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SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
UNSCR 2334 (2016)

25 March 2021

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I will devote this briefing to presenting his 17th report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), covering the period from 11 December to 23 March.

Madam President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to “immediately and completely cease all settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem” and to “fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard.” Settlement activity has, nevertheless, continued during the reporting period.

On 17 and 18 January, Israeli authorities advanced plans for some 800 housing units and tendered some 1,900 units in Area C settlements. An additional 210 units were tendered in East Jerusalem. Some 40 percent of these units are in settlements deep inside the occupied West Bank. Over 200 units are in outposts, illegal also under Israeli law, that Israeli authorities are regularizing retroactively.

On 19 January, the Jerusalem District Court denied an injunction to freeze the tendering process for some 1,200 units in Givat Hamatos. The winning bids were announced on 20 January. Establishment of this new settlement will further consolidate a ring of settlements along the southern perimeter of Jerusalem that would significantly damage prospects for a future, contiguous Palestinian State.

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Citing the absence of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, 325 structures were demolished or seized by Israeli authorities or demolished by their owners to avoid heavy Israeli demolition fees. These actions resulted in the displacement of 465 people, including 253 children and 105 women.

On five occasions in February, most recently on 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 repeatedly displaced some 63 people, including 36 children. Israeli authorities informed the community that it must relocate to a site near the village of Ein Shibli.

On 15 February and 2 March, the Jerusalem District Court rejected appeals against evictions of thirteen Palestinian households, some 52 people, in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. The appeals process to the Supreme Court is ongoing. Israeli courts also upheld eviction orders against six Palestinian families, some 80 individuals, living in the Silwan neighborhood.

Madam President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for “immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including all acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction.” Unfortunately, violence continued daily.

Overall, four Palestinians, including two children, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) during demonstrations, clashes, security operations, attacks against Israeli security personnel, and other incidents. 480 Palestinians, including seven women and 66 children, were injured, including 55 by live ammunition. One Israeli woman was killed, and 12 members of the Israeli security forces injured. In addition, 18 Israeli civilians, including three women and five children, were injured by Palestinians in clashes, rock and Molotov cocktail throwing, attacks and other incidents.

In Gaza, Palestinian militants launched six rockets and one incendiary balloon from Gaza into Israel. In response, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fired 11 missiles into Gaza, striking what it said were Hamas positions, as well as open areas. Seven Palestinian civilians were injured in these incidents, including one child.

In the occupied West Bank on 20 December, a 52-year-old Israeli woman was killed by blows from a stone near the settlement of Tal Menashe. On 24 December, Israeli forces arrested a Palestinian man near Jenin, who they said confessed to 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 the ISF.

On 1 January, further South in the occupied West Bank, a Palestinian man was paralyzed after being shot by Israeli forces during a dispute over the seizure of an electricity generator. An initial IDF internal probe found that the shooting was accidental, an account disputed by Palestinian eyewitnesses. The IDF opened a further enquiry into the incident.

On 5 January, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by ISF at the Gush Etzyon junction in the occupied West Bank after reportedly attempting to throw a knife at ISF personnel.

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 ISF. Israel has withheld the body.

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

On 19 March, ISF killed a Palestinian man during a demonstration in Beit Dajan, near Nablus. The man was reportedly shot in the head with three bullets, while he was using a slingshot to throw stones at ISF.

Settler-related violence in the occupied West Bank continued. There have been 116 attacks by Israeli settlers and others against Palestinians, resulting in two Palestinians killed, 37 injuries and damage to Palestinian-owned properties. Palestinians perpetrated some 170 attacks against Israeli

settlers and other civilians, resulting in 18 injuries and damage to property, according to Israeli sources.

On 3 January, an Israeli woman was critically injured by a rock thrown at her vehicle while she was driving near Deir Nidham, close to Qalqilya.

On 5 February, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by Israeli settlers in the Sadeh Ephraim Farm outpost in the northern West Bank, after reportedly attempting to break into a house. The ISF characterized the incident as a terrorist attack, while stating that the man was unarmed and that no weapons were found in his possession.

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, causing property damage.

On 13 March, Israeli settlers attacked a Palestinian family, including seven children aged 1 to 14, in Shi'b al Buttum, south of Hebron. The father was hospitalized with serious injuries. Israeli police have opened an investigation.

On 5 February, the International Criminal Court (ICC) Pre-Trial Chamber decided that the Court's jurisdiction extends to the Occupied Palestinian Territory. On 3 March, the ICC Prosecutor confirmed in a statement that her office has initiated an investigation respecting the situation in Palestine, covering crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court alleged to have been committed since 13 June 2014.

Madam President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for the parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric. Some Palestinian and Israeli officials continued to use such rhetoric during the reporting period.

A senior Fatah official said that Israel was carrying out a "second Holocaust" against Palestinians. A Palestinian Authority (PA) official used anti-Semitic language to describe Jews, while another PA official accused Israel of "striving to destroy the Al Aqsa Mosque." A senior Hamas official called for "annihilating the monstrous State [of Israel]," saying that "the Zionist enemy" seeks to "corrupt all of humanity."

A Member of Knesset praised the establishment of outposts, saying the settlers who live in them are "preventing with their own bodies any possibility of the future establishment of a Palestinian terror state in the heart of the State of Israel."

Madam President,

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated calls by the Middle East Quartet for "affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-State solution." Some positive steps were recorded during the period.

On 15 January, Palestinian President Abbas issued a decree calling for legislative, presidential, and Palestinian National Council (PNC) elections.

On 9 February, Palestinian factions concluded talks in Cairo resolving several long-standing differences. The areas of agreement include recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate

representative of the Palestinian people; establishment of an electoral court with appointments made by consensus; and the release of all detainees held on the basis of their political affiliation or opinion. On 20 February and 1 March, President Abbas issued decrees to enact the agreements. Initial reports suggest that a number of detainees have been released. The factions met again in Cairo on 15 March. Despite requests to ease restrictions on prospective candidates, the faction leaders reaffirmed current modalities for the conduct of the elections.

On 17 February, the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC) concluded voter registration and announced registration of over 91 per cent of eligible voters.

The candidate nomination period was opened by the CEC on 20 March and will conclude on 31 March.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic remains a persistent health threat that has had major socio-economic consequences across the West Bank and Gaza. In February and March, new COVID-19 cases increased significantly in the West Bank. Numbers in Gaza remain low but have recently increased again after a significant decline.

The Palestinian vaccination campaign has begun, although availability of vaccines remains a key concern. The global COVAX-AMC facility delivered its first batch of some 60,000 vaccines to the West Bank and Gaza on 17 March. Approximately 70,000 additional vaccines were reportedly delivered to Palestinians, including in Gaza, by donations from the Russian Federation and the United Arab Emirates. Israel, where the vaccination campaign is progressing at a quick pace, indicated that the vaccination of the Palestinian population is the responsibility of the Palestinian authority. Nevertheless, Israel has facilitated deliveries across the OPT and extended its vaccination program to some Palestinian populations, including in East Jerusalem. This includes Israel's provision of some 5,000 vaccines to the Palestinian Authority, as well as the vaccination of over 100,000 Palestinians holding permits to enter Israel, including Palestinian health workers in Israel. In the last days of the reporting period, there were reports of progress in talks about increased vaccine provision, including by Israel.

The COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the impact of the occupation and the protracted humanitarian crisis, has worsened the socio-economic conditions of women across the OPT. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Women Affairs, gender-based violence has soared 300 per cent since the pandemic began; women's labor force participation rate has shrunk to 16 per cent; and only 14 percent of senior positions in the public sector are held by women.

On 23 February, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) met virtually. The parties renewed their commitment to enhance cooperation and the donor community called on them to take specific steps to improve their economic relations, to facilitate critical infrastructure and assistance projects, and to avoid unilateral actions that could undermine the resumption of negotiations. The donor community also pledged increased assistance to the Palestinians, including in support of the Government's COVID-19 vaccination effort.

Humanitarian concerns in Gaza persisted. Due to a lack of funding, there continued to be a serious shortage of medical supplies in Gaza's health system, including essential drugs.

UNRWA narrowly avoided a financial collapse at the end 2020, at a time of acute needs in the Palestine refugee community. This year, UNRWA faces a financial shortfall of more than USD 200 million for its core programme budget. By April, the Agency will face a serious cash flow

crisis. After years of austerity measures and investment in efficiency, the Agency has reached its limits. It must receive additional funding to sustain all essential services and support national plans to contain the pandemic, including vaccination roll-out. Funding shortfalls facing WFP and UNRWA may also impact food distribution across the OPT in the coming months, if not addressed by donors.

On 9 February, Egypt reopened the Rafah Crossing in both directions until further notice. On 31 January, the Government of Qatar announced it had significantly increased its financial contribution to Gaza. It concluded, *inter alia*, an agreement with UNOPS through the end of 2021 to provide fuel to the Gaza Power Plant that will generate over twelve hours of stable supply of electricity per day.

Madam President,

In its resolution 2334 (2016), the Security Council called upon all States “to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967.” No such steps were taken during the reporting period.

Resolution 2334 (2016) also called upon “all parties to continue, *inter alia*, to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations.”

On 11 January and 11 March, the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, France, Germany and Jordan met in Cairo and Paris, respectively, to discuss ways to advance the Middle East Peace Process, including through collective efforts with the Middle East Quartet.

On 21 December, the United States Congress passed legislation that allocates USD 250 million over five years for programmes that “help build the foundation for peaceful co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians and for a sustainable two-state solution.”

On 23 December, 15 February and 23 March, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet 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 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.

Madam President,

In closing, I would like to share some broad observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of UN resolution 2334 during the reporting period.

1. I am deeply concerned by continued Israeli settlement expansion, particularly into highly sensitive areas, which entrench the Israeli occupation, erode the possibility of a contiguous, independent and viable Palestinian State and further threaten the prospect of achieving a two-State solution. I reiterate that settlements have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation of international law. I urge Israel to cease the advancement of all settlement activity immediately.

2. We have witnessed a spike in demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures, which include internationally funded humanitarian projects. I urge Israel to cease demolitions and evictions, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law, and to approve plans that would enable these communities to build legally and address their development needs.
3. COVID-19 continues to have a devastating effect on Palestinians. In addition to the brutal impact on public health, the recurrent lockdowns, school closures, and reduction of commercial activity have severely undermined living conditions. In view of these challenges, I commend the Palestinian Government's efforts to plan and implement its vaccination campaign. UN agencies, in particular WHO, UNICEF, UNRWA and their partners will continue to support vaccination efforts. Israeli facilitation of vaccine deliveries remains essential, and I appreciate this cooperation. Support to the Palestinian COVID-19 response should be significantly enhanced to ensure that Palestinians throughout the OPT receive a fair and timely share of the distribution of vaccines.
4. By every measure, 2020 was a year of setbacks for the Palestinians, for their institutions, and their economy. Yet we begin 2021 with a degree of guarded optimism. The restart of coordination between Israel and the PA places the Palestinian Government in a more solid fiscal position and could portend greater communication between the sides on a variety of critical issues. Despite an increase in infections in the West Bank, since early February, vaccines have begun arriving in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, one of the earliest middle-income countries to receive shipments of COVID-19 vaccines. This is a critical first step towards recovery and a more sustainable re-opening of the economy. I welcome the commitment shown by donors at the February AHLC meeting to supporting Palestinian efforts to respond to and recover from the pandemic. I reiterate my call on Israel to increase the number of permits for Palestinian workers and I call on both sides to address outstanding fiscal files and issues related to corresponding banking relations.
5. Nevertheless, I remain concerned by the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza. The threat of another major escalation has not disappeared. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism remains critical to facilitate reconstruction, as well as vital infrastructure projects to bolster Gaza's water and energy networks. However, humanitarian and economic support, alone, will not overcome Gaza's challenges. It is vital that Hamas and other factions end militant activity and the military build-up. Taking into consideration its legitimate security concerns, I urge Israel to ease the restrictions on the movement of goods and people to and from Gaza, in line with UN Security Council resolution 1860 (2009), with the goal of ultimately lifting them. Only by fully lifting the debilitating closures can we hope to sustainably resolve the humanitarian crisis.
6. Palestinian unity is essential for progress and free, fair and inclusive elections throughout Gaza and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are a first step. I am encouraged by the steady advance toward the holding of Palestinian elections and urge the parties to carry on their dialogue and overcome remaining differences. The UN will continue to support the Palestinian people, including through facilitating and supporting preparations for these important elections, which are crucial for renewing the legitimacy of national political institutions.

7. Let me underscore the criticality of preserving political space within, but not limited to, the context of elections. I call on authorities on all sides to ensure that political actors, civil society representatives and human rights defenders are able to exercise their democratic rights free from intimidation and threat.
8. Let me also welcome the important efforts of civil society organizations working towards peace. The significant new funding for these organizations approved by the U.S. Congress is a crucial vote of confidence at a challenging moment and a positive signal of renewed support to the search for peace in Israel and Palestine. I encourage additional Member States to continue and to increase their assistance for these activities.
9. I am deeply concerned by the daily violence that continues to fuel mistrust and drives us further from a peaceful resolution of the conflict. I am particularly concerned that children are so often the victims. Children should never be the target of violence by any party, nor be exposed to violence. I reiterate that security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. Pertinent authorities must carry out thorough, independent, impartial and prompt investigations into all instances of possible excessive use of force. Settler-related violence also remains of great concern, and I urge Israel to ensure the safety and security of the Palestinian population, in line with its responsibilities under international law. I underscore that all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.
10. I also emphasize that there can be no justification for any act of terrorism, which must be unequivocally condemned by all. Likewise, the launching of indiscriminate rockets and incendiary devices towards Israeli population centers violates international law and must stop.
11. I would like to reiterate that the fate of the two Israeli civilians and the bodies of the two Israel Defense Forces soldiers held by Hamas in Gaza remains an important humanitarian concern. I call upon Hamas to provide full information related to their condition, as required by international humanitarian law. I also remain deeply concerned at the continued Israeli practice of holding the bodies of killed Palestinians and call on Israel to return withheld bodies to their families in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.
12. I remain seriously concerned by UNRWA's financial situation. UNRWA is not only a lifeline for millions of Palestine refugees, but also critical for regional stability. Collective support of UNRWA and common responsibility for its funding are essential for its sustainability and a critical element for regional stability.
13. At the same time, humanitarian partners continue their efforts to assist the 1.8 million most vulnerable Palestinians, including 1.4 million in Gaza, through targeted assistance and programming. To date, only 21 percent of the USD 417 million OPT Humanitarian Response Plan has been funded. I encourage donors to consider additional support for 2021 to avoid further deterioration.

Madam President,

In closing, the COVID-19 pandemic remains a very real threat to the health, security and prosperity of Palestinians and Israelis alike. A collective, robust approach is crucial to tackling this deadly adversary and rebuilding the lives and livelihoods of all those impacted by the virus.

The Palestinian election process continues with a successful voter registration exercise. The finalization of electoral lists and candidates is ongoing. The international community must continue, throughout the process, to support Palestinian efforts to restore democracy and legitimacy to their national institutions. This includes the deployment of observation missions despite COVID-19 challenges.

Finally, I remain committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict and end the occupation in line with relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements in pursuit of achieving the vision of two States. This means Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security within secure and recognized borders, on the basis of the pre-1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States. I reiterate my call to the members of the Middle East Quartet, key Arab and international partners, as well as to Israeli and Palestinian leadership, to strengthen efforts to return to meaningful negotiations towards a viable two-State solution.

Thank you.