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

8 August 2022

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

The past days witnessed a deeply worrying escalation in the Gaza Strip between Israeli military forces and Palestinian armed groups, primarily the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Preliminary numbers, which have yet to be confirmed, indicate that from 5 August, the Israel Defense Forces launched 147 airstrikes against targets in Gaza. Palestinian militants launched approximately 1,100 rockets and mortars into Israel, many of which landed deep inside Israeli territory. During the escalation, 46 Palestinians were killed and 360 injured, and hundreds of residential housing units were damaged or destroyed, along with other civilian infrastructure. Seventy Israelis were injured, with damage to residential and other civilian structures.

Last night, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Israeli Prime Minister's Office announced in separate statements that a ceasefire had been agreed and would come into effect at 11:30 pm on 7 August. The ceasefire remains in place as I speak.

I welcome this agreement and am grateful to Egypt for its crucial role in securing the ceasefire, alongside the United Nations, and appreciate the very important support provided by Qatar, the U.S., Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and others to de-escalate the situation. Together, these efforts combined helped prevent the outbreak of a full-scale war and as of this morning allowed for the delivery of much-needed humanitarian relief to the people of Gaza.

The UN remains in close contact with all parties to solidify the ceasefire and ensure that the significant progress made towards easing restrictions, which we have seen since the end of the escalation last May, can be safeguarded and ultimately expanded.

Mr. President,

This most recent escalation had its roots in deeper tensions, which have been rising for months across the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).

Tensions spiked across the West Bank in March and April of this year, particularly after five terrorist attacks – the deadliest in years – took place inside Israel. Following these attacks, Israeli authorities increased military operations inside the occupied West Bank, with a significant number of these operations taking place in Jenin, focused on Palestinian militant groups operating in the area.

On 1 August, Israeli security forces arrested Bassem as-Saadi, a senior leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the occupied West Bank, along with his son-in-law. A 17-year-old Palestinian, whom PIJ claimed as an affiliate, was killed during the operation.

PIJ immediately declared a “state of alert” and raised the level of readiness of their militants. In response to the threats, Israel closed the crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip on 2 August and implemented measures restricting civilian movements in the so-called “Gaza envelope.”

Tensions mounted amidst highly inflammatory rhetoric by Palestinian militant groups.

The UN, Egypt and others began intensive mediation efforts to avert an escalation.

On 5 August, Israeli forces carried out a series of airstrikes against reported military targets, including against a senior PIJ commander in Gaza, who was killed in the attack. Hours later, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other militant factions launched more than 100 indiscriminate rockets and other projectiles from within civilian neighborhoods inside the Gaza Strip towards civilian population centers in Israel, including Tel Aviv, central Israel and the Gaza envelope.

Over the following days, Israeli air and artillery strikes against militant targets in Gaza and rocket launches by Palestinian militants into Israel continued intensively.

Mr. President,

The escalation took a severe toll on the civilian population. I repeat, the figures we are presenting are initial and verification is ongoing.

From 5 through 7 August, 46 Palestinians were killed, including 20 civilians - 15 children and four women. According to Israeli official sources, the strikes killed 21 operatives, mainly affiliated with PIJ.

The Ministry of Health in Gaza reported 360 Palestinians injured, including at least 151 children and 58 women.

At least ten houses were completely destroyed and 48 severely damaged and rendered uninhabitable. According to the Gaza authorities, over 600 housing units were damaged, displacing 84 families.

Approximately 1,100 rockets and mortars were fired by Palestinian armed groups, mainly PIJ’s Al Quds Brigades. Some 20 per cent of these reportedly fell short within the Gaza Strip causing damage and in at least three cases potentially large numbers of civilian casualties; UN monitoring of the incidents is ongoing. Of those that crossed the border, most were intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome, but some caused material damage. Israeli sources reported 70 injuries, including nine children.

I condemn the indiscriminate launching of rockets from highly populated residential neighborhoods in Gaza into civilian population centers in Israel, which puts at risk both Palestinian and Israeli civilians and violates international humanitarian law.

While fully recognizing Israel’s legitimate security concerns, I reiterate that under international law, all use of force must be proportionate and take all feasible steps to avoid civilian casualties.

Children, in particular, must never be the target of violence or put in harm’s way.

Mr. President,

Against the backdrop of the Gaza escalation, tensions remained high in the occupied West Bank. From the onset of the escalation, Palestinians held demonstrations in multiple locations protesting the Israeli strikes on Gaza. The President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, issued a statement condemning the Israeli strikes and reiterating his call for the international community to protect Palestinians.

Mr. President,

In addition to loss of life, injuries and destruction of property, the complete closure of Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings for six days had severe humanitarian consequences for Palestinians in the Strip.

Gaza was on the brink of a humanitarian collapse last evening when the ceasefire came into effect.

As in all escalations there are dire humanitarian consequences and a total breakdown of all normal supply lines and essential services.

Basic food, medical supplies, and fuel were unable to enter.

As a result, on 6 August, Gaza's only power plant shut down, causing rolling power cuts of over 20 hours per day and severely impacting the delivery of basic essential services and facilities, such as hospitals and clinics, schools, water desalination and distribution, as well as wastewater treatment.

Gaza's chronic shortages of essential medicines and equipment were exacerbated by the escalation; and, the closure of Erez prevented the daily crossing of some 50 patients requiring specialized treatment in Israel.

The closures also worsened the already precarious food security situation in the Gaza Strip, reducing stocks of basic foods, particularly wheat flour.

The ceasefire announced last night has allowed the resumption of essential movement of goods and people in and out of Gaza, including the delivery of humanitarian assistance and fuel for the Gaza Power Plant.

I welcome Israeli authorities' timely reopening of the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings after the ceasefire went into effect. The opening of Kerem Shalom has allowed for 23 trucks of fuel to enter the Gaza Strip today, enabling the Gaza Power Plant to resume normal operations from 8pm this evening local time.

My deputy, and Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Lynn Hastings, entered Gaza this morning and is leading the UN and humanitarian response on the ground. She has spent the day meeting with UN and humanitarian agencies, families affected by the escalation and civil society groups, and assessing the damage and needs. The cost will be steep.

Mr. President,

The escalation of recent days came a little more than one year after the end of May 2021 escalation in Gaza. The devastating impact of that conflict is still with us today.

In the months following the hostilities in May 2021, gradual but significant progress was made in opening Gaza for the movement of people and goods. These steps helped ease living conditions in the Strip. It is imperative that we see a resumption of the measures that were in place and continue our efforts to expand them further. We are committed to supporting the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement, ensuring the safety and security of the civilian population, and following-up on the Palestinian prisoners file.

Mr. President,

Yesterday, the Secretary-General welcomed the ceasefire announcement and called on all sides to abide by the agreement. I echo the Secretary-General's call.

I want to make the Council aware of the following: the ceasefire is fragile. Any resumption of hostilities will only have devastating consequences for Palestinians and Israelis, and make any political progress on key issues elusive.

Ultimately, the underlying drivers of this and previous escalations remain. These cycles of violence will only cease when we achieve a political resolution of the conflict that brings an end to the occupation and the realization of a two-State solution on the basis of the 1967 lines, in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

I reiterate my call to the Israeli and Palestinian leadership, along with the international community, to strengthen diplomatic efforts to return to meaningful negotiations towards a viable two-State solution.

Thank you.