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

**28 July 2021**

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I brief you today as the UN and its partners are providing urgent assistance to Gaza in the wake of the recent round of hostilities.

Beyond the human tragedy for both Palestinians and Israelis, and the physical damage of eleven days of fighting, the economic impact of the escalation in May has further exacerbated the existing humanitarian crisis and severely weakened Gaza's economy.

On 6 July, the UN, the World Bank and the European Union released the Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA). According to this assessment, damages in Gaza are estimated at between USD 290 – 380 million, while economic losses may reach nearly USD 200 million. The social sector was hit hardest, significantly weakening the safety net of the most vulnerable. The immediate and short-term recovery and reconstruction needs are estimated between USD 345 – 485 million.

The same day, a technical meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee was held to align donors' efforts to help address both the aftermath of the May escalation and the significant fiscal crisis facing the Palestinian Authority.

Mister President,

International efforts – coordinated by the United Nations – to implement the humanitarian response and stabilize the situation on the ground in Gaza are well underway. Thus far, some 45 million dollars of a requested 95 million has been raised for the consolidated humanitarian flash appeal published by the UN in May.

I thank the donors for their generous support and urge additional contributions so that the numerous pressing needs can be addressed. The United Nations and its partners stand ready to implement urgently needed recovery and reconstruction initiatives in coordination with the Israeli and Palestinian authorities, Egypt, Qatar and other regional and international partners.

On 28 June, fuel deliveries for the Gaza Power Plant resumed through the Kerem Shalom crossing under the existing United Nations framework through UNOPS with support from Qatar. Electricity supply is now roughly 14 hours per day, critical for Gaza and its residents.

On 24 June, Israeli authorities expanded the Gaza fishing zone from six to nine nautical miles and then again on 12 July, to 12 nautical miles. Additional restrictions on the import and export of

certain goods were also lifted. However, on 25 July, the fishing zone was restricted again to six nautical miles, following the launch of incendiary balloons from the Strip.

In this context, further steps are needed.

It is essential that Israel implement additional measures to allow unhindered entry of all humanitarian assistance, including materials to implement the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan and the Flash Appeal.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian needs, without regular and predictable entry of goods into Gaza, the capacity of the UN and our partners to deliver critical interventions is at risk, as are the provision of basic services, the livelihoods of people and the wider Gaza economy. In this context, the trilateral Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism – with the Government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United Nations – established in 2014 and operated by UNOPS remains best placed to enable the entry and accountable delivery of a wide range of essential imports from Israel.

Further, for any durable stability, movement and access in and out of Gaza must be improved. Taking into consideration its legitimate security concerns, Israel should ease 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. Hamas and other armed groups must stop the launching of incendiary devices, rockets and mortars and end the militant build up.

Looking ahead, and with additional donor support, existing UN humanitarian cash assistance or other programmes could quickly be scaled up to reach tens or hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza.

While urgent humanitarian interventions can provide crucial relief in the short-term, any sustainable future in Gaza requires political solutions. I again reiterate the need for the return of a legitimate Palestinian Government to the Strip.

Mister President,

The Palestinian Authority's (PA) fiscal situation continues to be a source of significant concern. The budget gap is expected to be well over USD 1 billion for the current budget year and the Palestinian financial sector is exposed to serious liquidity risks.

Compounding the PA's financial situation, on 11 July, the Israeli Security Cabinet approved the freezing of some 600 million Israeli Shekels from the clearance revenues Israel collects on behalf of the PA. The funds will be deducted in monthly installments, in line with Israeli Knesset legislation from 2018, which authorizes the withholding of funds equal to the amount that Israeli authorities determine have been paid by the PA over the preceding year to security prisoners and detainees and to the families of Palestinians killed while carrying out attacks. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh called the measures contrary to signed agreements and unjust.

To address these challenges, the PA must implement much needed reforms, including to the so-called prisoner payment system, and to strengthen the rule of law and accountability. Enhanced

cooperation between Israel and the PA to address outstanding financial challenges on key fiscal and economic files will also be critical.

Mister President,

Violence continued across the Occupied Palestinian Territory throughout the reporting period.

In Gaza, while the cessation of hostilities reached between Israel and Hamas in May largely held, militants launched 13 incendiary balloons towards Israel, with several causing fires. In retaliation, Israeli Defense Forces fired 18 missiles against what it said were Hamas targets in the Strip, resulting in damage but no injuries.

On 22 July, a Palestinian was killed and some 14 others injured in an explosion in az-Zawiya marketplace in Gaza City. The Israeli Security Forces (ISF) said the incident was an “internal matter” and that Israel had not been involved. Hamas has reportedly opened an investigation.

In the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, clashes, attacks, search and arrest operations, and other incidents resulted in the death of four Palestinians, including a child, and injuries to 638 Palestinians, including 46 children and seven women. Five Israeli security personnel were injured during these events.

On 25 June, Israeli forces shot, injured and detained a Palestinian who they said was planning to carry out a stabbing attack near the settlement of Yitzhar in the northern West Bank.

On 3 July, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by ISF in the village of Qusra near Nablus, following clashes between Israeli settlers and Palestinians. According to the ISF, the man was shot after throwing an object that exploded near Israeli soldiers.

On 14 July, a Palestinian man was shot and injured by ISF after reportedly trying to enter the settlement of Yitzhar with a knife.

On 18 July, clashes broke out between Palestinians and the ISF in and around the Holy Sites, ahead of visits by hundreds of Jewish visitors observing the commemoration of Tisha B’Av. I reiterate that the status quo in Jerusalem’s Holy Sites must be upheld and fully respected, and call upon community, religious and political leaders on all sides to refrain from provocative action and rhetoric in the interest of peace and stability.

On 23 July, ISF shot and critically injured a 17-year-old Palestinian boy during clashes in the village of Nabi Saleh in the West Bank. The boy later died of his wounds. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the boy was shot in the stomach by an ISF foot patrol. ISF said a soldier had opened fire after stones had been thrown towards him, threatening his life, and that it would investigate the incident.

Also on 23 July, a Palestinian man was reportedly shot and killed by Hamas security forces while driving through a checkpoint in Gaza City.

Meanwhile, settlers and other Israeli civilians in the occupied West Bank perpetrated some 36 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in 13 injuries and damage to property. Palestinians perpetrated 47 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians, resulting in eight injuries and damage to property.

On 26 June, settlers attacked Palestinians in the village of al-Mughayyir, near Ramallah. Israeli forces intervened, resulting in the injury of 18 Palestinians.

I underscore that all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.

I also call on Israeli security forces to ensure the protection of Palestinians, in line with Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law.

Mister President,

Following the death of political activist Nizar Banat on 24 June, Palestinians held demonstrations across the occupied West Bank. In Ramallah, on 26 June and 5 July, Palestinian Security Forces beat protestors and indiscriminately fired tear gas and stun grenades. On 26 June, Palestinian Security Forces also failed to stop violent acts by groups of non-uniformed persons, reported to be associated to security personnel, resulting in violence targeting journalists and human rights monitors, including a UN staff member. Women present at the demonstrations reported sexual harassment and gender-based threats on social media afterwards.

I call on the Palestinian Authority to ensure that the death of Nizar Banat and all allegations of use of disproportionate force against protestors by Palestinian Security Forces are investigated in a thorough, transparent and independent manner and those responsible held to account. The Palestinian people must be able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, opinion and peaceful assembly. Arbitrary and politically motivated arrests must cease.

Mister President,

On 2 July, Israeli settlers, comprising some 50 families, left the illegal outpost of Evyatar following an agreement reached with the Israeli Government that IDF troops would re-establish a presence at the site. According to the agreement, the Israeli Civil Administration will conduct an accelerated land survey to determine land status. Areas found not to be privately owned by Palestinians will be declared "state land" and subsequently made available for building a religious school and staff residence. Any existing structures found to be outside "state land" will be demolished.

Following the evacuation, near-daily clashes continued during the reporting period between Palestinian residents of the nearby village of Beita and Israeli settlers and security forces, resulting in the death of a Palestinian, injury to some 460 others and damage to structures.

I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law. Settlement-related activities must cease as they undermine the prospect of achieving a viable two-State solution in line with UN resolutions, international law and prior agreements.

Mister President,

Israeli demolitions of Palestinian homes and other structures continued throughout the reporting period.

Overall, Israeli authorities demolished or seized 113 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C of the occupied West Bank and 16 in East Jerusalem, displacing 177 Palestinians, including 38 women and 102 children, and affecting 1,934 others. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished 31 structures in the Bedouin community of Humsa al B'qaia in Area C of the occupied West Bank. Some 18 of the structures demolished or confiscated were provided by donors following previous demolitions in February 2021. As a result, seven Palestinian families, comprising 54 people, including 30 children, were again displaced. Despite repeated calls by the international community, Israeli authorities have continued to instruct the residents to move to a different location, citing the community's presence in an Israeli-declared firing zone.

During the reporting period, Israeli forces confiscated at least 49 structures in another West Bank herding community, Ras al-Tin, resulting in the displacement of 84 Palestinians, including 53 children and 14 women.

I urge Israel to cease the demolition and seizure of Palestinian property throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law, and to allow Palestinians to develop their communities.

Mister President,

Turning to the region, on the occupied 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. On 1 June, the IDF said that they had carried out a retaliatory attack on a military "outpost" of the Syrian armed forces west of the ceasefire line. Early on 17 June, UN personnel observed an IDF tank on the Alpha side fire ten rounds towards al-Qahtaniyah in the area of separation. UNDOF continues to liaise with the 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, and ahead of the first anniversary of the Beirut port explosion on 4 August, the United Nations reiterates the need for an impartial and transparent investigation into the explosion to ensure accountability. The United Nations looks forward to swift formation of a new Government able to address the country's crisis following the appointment of Mr. Najib Miqati as Prime Minister-designate on 26 July. Meanwhile, the situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remains tense, as demonstrated by the rocket fire from Lebanon towards Israel and the artillery response by Israel on 20 July. UNIFIL continues to liaise with the parties to de-escalate tensions.

Mister President,

I remain concerned about the financial situation of UNRWA. As of today, the projected shortfall under its Programme Budget amounts to USD 100m. The Agency also faces an imminent cash flow crisis which risks impacting the smooth opening of the school year for half a million girls and boys in Gaza. The absence of a fully funded Programme Budget also undermines UNRWA's capacity to conduct much needed humanitarian and early recovery activities in Gaza. I appeal once again to all donors, including those from the Arab region, to sustain the funding levels of past years and advance disbursements of funds as much as possible to avoid a disruption of essential services and humanitarian aid.

Mister President,

Following the explosive violence across the OPT and Israel in May, on June 30th, some 200 Israeli and Palestinian women's organizations and activists released a joint statement calling "for immediate action, based on the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, to achieve long term solutions" to the conflict.

Noting the particular importance of protecting women from all forms of violence, and ensuring women's representation in decision-making positions, they urged broader efforts towards a negotiated, long-term solution, "and not just a temporary calm."

We in the international community should heed these important words.

Urgent efforts to improve the situation in Gaza must move forward swiftly, but let us not lose sight of the broader goal: resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ending the occupation and realizing a two-State solution on the basis of UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.

The United Nations remains committed to continue supporting Palestinian and Israeli moves towards this political horizon. The United Nations will work with the parties and through the Quartet to pave the way forward to meaningful negotiations on all outstanding issues.

Thank you.