

**TOR WENNESLAND
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS**

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

30 August 2021

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

Over three months have passed since the deadly escalation between Israel and militants in Gaza and the situation remains tense.

In response, the United Nations continues to engage all sides to maintain calm and provide urgent assistance to Gaza's residents.

On 19 August, the State of Qatar announced a contribution of 40 million US Dollars over four months to the United Nations to provide cash assistance to some 100,000 needy families in Gaza. I welcome Qatar's contribution to support vulnerable families, which comes in addition to the 10 million US Dollars per month that it provides for fuel through UNOPS to the Gaza Power Plant. These efforts are vital to improving the dire socioeconomic and humanitarian situation in Gaza.

This support came following the UN's humanitarian appeal in May and its call at the AHLC technical meeting in July to the international community to work with the Palestinian Authority and the UN on implementing a robust programme of humanitarian aid and recovery for the Gaza Strip, developed in full contact with the PA. As the UN is about to implement this programme of cash assistance to needy families, I wish to thank Qatar for its generous support to these UN programmes and the PA for its support to them.

In addition, some 45 million of the requested 95 million dollars has been raised for the UN's humanitarian flash appeal and nearly USD 55 million has been mobilized in support of the humanitarian response more broadly.

I again thank donors for their generous support, while reiterating that further contributions are urgently needed.

Mister President,

Concerning levels of violence continued throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory during the reporting period.

In Gaza, militants launched incendiary balloons on multiple occasions and one rocket towards Israel. The rocket was intercepted, causing no damage, while the balloons caused

several fires in areas around the Strip. In retaliation, Israel Defense Forces fired 37 missiles against Hamas targets, resulting in damage but no injuries.

Tensions along the Gaza perimeter reached a peak on 21 August, when hundreds of Palestinians attended a rally organized by Palestinian factions. During the demonstration, hundreds of people approached the security fence, threw stones and reportedly IEDs towards Israeli security personnel. Israeli forces fired on Palestinian protestors, injuring 51 Palestinians, including 25 children, the vast majority due to live ammunition. One Palestinian man and a 12-year old Palestinian boy subsequently died of their wounds. One Israeli soldier was shot by a Palestinian and later died of his injuries. That evening, Israel launched six retaliatory airstrikes against what it said were Hamas military sites in Gaza.

Another demonstration near the security fence east of Khan Yunis, on 25 August, led to another clash between Palestinians and ISF. Fourteen Palestinians were injured, including five by live ammunition.

I reiterate that children must never be targeted, nor put in harm's way, and call on all sides to show restraint, avoid provocations at the fence and keep the protests peaceful.

In the occupied West Bank, clashes, attacks, search and arrest operations – including in Area A – and other incidents resulted in the death of nine Palestinians including two children, and injuries to over 280 Palestinians, including with live ammunition and, the vast majority, with rubber bullets. One Israeli security personnel was injured during these events.

Near-daily clashes near Beita village in the northern West Bank took place in the context of protests against the nearby outpost of Evyatar, which is held by ISF after settlers evacuated the location in July. In over 100 days of protests, seven Palestinians have been killed and 972 injured by ISF, with one killed and 226 injured during the reporting period.

On 27 July, a Palestinian man was shot dead by ISF near Beita. According to ISF, the man advanced towards Israeli soldiers holding a suspicious object and ignored warning shots. The man, reportedly a water technician, was seen on video with a pipe wrench near a water pump shortly before he was shot. Israeli authorities said they had opened an investigation. On 6 August, another Palestinian man was killed by ISF live fire in Beita during clashes with ISF.

On 28 July, an 11-year old Palestinian boy was killed in Beit Ummar after ISF fired at the car he was travelling in with his father and siblings. Israeli authorities have opened an investigation. The next day, ISF killed a 20-year old Palestinian man amid clashes during the boy's funeral.

On 3 August, six Palestinians were injured during an exchange of fire with ISF in the Jenin Refugee Camp, in Area A of the West Bank, including a 25-year-old man who later

succumbed to his wounds. On 16 August, four Palestinians were killed and another injured by live ammunition in an exchange of fire with ISF during an Israeli search operation in the camp.

On 24 August, Israeli Forces killed a 15-year-old boy with live ammunition during an arrest operation in Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus. According to Israeli officials the boy had been threatening to throw a large object at ISF personnel. However, witnesses dispute the account and say that the boy was shot in the head by ISF personnel at some distance.

During the reporting period, six Palestinians, including one woman and one child, were injured in five violent incidents involving Israeli settlers. Palestinians perpetrated attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians, that resulted in five injuries and damage to property.

On 17 August, a 15-year-old Palestinian boy was attacked in the northern West Bank, during which a group of Israeli settlers kidnapped the boy, tied him to a tree, and brutally assaulted, cut and burned him. The boy, who lost consciousness, was eventually handed over to a Palestinian ambulance. I am deeply concerned by this heinous act and I expect the Israeli authorities to undertake a swift, thorough and transparent investigation and ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable.

I am concerned by the continued tragic loss of life and serious injuries in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. I note that settler violence against Palestinian civilians is recurrent in my reporting to this Council. Further measures must be taken to ensure that Israel fulfills its obligation to protect Palestinian civilians from violence, including by Israeli settlers, and to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for such attacks. I reiterate that security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when it is strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Mister President,

In a concerning incident, on 14 August, during the protests in Beita, Palestinians set fire to a Star of David containing the image of a swastika. Such a display of anti-Semitism is unacceptable. I urge all parties to refrain from incitement and provocative actions.

Mister President,

During the reporting period, Palestinian civil society organizations and human rights defenders continued to face restrictions on their freedoms of expression, assembly and association.

On 29 July, ISF reportedly conducted searches of the offices of the Bisan Center for Research and Development and of Defense for Children International-Palestine (DCI) in Ramallah and confiscated equipment.

On 21 August, Palestinian security forces arrested 23 people in Ramallah for their participation in a planned demonstration, the majority of them before the protest started. Several of those arrested were well-known human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and political activists. All the detained were subsequently released.

I call on Israel to take all necessary measures to protect the right to freedom of association and ensure that human rights organizations in the OPT are protected from arbitrary actions.

I also urge the Palestinian Authority to immediately stop arrests of human rights defenders, journalists and activists on charges that impinge upon the exercise of freedom of expression.

Mister President,

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

Overall, Israeli authorities demolished, seized, or forced owners to demolish 81 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 22 in East Jerusalem, displacing 165 Palestinians, including 33 women and 98 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 4 August, 17 structures were seized in the Bedouin community of Ibziq in the Jordan Valley, displacing 27 people, including 19 children. The confiscation was carried out due to the community's location in an Israeli-declared 'firing zone.'

On 2 August, Israel's Supreme Court held a hearing to consider an appeal request by four Palestinian families facing eviction in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem. The judges proposed a compromise, which was not agreed and the hearing was adjourned with no date to reconvene.

On 15 August, the Supreme Court postponed the eviction of several other Palestinian families living in the same area of Sheikh Jarrah, pending a decision on their request to appeal the decision to evict them.

On 11 August, the Jerusalem Local Affairs Court froze the demolition of several dozen structures in the al-Bustan section of the Silwan neighborhood until 10 February 2022, pending planning discussions that are underway.

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

Mister President,

Returning to the situation in Gaza, I note a gradual and partial easing of the access restrictions by Israeli authorities.

On 29 July, the fishing zone was again expanded to 12 nautical miles after being restricted for four days in response to the launching of incendiary balloons into Israel from the Strip. On 13 and 26 August, Israeli authorities announced additional easing of import and export restrictions. For the first time in 18 months, permits will be given to 2,000 Palestinian traders and 350 businesspeople to cross from Gaza into Israel.

While some 6,000 trucks including of construction materials, food and non-food items, and fuel entered Gaza through Kerem Shalom, the volume of trade still remains below pre-escalation levels.

On 23 August, for the first time in over six months, Egyptian authorities closed Rafah crossing to all movement, reopening it fully again on 29 August.

Although movement and access in and out of Gaza should be further improved, no amount of humanitarian or economic support on its own will address the challenges facing Gaza. The current gradual approach is a holding operation and not a strategic way forward and a solution for the people in Gaza.

Gaza requires political solutions that will see a full lifting of Israeli closures, in line with UN Security Council resolution 1860 (2009) and the return of a legitimate Palestinian Government to Gaza, and the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian State, of which Gaza is an integral part. It must also see Hamas and other armed groups stop the launching of incendiary devices, rockets and mortars, and end the militant build up.

Mr. President,

Following the takeover of an UNRWA school by Hamas, the Agency reiterated in an 11 August statement that its installations are inviolable at all times. The Agency protested the takeover and condemned the existence and potential use of structures, including tunnels, under its premises in the strongest possible terms. While the school was subsequently vacated by Hamas, such actions undermine the inviolability and neutrality of UNRWA premises and compromise the safe return of children to their schools on time. UNRWA and UNMAS are working to remove any remaining unexploded ordnance as soon as possible.

Mister President,

The state of the Palestinian Authority's finances remains precarious. While the monthly transfer of clearance revenues from Israel to the PA occurs regularly, Israel continues to deduct an amount equivalent to what it calculates is paid by the PA to the families of prisoners and martyrs. These deductions, along with numerous other fiscal leakages, make it increasingly difficult for the PA to cover its minimum expenditures, including salaries to Government employees and social protection payments to needy households.

I urge Israelis and Palestinians to resolve the impasse over the prisoner payment scheme and other fiscal leakages; and I call on donors to provide urgent, financial support to the PA.

On a positive note, on 29 July, the Israeli Ministers of Health and Environmental Protection met with their Palestinian counterparts for the first time in many years, amid an increase in engagement between Israeli and Palestinian officials. On 29 August, Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz met with Palestinian President Abbas in Ramallah, where they discussed security policy and economic issues, among other aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. This was the highest-level meeting between the two sides since the formation of the current Israeli Government.

I welcome this dialogue and I encourage more Ministerial-level engagement, particularly to advance financial and economic cooperation. I hope that such contacts can result in bringing the Parties in a position to advance unresolved issues, including political ones and those related to the implementation of agreements made by the Parties.

On 27 August, Israeli Prime Minister Bennett met with U.S. President Biden. The two sides exchanged views on efforts to advance peace, security and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians, and reaffirmed the importance of Israel's historic partnerships with Egypt and Jordan, as well as its expanding relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Mister President,

Turning to the region, in Lebanon, the government formation process has yet to yield tangible progress. The lifting of fuel subsidies on 11 August exacerbated fuel shortages, causing widespread disruption in service delivery. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remains tense following the launching of rockets from Lebanon towards Israel on 4 and 6 August -- the latter instance claimed by Hizbullah. Israel responded on both occasions with artillery fire, as well as airstrikes in southern Lebanon on 5 August. UNIFIL remains engaged with the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces to defuse tensions.

On the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained despite the continued volatile situation and violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement by the parties. On 17 August, UNDOF observed projectiles fired from west to northeast of their positions strike locations and heavy explosions on the Bravo side. UNDOF continued to observe the presence of unauthorized military personnel and equipment in the area of separation

Mister President,

Demonstrable change is needed on the ground, especially for the people living in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza.

I remain extremely concerned by the dire financial situation facing the Palestinian Authority and its ability to withstand the ongoing fiscal and health crises. This may affect all Palestinians. It is critical that the PA be empowered to exercise its responsibilities throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including on reconstruction in the Gaza Strip.

The Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee remains the established mechanism whereby the Parties and donors can address relevant issues pertaining to the economic situation of the PA and PA institution building. The next meeting of the AHLC can work out plans for how outstanding issues can be addressed by the Parties, with the support of donors and the UN.

I also believe that no positive, hopeful step should be wasted, and that despite the formidable challenges, we should help provide momentum to this renewed engagement.

Nevertheless, serious political efforts are required to return to meaningful negotiations that will address all final status issues and achieve a negotiated end to the occupation and the vision of two States, living side by side in peace and security, based on the 1967 lines, in line with UN resolutions, international law and signed agreements.

In the meantime, Mr. President, both sides should abide by the signed agreements and avoid unilateral actions that change the reality on the ground and undermine the horizon toward a two-State solution.

Thank you.