. Israeli facilitation of vaccine deliveries has also been essential and I appreciate efforts by the Israeli Government to support the Palestinian response to COVID-19. It is critically important that this cooperation continues and is enhanced to ensure that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza receive a fair and timely share in the distribution of vaccines.

Turning to Gaza, I welcome Egypt's reopening of the Rafah Crossing on 9 February in both directions until further notice. The Rafah crossing is the main gateway to the world for 2 million residents of Gaza.

I also commend the decision of the Government of Qatar to significantly increase its financial contribution for Gaza, including the agreement signed with UNOPS to provide fuel to the Gaza Power Plant to the end of this year. This arrangement will generate over twelve hours of electricity – stable - per day. The UN stands ready to play its part, and will continue to work closely with donors to ensure the continuity of existing commitments.

Madam President,

Unfortunately, concerning developments on the ground continued throughout the reporting period.

Overall, Israeli authorities demolished or seized 170 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 10 in East Jerusalem, displacing some 314 Palestinians, including 67 women and 177 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

In a particularly concerning series of incidents, on 1, 3, 8, 16 and 22 February, the ISF demolished or confiscated 80 structures in the Palestinian Bedouin community of Humsa al-Bqai'a in an Israeli declared firing zone in the Jordan Valley. The actions displaced reportedly 63 people, including 36 children multiple times, and followed a similar demolition in November 2020. On 23 February, my Deputy and the Humanitarian Coordinator visited the site and called on Israeli authorities to cease further demolitions in accordance with international law and allow the humanitarian community to provide shelter, food and water to this most vulnerable community.

I reiterate this message from the Humanitarian Coordinator and urge Israel to cease the demolition and seizure of Palestinian property throughout the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and to allow Palestinians to develop their communities.

Madam President,

Daily violence also continued throughout the OPT during the reporting period.

In the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, clashes, attacks, search and arrest operations, and other incidents resulted in the death of two Palestinians, including one child, reportedly while they were attempting to stab Israeli soldiers, as well as injuries to 34 Palestinians, including 6 children. Ten Israelis, including two women and three children, were injured by Palestinians during the reporting period.

On 26 January, a 17-year-old Palestinian boy tried to stab a female Israeli soldier near the settlement of Ariel and was subsequently shot and killed by Israeli Security Forces (ISF).

On 31 January, a 36-year-old Palestinian man was shot and killed by the ISF as he ran towards officers stationed at the Gush Etzyon junction south of Bethlehem while reportedly holding an improvised weapon.

Meanwhile, Israeli settlers and other civilians perpetrated some 25 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in five injuries and damage to property. Palestinians perpetrated 59 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians in the West Bank, resulting in eight injuries and damage to property.

On 5 February, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by Israeli settlers in the Sadeh Ephraim Farm outpost near the village of Ras Karkar, after reportedly attempting to break into a house. The ISF, who stated the incident was a terrorist attack, also stated that the man was unarmed, and no weapons were found in his possession. I call on Israeli authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into the circumstances of the incident.

On 15 February, Israeli civilians vandalized nine vehicles belonging to Palestinian workers near the West Bank settlement of Shiloh. The Israeli police opened an investigation into the incident noting that it occurred following the removal of an unauthorized structure from a nearby outpost by the ISF.

On the same day, Israeli police announced that they had arrested several Israelis in the West Bank on suspicion of stone throwing that injured Palestinians, illegal possession of weapons, and membership in a terrorist organization.

On 23 February, Israeli authorities filed an indictment against a 17-year-old Israeli boy accused of throwing stun grenades into Palestinian homes in the West Bank village of Sarta and causing damage to property. Israeli police also arrested four additional individuals suspected of involvement in the incident.

I underscore that all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice. Particular care should be taken to protect children from any sort of violence.

On 5 February, the International Criminal Court Pre-Trial Chamber decided that the Court's jurisdiction extends to the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Madam President,

Turning to the region, on the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained. However, the security situation continues to be volatile, with continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement by the parties, leading to heightened tension between Israel and Syria. Late on 3 February, UNDOF observed kinetic activity in its area of operation. The next day, the IDF informed that they had "carried out a precision strike against infrastructures [in Damascus International Airport] that are utilized by proxies for transfers of weaponry and mobilization against the State of Israel." UNDOF continues to liaise with both parties to remind them of their obligations to respect the terms of the Disengagement Agreement and prevent escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line.

In Lebanon, the population faces increasing hardship, as a result of the steadily deteriorating economic situation and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. On 26 and 27 January in Tripoli, two protestors died following clashes with security forces.

In the UNIFIL area of operations, incidents of weapons pointing between the Israel Defense Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces across the Blue Line contributed to heightened tensions. UNIFIL

remains engaged with the parties to defuse tensions, including through its liaison and coordination efforts.

Madam President, in closing allow me to underline the following,

It is critical to begin the process of restoring hope to Palestinians and Israelis that the achievement of the two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace can be realized. Given the reality of developments on the ground, the depth of the task is daunting, but not insurmountable. We must seize emerging opportunities.

The upcoming elections in Palestine may be one such opportunity. The extraordinarily high registration rate among the Palestinians is a resoundingly positive response from the people of Palestine in support of President Abbas' call for elections. The holding of free and fair elections across the Occupied Palestinian Territory is a crucial step towards reestablishing Palestinian national unity, one that can renew the legitimacy of national institutions, including a democratically elected Legislative Council and Government in Palestine.

The democratic right to vote, particularly for young people, is the right to decide one's own political future and should be carefully guarded. The UN and the international community will continue to play an active part in supporting the election process.

Elections will also help to clear the path toward restoring a legitimate political horizon to realize a two-State solution. The United Nations, alongside its partners in the Middle East Quartet, will continue to support Palestinians and Israelis in their efforts to achieve this goal.

Thank you.