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Provisional

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New York

<i>President:</i>	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett	(Guyana)
<i>Members:</i>	Algeria	Mr. Gaouaoui
	China	Mr. Zhang Jun
	Ecuador	Mr. De La Gasca
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Japan	Mr. Yamazaki
	Malta	Mrs. Frazier
	Mozambique	Mr. Kumanga
	Republic of Korea	Mr. Sangjin Kim
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sierra Leone	Mr. Kanu
	Slovenia	Mr. Žbogar
	Switzerland	Mrs. Baeriswyl
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Dame Barbara Woodward
	United States of America	Mr. Wood

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Tor Wennesland, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process; and Mr. Christopher Lockyear, Secretary General of Médecins sans frontières.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Wennesland.

Mr. Wennesland: As we approach 140 days of devastating war, there is still no end in sight — no end to the trauma of those impacted by the horrors unleashed on 7 October; no end for the people in Gaza; and no end to the regional turmoil.

I was in Gaza this week to see at first-hand the unfolding tragedy and to meet with our tireless and brave teams on the ground, who face impossible challenges to deliver life-saving assistance to Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip. What I saw was shocking and unsustainable. I am deeply concerned about a possible full-scale Israeli military operation in the densely populated Rafah area, where some 1.4 million Palestinians are sheltering and where we have the only point of entry for humanitarian goods.

I cannot stress enough how urgently we need a deal that will bring about a humanitarian ceasefire and the release of hostages. I reiterate my call for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and for a humanitarian ceasefire. In the meantime, I will continue to urge all concerned, including Israeli authorities, to address the key impediments to our humanitarian response on the ground. We need more safety measures, greater security and the tools and access points to scale up aid, particularly in the north of the Gaza Strip.

I am also continuing my extensive engagements in the region and internationally, not only to support all efforts towards a ceasefire but also to bring about a more common understanding and coordinated approach

to addressing the complex humanitarian, security and political crises affecting not only Gaza, but the whole of the occupied Palestinian territory, Israel and the region.

I am convinced that there is no time to lose in laying the framework for Gaza's recovery and for a long-term political resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including by advancing meaningful, irreversible steps towards a two-State solution.

According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, from 18 January through 16 February, 4,327 Palestinians were killed and over 7,000 injured in fighting and Israeli operations in the Strip, bringing the total Palestinian fatalities in the war to more than 28,000, many women and children. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has said that over 10,000 Palestinian fatalities are militants. In addition to the approximately 1,200 fatalities on 7 October in Israel, the Israel Defense Forces reported 235 security forces personnel killed in Gaza since ground operations began. Of the 253 hostages kidnapped on 7 October, some 134 are believed to be still held hostage by Hamas, 112 have been freed and 11 bodies have been recovered. One hundred and sixty United Nations staff have been killed in Gaza — the largest single loss of life in the history of the Organization.

Battles have continued across Gaza, including a campaign in Khan Younis that began in late January, and more recently intensified airstrikes in the densely populated Rafah area. Hospitals, schools and other protected sites continue to be severely impacted by military operations. The IDF has said that its forces are targeting Hamas fighters and equipment as well as large-scale tunnel networks under those and other civilian infrastructure used for military purposes.

On 15 February, the IDF entered Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, following days of shelling and sniper fire that killed 13 Palestinians. During a multi-day operation, the IDF arrested over 100 Palestinians, including health workers, who they said were involved in militant activity including the 7 October Hamas attack in Israel. While the World Health Organization evacuated some 50 critical patients, including children, more than 100 patients remained behind and seven reportedly died after generators were shut down. Israeli forces said they were acting on information that Hamas held hostages in the facility and were actively using the facility for military purposes. Palestinian armed groups continued to fire indiscriminate rockets from Gaza towards Israel, albeit at reduced frequency and range.

Let me return in more detail to where I started this briefing: the desperate humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Internally displaced persons face acute shortages of food, water, shelter and medicine. Communicable diseases are rising amid unsanitary conditions. And over 2 million people face extreme food insecurity, with women and children at greatest risk. This desperation and scarcity has led to a near-total breakdown in law and order. Essential services have been heavily impacted by the fighting. Eighty-four percent of health and education facilities are damaged or destroyed. Over 62 percent of all roads and electricity feeder lines are unusable.

My Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator has a plan to deliver the essentials — food, shelter, medicine and water and sanitation — but our capacity to deliver depends on coordinated humanitarian movements, effective deconfliction with the parties and Israeli approvals for essential communications equipment and armoured vehicles, all of which provide the minimum conditions for staff to work safely. That must be improved. United Nations convoys and compounds must not be hit, and our equipment needs clearance, fast.

Keeping Gaza on a drip-feed not only deprives a desperate population of life-saving support, but it also drives even greater chaos that further impedes humanitarian delivery. On 20 February, the World Food Programme announced that it was forced to pause deliveries to northern Gaza following multiple security incidents. Convoy movements had only just resumed two days earlier, following a three-week suspension in the wake of a strike on a United Nations truck. For that reason, I renew our appeal to open additional access points to the northern part of Gaza to increase the flow of aid, reduce congestion in the south and relieve some of the pressure on the population and the staff seeking to deliver.

Israel has provided information that 12 staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) were involved in the brutal attacks against Israelis on 7 October. Those allegations are appalling, and such acts must be condemned. The Secretary-General and UNRWA took swift action, including terminating the employment of the 10 active staff members and launching internal and independent investigations. Nevertheless, key donors have suspended aid amounting to over half of the Agency's forecasted income for 2024. While we address the very serious allegations at hand, we must

recognize that UNRWA remains the backbone of the humanitarian response on the ground. I reiterate the Secretary-General's appeal to donors to guarantee the continuity of UNRWA's operation — not only for Gaza, but for stability in the region.

Turning to the occupied West Bank, 27 Palestinians, including eight children, were killed by Israeli security forces — the majority of them were killed in the context of Israeli operations in Area A, often including armed exchanges with Palestinians. On 30 January, an undercover IDF unit killed three Palestinians inside a hospital in Jenin, one of whom was a patient. The IDF said that the three, who were claimed by members of armed groups, were planning an attack against Israelis.

During the reporting period, three Israelis, including one woman, were killed in Palestinian shooting attacks in the occupied West Bank and in Israel, including two at a bus stop on 16 February by a Palestinian, who was also killed at the scene. In today's early morning hours, a deadly terror attack by three Palestinians against Israeli commuters near the Maale Adumim settlement, outside Jerusalem, is yet another reminder of the boiling tension on the ground. Settler attacks against Palestinians and their property have also continued.

On 1 February, United States President Biden issued an executive order imposing sanctions on "persons undermining peace, security and stability in the West Bank". Four Israeli settlers have been sanctioned under the order, while the United Kingdom and France have also announced sanctions against settlers. Settlement activities also continued as Israeli authorities published tenders for approximately 420 housing units in Area C settlements. On 14 February, after an extended legal battle, Israeli authorities demolished the home of a prominent community leader in Al-Bustan, in occupied East Jerusalem, citing the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

I am concerned that, if the violence in Gaza does not end, and tensions and restrictions remain high in the West Bank, including at the holy sites in East Jerusalem, the holy month of Ramadan risks becoming another volatile marker rather than a time of contemplation and healing. I also remain deeply concerned about the economy of the West Bank and the Palestinian Authority's (PA) fiscal crisis. In that context, I welcome Norway's announcement on

18 February that an arrangement was reached with the parties to facilitate a partial transfer of the monthly clearance revenues, not including the amount Israelis say the PA transfers to Gaza. I am also encouraged that the Palestinian Prime Minister announced several judicial, security, administrative and financial reforms last month, but more remains to be done.

In the international arena, on 26 January, the International Court of Justice issued provisional measures in the case of *South Africa vs. Israel*, on the application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip. I welcome the recent visit of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict to gather information on reports of sexual violence in the context of the 7 October attacks.

I remain gravely concerned about the serious risk of further regional escalation. Across the Blue Line, exchanges of fire between Israel and Hizbullah continue to intensify, with several civilian casualties reported in recent days. Approximately 100,000 Israelis and more than 87,000 Lebanese are displaced from their communities. Firing from Syria towards the Israeli-occupied Golan and strikes by Israel against targets in Syria also continued, including Syrian claims of Israeli strikes on locations in Damascus and Homs.

On 28 January, three United States soldiers were killed and more than 40 were injured in a drone attack on a United States military outpost in the northern part of Jordan. United States forces responded with strikes on targets in Syria and Iraq. Houthi forces continued to launch attacks against vessels in the Red Sea, with strikes reported against Houthi targets in Yemen. Attacks against international shipping routes must cease immediately. I urge all relevant actors to take steps to immediately de-escalate.

The scale of the emergency we are facing is staggering and could quickly spiral out of control in the region. I appeal for the collective, coordinated and comprehensive response to not only address the immediate crisis before us in Gaza, but to help restore a political horizon for Palestinians and Israelis alike, while promoting greater stability and peace in the region. In order to do so, we urgently need a deal to achieve a humanitarian ceasefire and the release of hostages. We need to create the space for moving forward through dialogue rather than violence.

Ultimately, the only long-term solution for Gaza is political. While taking into account Israel's legitimate security concerns, there must be a clear path towards restoring single, effective Palestinian governance across the occupied Palestinian territories, including Gaza. International support to strengthen and reform the Palestinian Authority in order to improve domestic and international legitimacy will be critical. To create the conditions for this to work, there must be time-bound steps within a political framework to end the occupation and establish a two-State solution in line with the relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements. Those efforts must coalesce and accelerate if we are to emerge from the nightmare onto a trajectory that can provide Palestinians and Israelis with the chance of lasting peace.

The President: I thank Mr. Wennesland for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Lockyear.

Mr. Lockyear: As I speak, more than 1.5 million people are trapped in Rafah. People violently forced into that strip of land in southern Gaza are bearing the brunt of Israel's military campaign. We live in fear of a ground invasion. Our fears are rooted in experience. Just 48 hours ago, as a family sat around their kitchen table in a house sheltering Médecins sans frontières (MSF) staff and their families in Khan Younis, a 120mm tank shell exploded through the walls, igniting a fire and killing two people and severely burning six others. Five of the six injured were women and children. We took every precaution to protect the 64 humanitarian staff and family members from such an attack by notifying warring parties of the location and clearly marking the building with a Médecins sans frontières flag.

Despite our precautions, our building was struck not only by a tank shell but by intense gunfire. Some were trapped in the burning building while active shooting delayed ambulances from reaching them. This morning, I am looking at photos that show the catastrophic extent of the damage, and I am watching videos of rescue teams removing charred bodies from the rubble. That is all too familiar — Israeli forces have attacked our convoys, detained our staff and bulldozed our vehicles; hospitals have been bombed and raided, and now, for a second time, one of our staff shelters has been hit. That pattern of attacks is either intentional or

indicative of reckless incompetence. Our colleagues in Gaza are fearful that, as I speak to the Council today, they will be punished tomorrow.

Every day we are witnessing unimaginable horror. Like so many, we were horrified by Hamas's massacre in Israel on 7 October, and we are horrified by Israel's response. We feel the anguish of families whose loved ones were taken hostage on 7 October. We feel the anguish of the families of those arbitrarily detained in Gaza and the West Bank. As humanitarians, we are appalled by violence against civilians. This death, destruction and forced displacement are a result of military and political choices that blatantly disregard civilian lives. Those choices could have been, and still can be, made very differently.

For 138 days, we have witnessed the unimaginable suffering of the people of Gaza. For 138 days, we have done everything we can to carry out a meaningful humanitarian response. For 138 days, we have watched the systematic obliteration of a health system that we have supported for decades. We have seen our patients and colleagues killed and maimed. The situation is the culmination of a war that Israel is waging on the entire population of the Gaza Strip — a war of collective punishment, a war without rules, a war at all costs. The laws and principles that we collectively depend on to enable humanitarian assistance are now eroded to the point of meaninglessness.

The humanitarian response in Gaza today is an illusion — a convenient illusion that perpetuates a narrative that this war is being waged in line with international laws. The calls for humanitarian assistance have echoed across this Chamber. Yet in Gaza we have less and less every day — less space, less medicine, less food, less water and less safety. We no longer speak of a humanitarian scale-up. We speak of how to survive without even a bare minimum. The efforts in Gaza today to provide assistance are haphazard, opportunistic and entirely inadequate. How can we deliver life-saving aid in an environment where the distinction between civilians and combatants is disregarded? How can we sustain any type of response when medical workers are being targeted, attacked and vilified for assisting the wounded?

Attacks on health care are attacks on humanity. There is no health system to speak of left in Gaza. Israel's military has dismantled hospital after hospital. What remains is so little in the face of such carnage

that it is preposterous. The excuse given is that medical facilities have been used for military purposes. Yet we have seen no independently verified evidence of that. In exceptional circumstances, where a hospital loses its protected status, any attack must follow the principles of proportionality and precaution. But instead of adherence to international law, we are seeing the systematic disabling of hospitals, which has left the entire medical system inoperable. Since 7 October, we have been forced to evacuate nine different health facilities. One week ago Nasser Hospital was raided. Medical staff were forced to leave despite repeated assurances that they could stay and continue caring for patients.

Those indiscriminate attacks, as well as the types of weapons and munitions used in densely populated areas, have killed tens of thousands and maimed thousands more. Our patients have catastrophic injuries — amputations, crushed limbs and severe burns. They need sophisticated care and long and intensive rehabilitation. Medics cannot treat those injuries on a battlefield or in the ashes of destroyed hospitals. There are not enough hospital beds, medications or supplies. Surgeons have had no choice but to carry out amputations on children without anaesthesia. Our surgeons are running out of basic gauze to stop their patients from bleeding. They use it once, squeeze out the blood, wash it, sterilize it and reuse it for the next patient.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza has left pregnant women without medical care for months. Women in labour cannot reach functional delivery rooms. They are giving birth in plastic tents and public buildings. Medical teams have added a new acronym to their vocabulary — WCNSF, for "wounded child, no surviving family". Children who do survive this war will bear not only the visible wounds of traumatic injuries but the invisible ones, too — those of repeated displacement, constant fear and the sight of family members being literally dismembered before their eyes. Those psychological injuries have led children as young as five to tell us that they would prefer to die. The dangers for medical staff are enormous. On a daily basis, we are making the choice to continue working, despite the increasing risks. We are scared, and our teams are beyond exhausted.

This must stop. Along with the rest of the world, we are closely watching how the Security Council and its members have approached the conflict in Gaza.

Through meeting after meeting, and resolution after resolution, the Council has failed to effectively address the conflict. We have watched its members deliberate and delay while civilians die. We are appalled by the willingness of the United States to use its powers as a permanent member of the Council to obstruct efforts to adopt the most evident of draft resolutions, one that demands an immediate and sustained ceasefire. Three times the Council has had an opportunity to vote in favour of the ceasefire that is so desperately needed, and three times the United States has used its veto power, most recently on Tuesday (see S/PV.9552).

A new draft resolution prepared by the United States ostensibly calls for a ceasefire. However, that is misleading at best. The Council should reject any draft resolution that further hampers humanitarian efforts on the ground and leads the Council to tacitly endorse the continued violence and mass atrocities in Gaza. The people of Gaza need a ceasefire, not when practicable but now. They need a sustained ceasefire, not a temporary period of calm. Anything short of that is gross negligence. The protection of civilians in Gaza cannot be contingent on draft resolutions from the Council that instrumentalize humanitarianism to blur political objectives. The protection of civilians, civilian infrastructure, health workers and health facilities falls first and foremost on the parties to the conflict. But it is also a collective responsibility — a responsibility that rests with the Council, and its members, as parties to the Geneva Conventions. The consequences of casting international humanitarian law to the wind would reverberate well beyond Gaza. They would be an enduring burden on our collective conscience. This is not just political inaction. It has become political complicity.

Two days ago, MSF staff and families were attacked and died in a place that they were told would be protected. Today our staff are back at work, risking their lives once again for their patients. What is the Council willing to risk? We demand the protections promised under international humanitarian law. We demand a ceasefire from both parties. We demand the space to turn the illusion of aid into meaningful assistance. What will the Council do to make that happen?

The President: I thank Mr. Lockyear for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing.

We all want to see a durable end to this conflict. The best way to advance an enduring peace and Israel's security is to support the creation of an independent Palestinian State side by side with Israel. The realization of that vision, however, continues to face numerous obstacles, several of which we heard about in today's briefing by the Special Coordinator. Those obstacles include the continued holding of 134 hostages by Hamas and other groups. I have said it before, and I will say it again: there can be no sustainable ceasefire in Gaza without the hostages being released. After five months of fighting, that is clear.

The pace of hostage talks can be frustrating. They are complicated by practical considerations, and as we all know, negotiations at such high stakes do not always yield immediate results. For that reason, we are working day in and day out with our partners in Egypt and Qatar to achieve a positive result that can bring the hostages home and result in a six-week cessation of the fighting.

I also share members' profound concern about the well-being of the more than 1 million Palestinian civilians in Rafah. President Biden and Secretary Blinken made it clear to Israel that in the current circumstances, a major ground offensive into Rafah would result in civilian harm and displacement, including potentially into neighbouring countries, which would have serious implications for peace and security in the region. We have therefore underscored that such a major ground offensive should not proceed in the circumstances. Those statements are a clear signal that Israel should not proceed with an operation that we know will create more suffering and worsen the humanitarian crisis in the absence of a viable plan to protect civilians. We all want to see a durable end to the conflict. There are three key elements that I would like to highlight.

A temporary ceasefire, conditional on an agreement to release the hostages, is the first step. Again, that is the best path forward.

Regarding the protection of civilians, again, we have communicated our concerns to Israel quite clearly. We need better deconfliction and coordination mechanisms so that humanitarian personnel can perform life-saving work — a point that the Special Coordinator reinforced today. We cannot forget that 1.5 million civilians in Rafah and other civilians across

Gaza would not be in harm's way right now if Hamas abided by the laws of war and did not embed itself with civilians, hide in tunnel complexes beneath hospitals and schools and engage in other atrocities. Hamas's violations of international humanitarian law and its abuses of the civilian population in Gaza also in no way lessen Israel's responsibility to do everything possible to protect the civilian population.

Finally, there must be full implementation of Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator Kaag's plan to accelerate the delivery of humanitarian aid at scale. That includes opening additional crossings for the delivery of aid and commercial goods and keeping the currently available crossings open. Here again, the United States has been clear with Israel about the need for urgent and specific steps to increase the throughput and consistency of humanitarian assistance.

Let me conclude by emphasizing what Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield noted the other day (see S/PV.9552), which is that the United States stands ready and indeed has begun negotiations on a Council product that supports diplomacy on the ground to bring about a sustainable end to the conflict. Moreover, the United States will continue to press the parties to reach a deal that would bring the hostages home and enable an extended six-week temporary ceasefire. The support of the Council for that diplomacy will be critical to increasing the pressure on Hamas to accept the agreement on the table.

Securing that agreement and successfully implementing it is how we will lay the foundation for a durable peace. That is critical for the Palestinian civilians in Gaza whose family members have been killed, whose homes have been destroyed, who have been displaced multiple times and who wonder where they will find their next meal or when and where the next air strike will land. It is critical for the families of hostages — parents and relatives who do not know whether their children are alive, injured or deceased. It is critical for Israelis, many of whom are still displaced or face barrages of rocket fire. It is critical for Palestinian civilians in the West Bank, who are facing record levels of violence by extremist settlers that we unequivocally condemn. It is critical for humanitarian workers and journalists, who put their lives on the line every day to do their jobs and help us do ours, and who must be protected. It is also critical to everyone who desperately wants to see sustainable peace in the region.

We welcome Council members' support for the ongoing diplomacy and thank the United Nations for its ongoing efforts to reach a sustainable end to the tragic conflict.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We would like to thank the briefers for their objective assessments of the catastrophic situation in the Gaza Strip, particularly Mr. Lockyear's direct, frank and chilling testimony. What more is there to add? He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Today's meeting is taking place against the backdrop of yet another veto exercised by the United States against a Security Council draft resolution (S/2024/173) calling for an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. There is, and there can be, no justification for actions by the American delegation. The unprecedented levels of violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict zone have continued for almost 140 days. The colossal figures of losses and destruction that we heard about from today's briefers speak for themselves. More than 29,000 people, including women and children, have fallen victim to the Israeli military's indiscriminate bombings and forceful action. At least 69,000 people have been wounded — with horrific injuries, as we just heard — and 80 per cent of the entire population of the Gaza Strip is now internally displaced, with most of them taking refuge in the southern part of the Strip in the cities of Khan Yunis and Rafah, which are effectively under siege. The Israeli air force has been bombing them intensively. This amounts to a deliberate policy on the part of West Jerusalem to force the Palestinians out of Gaza, with consequences that will inevitably mean that Gazans will break through the border with Egypt and a humanitarian catastrophe will spill over onto its territory.

The so-called diplomatic efforts by Washington on the ground, to use the phrase our American colleagues have been insisting on like a mantra, have so far led nowhere. It is obvious that Washington simply has no real leverage over the Israeli Government. The authorities in West Jerusalem have declared categorically that what they call the cleansing of the Gaza Strip will continue for several more months, and they are calling for the continuation of the military operation, the elimination of the presence in the Gaza Strip of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the forced displacement of Palestinians from the places of their permanent residence. However, it is also clear that despite its bravado, Israel is not

achieving its stated goals. As far as one can judge from the publicly available information, the Israeli military operation has not helped and will not help to obtain the release of the hostages. Against that backdrop, the United States representative's statement that there cannot be a ceasefire without the release of hostages appears doubly cynical, because that release of the hostages cannot take place without a ceasefire.

We are therefore dealing with a stalemate of uncontrolled escalation, whose victims are yet more thousands of Palestinians. There is in fact a consensus within the Security Council on the need to stop the violence. Only one delegation is standing in the way of multilateral efforts under the auspices of the United Nations, and that is the United States. By shielding its ally in the Middle East, the United States is attempting to sell, in the guise of an alternative solution, the Security Council's blessing for a resolution that benefits only Israel, or rather the United States' own geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Every United Nations body, with Secretary-General Guterres in the lead, has been unanimous in reiterating the need for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire as a prerequisite for establishing humanitarian assistance at the required scale and for creating the conditions needed for the release of hostages. That specific demand on the parties was the cornerstone of the draft resolution authored by the delegation Algeria, which was vetoed by the United States (see S/PV.9552).

By repeatedly blocking Security Council decisions and even dismissively urging it not to interfere in their diplomacy, members are doing themselves a disservice. Instead of allowing the Council to use the resources at its disposal and exercise its authority, members are increasingly losing control over the situation and giving the green light for the aggression against the Palestinian people to continue, including the ground operation in Rafah. The stalemate in the Security Council, which was brought about by the hard-nosed position of the United States, has meant that the violence in Gaza has already spilled over to the entire Middle East region. We are seeing the consequences and fallout of that in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Sympathy for the Palestinian people has naturally stirred up the Middle East. Yet, instead of seeking an adequate political solution, Western countries have as usual tried to "bomb" dissenters and those who do not agree with their policies. The Anglo-Saxon coalition's use of force against the sovereign nations of Syria, Iraq and Yemen

poses a direct threat to international peace and security, undermining the world order based on international law and the central role of the United Nations.

There is not even the slightest prospect of ending the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, which was generated by Israel's ongoing military operation, both inside and outside the Strip. In view of the absence of unhindered humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip, particularly to its northern regions, Gazans have been suffering from hunger and infectious diseases. Given those catastrophic circumstances, we are outraged by the incomprehensible decision of several Western donors to suspend funding for United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) based on suspicions that its employees were involved in cooperating with Hamas. Those employees were immediately dismissed, before any investigation could take place, solely based on Israel's allegations. We call for the decision to suspend UNRWA funding to be reconsidered. The collective punishment of millions of Palestinians in need of assistance is simply immoral and can only be seen as a manifestation of donor blackmail and the politicization of humanitarian issues.

In reality, that exacerbates the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, including through disruptions in the provision of humanitarian aid, education, social services and health care for some 6 million Palestinians in all occupied Palestinian territories, as well as in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. In that regard, we condemn attempts to discredit the UNRWA by attaching political labels to its activities. For our part, we reaffirm our principled position that there is no military solution to this protracted, decades-long conflict and that it can only be settled through political and diplomatic means within the framework of the two-State solution. We have consistently advocated a humanitarian ceasefire as the only condition for ensuring unhindered humanitarian access to all those in need and the unconditional release of all hostages. That is an imperative on which all Security Council efforts should be focused. We urge everyone to listen to the voices of the Arab and Muslim worlds and the overwhelming majority of the international community, which are calling for an end to the suffering of peaceful civilians in Gaza and the Middle East.

Mrs. Frazier (Malta): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland and Mr. Lockyear from Médecins sans frontières for their frank briefings. My condolences go to Mr. Lockyear for the loss of lives of his colleagues.

Too many humanitarian and United Nations workers have perished in this conflict so far. I also thank him for his courageous decision to brief the Security Council at this critical time.

At the outset, I underline the fact that any reprisals are unacceptable. As a Council, we must make that clear to all sides.

Malta has repeatedly and unequivocally condemned the Hamas terror attacks of 7 October 2023. We reiterate that the immediate and unconditional release of hostages must be a top priority. However, the scale of human suffering that continues to unfold in Gaza owing to the ongoing hostilities is appalling and deeply consternating. We regret that, two days ago, the Council once again failed to call for a permanent ceasefire (see S/PV.9552).

The Israeli Government's announcement that it will be advancing its ground offensive into Rafah is extremely alarming. The area, designated as a safe zone, is sheltering half of the Strip's population, including more than 600,000 children and their families. We are gravely concerned about Israel's plan to displace that acutely vulnerable population, which will only serve to perpetuate the forced displacement of Palestinians and further inflame regional tensions.

We have already heard this morning of the medical and humanitarian consequences of the relentless assault on Gaza. Thirty thousand people have already been killed as a result; 12,000 are children. Not a single medical facility remains fully functioning. Reports from the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, attesting that acute malnourishment is causing signs of physical wasting in children under the age of 5, speak volumes. More than half a million Gazans are in famine-like conditions owing to the induced state of food insecurity.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza must be urgently addressed. Israel is required to facilitate the full and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza, which continues to fall short, and to facilitate an effective humanitarian deconfliction mechanism. Further crossing points must be reopened to allow for the adequate scaling-up of aid, particularly in the north of Gaza, where conditions are reportedly even more dire.

Malta calls for the full implementation of resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023). That remains the bare minimum required. In that vein, we fully

support the Special Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator in her mandate. We also call for the immediate implementation of the order on provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice on 26 January.

The presence of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) also remains essential. Funding cuts to UNRWA will have immediate repercussions. It is in that vein that Malta has just issued a further contribution to UNRWA, and we encourage others to do the same.

In the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, attacks by the Israel Defense Forces and violent settlers on unarmed Palestinians threaten to push the occupied territories over the brink. We unequivocally stress that settlements are in violation of international law and that their continued expansion must stop. Malta also remains deeply concerned about the escalation of hostilities across, and beyond, the Blue Line. We urge all concerned to stop the cycle of violence. De-escalation and restraint are critical. We reiterate that an immediate ceasefire in Gaza must be agreed to allow the necessary space for a diplomatic resolution to this conflict. That must include a revitalized Palestinian Authority that has the agency and legitimacy to govern the people of an independent Palestine, including in Gaza, in line with the two-State solution.

Mr. Yamazaki (Japan): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland and Mr. Lockyear, Secretary General of Médecins sans frontières, for their valuable briefings.

Almost 140 days have passed since Hamas and others' abhorrent acts of terror against Israel took place. We reiterate our unequivocal condemnation of those heinous acts and call for the immediate and unconditional release of all remaining hostages held by Hamas and other groups. One hundred and forty days of hostilities are also far too many to bear witness to. According to reports, almost 30,000 Palestinians have lost their lives, 75 per cent of the population has been displaced and an estimated 70 per cent of homes have been destroyed or damaged.

Japan is deeply concerned about the Israeli military offensive into Rafah, where almost 1.5 million people are sheltering. The humanitarian situation in Gaza has been a nightmare for too long. It is also regrettable that the World Food Programme has had to pause food deliveries to northern Gaza, despite widespread starvation and disease there. If the enormous

humanitarian requirements are to be met, more coordination among the relevant parties is necessary. We also need more trucks and fuel inside Gaza to ensure the consistent and predictable delivery of aid. We urge Israel to open additional border crossings and secure humanitarian corridors so that humanitarian actors can safely do their work. We strongly support the efforts of Ms. Sigrid Kaag, Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, to overcome the many obstacles to reaching those in need. In that regard, Japan reiterates that a humanitarian ceasefire has to be rapidly established in a way that ensures an environment conducive to adequate humanitarian assistance and that can lead to the release of the remaining hostages, enabling the realization of a sustainable ceasefire. While the Security Council was unable to adopt a draft resolution two days ago (S/2024/173), our collective endeavour must continue. We also deeply appreciate the ongoing four-party diplomatic talks and hope that they will swiftly bear fruit.

The conflict is already spreading across the region, from Israeli settler violence in the West Bank and intensified hostilities between Hizbullah and Israel to the Houthis' provocative attacks on vessels in the Red Sea. We cannot afford a wider conflict, which would reverberate around the world. All the parties must abide by international law, including international humanitarian law, and observe the relevant Security Council resolutions in good faith. While Japan takes the allegations against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East seriously, at the same time we also understand that the Agency's services are vital to Palestinians across the region. We therefore hope that the independent investigations now under way will be efficiently and swiftly concluded and that the Agency will take appropriate measures, including strengthening its governance, in order to sustainably restore the trust of international donors and broaden its donor base. Japan will continue to work with the other members of the Council for stability in the region. It is high time that we heeded the many calls to save lives, including from the International Court of Justice in its legally binding order on provisional measures.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that de-escalation and a humanitarian ceasefire are prerequisites for the ultimate goal that we all want to see, which is two independent States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

Dame Barbara Woodward (United Kingdom): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing, and I want Mr. Lockyear to know that I join others in offering condolences to the families and friends of those who have lost their lives. I also salute the courage of those who have decided to stay. Mr. Lockyear's briefing was harrowing, and his message was unequivocal and clear, and I thank him for that.

We all know that Palestinian civilians are facing a devastating and growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. We want the fighting to stop now, but simply calling for a ceasefire will not make it happen and would not make it sustainable. That is why we are calling for an immediate suspension of the fighting to get aid in and hostages out and then to progress towards a sustainable, permanent ceasefire, without a return to destruction, fighting and death. That means the release of all hostages; the formation of a new Palestinian Government for the West Bank and Gaza, accompanied by an international support package; the removal of Hamas's ability to launch attacks on Israel; an end to Hamas being in charge of Gaza; and a political horizon that provides a credible and irreversible path towards a two-State solution. The current negotiations are critical to securing the release of the hostages held in Gaza as well as making progress towards our shared objective of a sustainable ceasefire. The Government of the United Kingdom continues to work intensively with partners across the region to support that, and we call on all actors to do the same.

We are gravely concerned about the prospect of an Israeli offensive on Rafah, which would have disastrous consequences for the civilians sheltering there with nowhere else to go. More than half of Gaza's population is sheltering in the area, and the Rafah crossing is vital to ensuring that aid can reach the people who so desperately need it. That is why the immediate priority must be a suspension of the fighting, which is the best route to secure the safe relief of hostages and significantly step up the aid reaching Gaza.

We are also gravely concerned about the fact that the World Food Programme has had to pause deliveries of food aid to northern Gaza. As the Special Coordinator mentioned, we continue to stress the need for Israel to support the United Nations in distributing aid effectively across the whole of Gaza, including in the north, and for Israel to open more crossing points into Gaza. Nitzana and Kerem Shalom must be open for longer. Israel must also ensure effective deconfliction in Gaza and take

all possible measures to ensure the safety of medical personnel and facilities. As we approach Ramadan, we urge all the parties to call for calm and not to inflame tensions around the holy sites. We call on everyone to respect their sanctity and security. More than ever, we need to generate momentum for a permanent peace, and the United Kingdom will continue to work intensively in support of a two-State solution that guarantees justice, peace and security for the people of two States, Israel and Palestine.

Mrs. Baeriswyl (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): Like my colleagues, I would like to thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland and Chris Lockyear for their briefings, which cannot leave us indifferent. We are appalled by the recent attacks in Al-Mawasi where family members of Médecins sans frontières personnel were killed. Those casualties add to the growing number of deaths that we must mourn. I want to express my sincere condolences to the families of all the victims and to Médecins sans frontières, and my admiration for all the humanitarian workers who have stayed to do their work, despite the conditions.

As members of the Security Council, we are duty-bound to reaffirm our commitment to the principle of humanity, which today is being severely tested in the Middle East. That principle underpins the rules of international law, especially international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and binds us together in our shared humanity. We therefore regret the failure to adopt draft resolution S/2024/173, which called for the immediate establishment of a humanitarian ceasefire.

Today we heard that more than 75 per cent of the population of the Gaza Strip is displaced. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are under siege, facing starvation and epidemics. The majority of them are in Rafah, a refuge for more than 1 million civilians fleeing the fighting and a vital conduit for humanitarian aid to Gaza. Switzerland is deeply concerned about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that an Israeli large-scale military offensive in Rafah could have — both directly for the civilian population and for the delivery of humanitarian aid.

We condemn the fact that hostilities continue to claim numerous civilian victims in Gaza. We now estimate that nearly 30,000 people have been killed, the majority of them women and children. In four

months, the repeated bombing of densely populated urban areas have destroyed 70 per cent of Gaza's civilian infrastructure.

We also reiterate our firm condemnation of the acts of terrorism and indiscriminate attacks that have been committed by Hamas since 7 October 2023, and our repeated calls for the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages. International humanitarian law prohibits the taking of hostages and demands that those placed “hors de combat” — whether detained, wounded or ill — be treated humanely.

In accordance with article 1 common to the Geneva Conventions, Switzerland calls on all parties to the conflict to strictly respect international humanitarian law and to take concrete measures to spare and protect the civilian population. That includes the fundamental principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution in the conduct of hostilities. In that regard, Switzerland also recalls that indiscriminate rocket fire is prohibited by international humanitarian law.

It is important to reiterate that medical units, such as hospitals, must be respected and protected in all circumstances. They enjoy special protection under article 20 of the Geneva Conventions. They must not be attacked or used outside their humanitarian function to commit acts harmful to the enemy.

We are deeply concerned about the consequences of the collapse of the health system on the Gaza Strip on civilians, including nearly 70,000 wounded. According to article 55 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, “the occupying Power has the duty of ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population”. That must be done, now.

In that respect, the International Court of Justice has been clear — Israel must take effective measures without delay to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian aid throughout the Gaza Strip. Switzerland reminds Israel that it must comply with the Court's order and, in particular, take the necessary measures to that end.

As we have heard, already fragile humanitarian aid operations cannot be kept afloat without adequate security guarantees and sufficient access for humanitarian personnel. In the short term, we see no alternative to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) saving lives, providing shelter and

organizing assistance for civilians in Gaza. Following the serious accusations made against certain UNRWA employees, we expect independent investigations to shed full light on the allegations and call for all necessary cooperation to that end.

We must work now to protect civilians displaced within the Gaza Strip. The Gaza Strip must be an integral part of the future Palestinian State, living side by side with Israel in peace and security. Switzerland remains ready to support diplomatic efforts on the ground. A humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza is necessary, including to achieve regional de-escalation as quickly as possible. We stand ready to cooperate with all members of the Council to find consensus in the quest for a solution that can put an end to human suffering and revive prospects for peace.

Mr. Zhang Jun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank the two briefers for their briefings. We were appalled at Mr. Lockyear's briefing. We hope that the tragic picture that he painted for us of Gaza can touch the conscience of a certain member of the Council. The veto by the United States two days ago (see S/PV.9552) meant that the Council missed yet another opportunity to push for a ceasefire in Gaza. The continuation of the conflict, even for another day, would cause even more civilian casualties and lead to a greater catastrophe. An immediate ceasefire in Gaza is an urgent imperative to save innocent lives and prevent a wider war.

An immediate ceasefire is the common wish voiced by the international community and the consensus of the Council's overwhelming majority. We note that the United States has submitted a new draft resolution. We hope the United States will show a responsible attitude, respond positively to the international community's call and respect the established consensus among Council members.

We must underscore that the essence of any action by the Council is to achieve an immediate ceasefire. Any message conveyed by our action must be clear, unequivocal, unambiguous and unmistakable. It must not prevaricate or beat around the bush. At this point, the Council must demonstrate strong resolve rather than negotiating skills only.

More than four months have passed since the beginning of the conflict in Gaza. It is the inescapable duty of the Council to slam on the brakes to avert a greater calamity. The military offensive into Rafah must cease immediately. More than 1.5 million Gazans are

packed into Rafah, with nowhere else to go. Escalated Israeli military incursions into Rafah will result in unimaginable civilian casualties and a humanitarian disaster and cause irreparable damage to regional peace. We are strongly opposed to such actions.

Israel should immediately cancel its plan to attack Rafah and halt its collective punishment of the Palestinian people. The International Court of Justice requires that its order on provisional measures issued to prevent genocide be effectively implemented, without delay.

It is imperative to ensure sufficient, unimpeded humanitarian deliveries into Gaza. As the Director-General of the World Health Organization said, Gaza has become a death zone. Millions of people in Gaza lack the basic necessities for survival and are languishing in hunger, disease and despair. Meanwhile, humanitarian relief is hampered by man-made barriers, to the degree that is becoming unsustainable.

The World Food Programme announced that it had been forced to suspend its assistance to northern Gaza because of security threats. Resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023) must be fully implemented. Israel must take concrete action to open all land, sea and air routes into Gaza, provide all that is required by humanitarian agencies for their relief operations and ensure the safety and security of the staff and facilities of humanitarian relief agencies.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) plays a vital role — indispensable and irreplaceable — in alleviating the humanitarian plight in Gaza. We call on the donors concerned to resume funding to the Agency as soon as possible out of humanitarian considerations to maintain a lifeline for the people of Gaza. All parties should fully support the efforts of Sigrid Kaag, Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza. Every effort must be made to prevent the conflict spilling over to the wider region.

The Middle East is now in turmoil. Exchanges of fire between Lebanon and Israel and between Syria and Israel are escalating. Tensions in the Red Sea are continuing, and the spectre of a wider war is looming over the Middle East. We call on the parties concerned, especially those with significant influence, to exercise calm and restraint and to refrain from acts that would aggravate tensions. The parties should endeavour to

stop war through peace and break the vicious cycle in which violence is repaid with violence and the swivel door of conflict does not stop spinning.

The political horizon afforded by the two-State solution must be given a new lease on life. Independent Palestinian statehood is not a gift given by one party to another as charity, but an inalienable right of the Palestinian people as a nation. We are gravely concerned by the recent repeated public dismissal of the two-State solution by some Israeli politicians and their rejection of any international effort towards independent Palestinian statehood.

Gaza is an inalienable part of Palestine, and the two-State solution is the minimum dictate of international justice and the only viable path towards the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

China urges Israel to stop without delay, eroding the foundation of the two-State solution, halt the forced displacement of Palestinian civilians and cease the searches, the arrests and the raids in the West Bank.

The historical wrongs suffered by Palestine must be righted, and Palestine's long-cherished aspiration for independent statehood must be fulfilled. China supports Palestine becoming a member of the United Nations as soon as possible and calls for the convening of a larger, more authoritative and more effective international peace conference to push for a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mr. Wennesland and Mr. Lockyear for their briefings.

As the President of France Emmanuel Macron has said, it is critical to, without further delay, reach a ceasefire agreement on Gaza that guarantees the protection of all civilians. The human toll and the humanitarian situation are indescribable. It is essential to be able to deliver humanitarian assistance en masse to the people of Gaza. To that end, it is imperative to open the Ashdod port, a direct land route from Jordan, and all access points to the Gaza Strip. We must spare no efforts in facilitating the efforts of the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, Sigrid Kaag.

Israeli military operations must cease. France is also firmly opposed to an Israeli offensive in Rafah, which could only worsen the humanitarian disaster.

Israel must comply with international humanitarian law, which imposes clear principles of distinction, necessity, proportionality and precaution at all times and in all places.

France is also opposed to any forced displacement of people, which would constitute a violation of international humanitarian law and would create a further risk of regional escalation.

France recalls that all hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally, as required in resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023). The Council must make that a priority.

The Council must also clearly condemn the terrorist attacks of 7 October committed by Hamas and other terrorist groups. France reiterates its unwavering commitment to Israel's security and its solidarity with the Israeli people in the wake of those terrorist attacks.

The reports of the involvement of staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in the 7 October attacks are extremely serious, and France welcomes the first useful steps taken by the Secretary-General to shed light on the allegations, notably the two audits that are under way.

It is essential to restore a political horizon and work towards building a State for the Palestinians and establishing security guarantees for Israel. The two-State solution is the only way to build a just and lasting peace.

The two-State solution is seriously threatened in particular by Israel's illegal settlement policy. In addition to being a major obstacle to lasting peace, that policy stokes violence on the ground committed by settlers. France has imposed sanctions against 28 Israeli settlers. The State of Israel must ensure the security of the Palestinian population in the territories it occupies.

Finally, it is urgent to avoid a regional conflagration. The stability of Lebanon and the entire region requires full compliance with resolution 1701 (2006) by all parties and with the help of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. France is working actively to establish a de-escalation in that context. It will also continue to contribute to maritime safety in the Red Sea.

France calls for the Security Council to engage on all aspects of the crisis, namely, the security, humanitarian and political dimensions.

Mr. De La Gasca (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would like to begin by thanking the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Tor Wennesland, and Mr. Chris Lockyear, for their briefings this morning.

In recent months, the agenda item that brings us together today — the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question — has been the most active item on the Security Council's agenda. That is for good reason — the situation undoubtedly warrants it. There have been thousands of painful and unacceptable deaths of innocent civilians during this period. Ecuador has expressed its solidarity with Israel and Palestine, because it values all lives equally, because it shares the pain of each unnecessary death.

The situation in Rafah requires that we recall that the provisions of international humanitarian law must be respected at all times and by everyone. Adherence to them is not voluntary, and failure to comply with them entails serious responsibilities.

The Council adopted resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023), the result of arduous negotiations, with the aim of alleviating the conditions faced by the civilian population in Gaza, especially women and children, who make up the majority of the victims. Ecuador demands the full implementation of resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023), and to that end, considers a humanitarian ceasefire necessary. We have expressed that repeatedly and we do so again today.

Similarly, Ecuador reiterates its unequivocal condemnation of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October and, once again, demands the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

Last December, Coordinator Wennesland addressed the Council (see S/PV.9513) and reminded us that, during the first nine months of last year, the Council's attention was focused on the West Bank. What is happening in Gaza should not lead us to ignore what continues to happen in that region. The settlement activities, the economic crisis and the acts of violence continue.

We are constantly witnessing acts and statements of provocation and incitement. The behaviours and statements of leaders influence the actions of others. Therefore, we call on them to demonstrate responsibility, restraint and a genuine commitment to prevent further spread of violence.

Today we must make a particular call for prudence during the sensitive period of the approaching holy holidays. We call especially for respect for the status quo of the holy sites in Jerusalem and the role of the Kingdom of Jordan as custodian. Acts of provocation at those sites must be avoided at all costs.

Finally, we reiterate once again our conviction that the only way to put an end to the conflict is through a peaceful, negotiated, lasting and just solution for the parties, with the existence of two States, Palestine and Israel, on the basis of the 1967 borders and relevant resolutions.

Mr. Žbogar (Slovenia): I want to thank the Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing. I also want to thank Mr. Lockyear for his very powerful testimony today. I join others in expressing to him our support and admiration and our condolences, of course, for the loss of his staff.

The Security Council meets today as a threat of incomprehensible proportions is looming over Rafah. I cannot but feel that this unimaginable catastrophe is looming also over the Security Council, which has not been able yet to rally behind a call for a ceasefire and for silencing the skies over Gaza and Israel. What future awaits us, the international community, if we continue to be indifferent to the tears of the 17,000 unaccompanied minors who have witnessed unimaginable horrors of death and destruction? What kind of Council have we become if we remain untouched by the heartbreaking briefing that we heard today from the Secretary General of Médecins sans frontières? What is the future of the international community if the most fundamental principles of the international system and international humanitarian law, which were decades in the making, are crumbling before our eyes?

I want to reiterate our deep concern about the grave violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law that we have continued to witness in Gaza. They range from indiscriminate bombings, forced displacement and the targeting of protected buildings and personnel, including hospitals and medical and humanitarian staff, to preventing the delivery of much-needed humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza, including water, food, fuel and medical supplies. We consider that taking civilian hostages, preventing the International Committee of the Red Cross from getting in touch with them and blocking the delivery of medicines they urgently need are equally grave violations. I would also

like to take this opportunity to reiterate once again our distress about the working conditions, safety and security of medical and humanitarian personnel and United Nations staff in Gaza. The stories of sieges of hospitals and attacks on convoys, ambulance crews and shelters are horrifying. We applaud the courage of humanitarian, medical and United Nations workers and organizations and their dedication to saving lives.

Slovenia has assumed its share of the responsibility to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Just today the Government of Slovenia made an additional contribution to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, and it is committed to providing further support in the future. Tomorrow, in cooperation with Jordan, Slovenia will provide a substantial amount of in-kind assistance for Gaza. Meanwhile, the violations of international humanitarian laws continue unchallenged, and they are weakening the power and sanctity of the rules of war, whose seventy-fifth anniversary we will mark later this year. What consequences will those violations have for the safety of humanitarian and medical personnel in other and future conflicts?

Nearly four weeks have passed since the International Court of Justice issued its order on provisional measures. It is alarming that we have seen no change in the way military operations are carried out. On the contrary, there is an ongoing threat of an imminent Israeli ground invasion of Rafah, where massive civilian casualties are imminent. We urge the Israeli Government to refrain from carrying out those plans. We condemn and strongly reject the statements and plans proposing the mass displacement of Palestinians from Gaza. To be clear, any displacement of the Palestinian population from Gaza could constitute another grave breach of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

As we did two days ago (see S/PV.9552), and as we have done on every related occasion in the Council, I want to put on record our clear condemnation of the horrific Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 and our call for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. We remain hopeful about the negotiation process led by Egypt, Qatar and the United States, and we thank them for their role. We expect both parties to engage in negotiations in a meaningful way and to conclude them now.

We have been discussing regional spillover since the start of this conflict. The messages of many countries and citizens have become clearer and sharper in recent weeks, and we fear that the conflict is spiralling out of control. We are observing gradually deteriorating conditions in the West Bank, along the Blue Line and in the Red Sea, but also in Syria and the wider region. Every conflict situation in the Middle East has its own root causes and its own spoilers, but no one can deny that a ceasefire in Gaza would have a calming effect on the rest of the region. It is political solutions alone that can bring peace and security to the whole region, and it is the Council's responsibility to pave the way for them. The pathway to peace and to a two-State solution can only be built on an inclusive political process with a vision for the future. Slovenia will continue to call for an international peace conference to address the possibility of a two-State solution in a comprehensive manner.

Mr. Kanu (Sierra Leone): I thank Mr. Tor Wennesland, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, and Mr. Chris Lockyear, Secretary General of Médecins sans frontières, for their timely and comprehensive but sobering briefings.

The situation in the Middle East, with specific reference to the Palestinian question, has been marked by a cycle of insecurity and instability, owing to the unresolved ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territory. That fragility was recently exacerbated by Hamas's attack of 7 October 2023 on Israeli civilians, which we strongly condemn. Regrettably, the war in the Gaza Strip that ensued continues to rage, causing grievous harm to civilians. The war in Gaza has also threatened stability in the Middle East generally. The severity of the situation at this stage is an indication that our foremost priority as a Council should be focusing on ending the war in Gaza and ensuring the release of all hostages held by Hamas and other armed groups.

Sierra Leone remains deeply concerned about the fact that resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023) have not been fully implemented. We remain deeply worried about the consistent failure of the parties to the conflict to comply with international law, particularly international humanitarian law. We are gravely concerned about the failure to protect civilians, civilian objects and humanitarian workers. The reported figures of casualties among civilians and humanitarian workers across the Gaza Strip since the 7 October attack are deeply disturbing. It is distressing to note that more

than 29,000 fatalities have been recorded, with the greater percentage of them women and children. Besides that, according to UNICEF, another 1 million children are in need of mental health and psychosocial support and 17,000 are unaccompanied or separated from their parents.

Our concern about the destruction of civilian infrastructure extends to acts of perfidy and military operations being carried out in health-care facilities, including the Nasser Hospital complex in Khan Yunis. Such actions pose threats to patients and medical personnel, whom there is an obligation to protect under international humanitarian law. We recognize the bravery and commitment displayed by United Nations personnel and a host of other humanitarian and medical workers, who endeavour daily to provide life-saving aid to civilians in need amid the ongoing hostilities in Gaza. We want to express our deepest condolences to the relatives and friends of all whose lives have been lost since the start of the conflict.

The Council, however, can offer more than condolences and deep concerns. It is mandated to do more. And in view of the collective security scheme and the responsibility that accompanies it, it behoves the Council to do more. As we said two days ago (see S/PV.9552), we are deeply worried about the fact that now, more than 130 days into the conflict in Gaza, the Security Council has been unable to adopt another draft resolution, even with 13 affirmative votes. Draft resolution S/2024/173 would have called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, rejected the forced displacement of the Palestinians and reiterated the call for full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access into Gaza and the optimal political settlement of a two-State solution. But it could not be adopted.

The situation in the wider Middle East is becoming increasingly volatile as a result of the grave situation currently unfolding in the Gaza Strip. The fallout from the Gaza conflict is being felt throughout the Middle East and the beyond. The reported incidents of air raids and firing of rockets in southern Lebanon and northern Israel, respectively, are deeply concerning. The continuing maritime attacks in the Red Sea by Houthis in Yemen must stop. Responses to the Houthis's attacks must comply with international law, and the relevant resolutions of the Security Council must be respected. Given this situation, Sierra Leone would like to put

forward the following observations and immediate action points.

First, the ongoing bombardment and imminent intense military operations in the Gaza Strip, with the spotlight on the impending attack on the city of Rafah, will further worsen the current humanitarian situation being endured by civilians, who cannot access basic essentials such as water, food, electricity and medical supplies. We therefore emphasize the need for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. The Security Council is primarily responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security, which is why we expect the Council to adopt a draft resolution that unambiguously calls for a humanitarian ceasefire.

Secondly, we acknowledge the ongoing diplomatic negotiations being mediated by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, and we sincerely look forward to a positive outcome. The ongoing diplomatic negotiations, done in good faith, can complement, or be complemented, by a Security Council resolution that demands a full and unconditional humanitarian ceasefire and the release of all the hostages unconditionally.

Thirdly, we call on the parties to the conflict to respect and comply with the 26 January order of the International Court of Justice to, *inter alia*, enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Fourthly, we urge Israeli settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank and other actors in the wider region to refrain from any unilateral or provocative actions or activities with the potential to inflame further tensions.

In conclusion, Sierra Leone regrets the serious allegations, based on information provided by Israel, implicating 12 staff members of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in the 7 October 2023 attacks in Israel. We welcome the swift action by the United Nations and the immediate activation of the investigation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services. We urge for a comprehensive and speedy conduct of the investigations and urge all the relevant parties to cooperate and comply with the investigators.

Sierra Leone acknowledges the pivotal role played by UNRWA in providing humanitarian assistance to the 1.9 million internally displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and to Palestinians in the West Bank, Syria,

Jordan and Lebanon. We therefore reiterate our call for the continuation of vital funding to facilitate the Agency's indispensable operations.

Mr. Sangjin Kim (Republic of Korea): I thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland for his detailed briefing, and Mr. Christopher Lockyear, Secretary General of Médecins sans frontières, for his vivid testimony, which I believe touched Member States in this Chamber.

The current catastrophe in Gaza started in the fall of last year, and we are now heading towards spring. For a period of more than four months, civilians in Gaza have suffered excessively, experiencing the worst winter without adequate shelter, food and clothes. The number of fatalities in Gaza, 70 per cent of whom are women and children, is outrageous. This tragic situation must come to an end.

Over the past two weeks, the world has been gravely concerned about possible ground operations in Rafah, into which more than half of the Gazan population is densely packed, seeking safety and security for themselves and their children. Extensive military operations in Rafah would lead to another great calamity. That must not happen. And any forcible transfer of Palestinians outside Palestine, including the Gaza Strip, is simply unacceptable.

Ramadan, the holy month for Muslims, is fast approaching. Yet the situation in Gaza has seen little improvement. Indeed, more than 70 per cent of civilian infrastructure in Gaza, such as homes, schools and hospitals, are now completely destroyed or badly damaged. More than 1 million children are in need of mental health support, and 17,000 children are reported to have been orphaned. And 2.2 million people — almost everyone in Gaza — are at imminent risk of famine. All those figures are hard to believe, but tragically, these difficult facts demonstrate the ongoing reality for Gaza and its people.

Yet we must not forget that Israeli citizens are also suffering. More than 100 hostages are still being held in Gaza, and their family members are desperately waiting for any news of their loved ones. Hamas and other militant groups are still firing rockets from Gaza into Israel.

At the same time, regional tensions are expanding, bringing the imminent danger of a greater conflagration. The Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon is facing the constant risk of a further intensification of the current

armed conflict, and the attacks against vessels on the Red Sea by the Houthis are ongoing. All across the Middle East, including in Iraq and Syria, instability and tensions are at an alarming level. All actors in the region should pursue de-escalation, considering the combustible moment we are collectively facing.

With a view to stopping the atrocities in Gaza and Israel and easing the perilous tension in the region, we once again call for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. The terrorist attacks by Hamas on 7 October must be resolutely condemned. But Israel's right and duty to protect itself and its citizens must be carried out in full compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law.

The Republic of Korea supports every effort to achieve a cessation of hostilities. We therefore voted in favour earlier this week of draft resolution S/2024/173, calling for a humanitarian ceasefire (see S/PV.9552). Korea also appreciates the efforts being undertaken to that end by key stakeholders in the region, including Egypt, Qatar and the United States.

Korea hopes that the hostilities will soon end. However, we are also deeply worried that, even after the current situation ends, agony and sorrow will be deeply rooted in both Palestine and Israel, carrying a high risk of conflict relapse. As such, it is high time for the international community, notably the Security Council, to realize the two-State solution, which is the only viable way towards a brighter future underpinned by peace, security, prosperity and dignity for all.

Mr. Kumanga (Mozambique): Mozambique thanks the Guyana presidency for convening this meeting on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. We extend our deep appreciation to the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Tor Wennesland, for his briefing and for the important work that he and his team have been doing at this difficult hour. We are grateful to Mr. Christopher Lockyear, Secretary General of Médecins sans frontières, for his insightful update to the Security Council.

The ongoing crisis in Gaza continues to be a matter of great concern to the international community as a whole. The situation is dire, with humanitarian needs growing rapidly. The escalation of hostilities has killed many people and has had devastating consequences for critical civilian infrastructure and for the aggravation of the humanitarian crisis, which affects women and children in particular. Facilitating secure and

unimpeded humanitarian access across Gaza will be crucial to saving millions of lives, as the people there now depend exclusively on humanitarian assistance.

The efforts to address the crisis in the Gaza Strip have not been successful so far, but the full implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions would constitute a step in the right direction. In that context, Mozambique urges for the following measures.

First, we need an immediate and urgent humanitarian ceasefire. A cessation of hostilities followed by a permanent ceasefire is important to ensuring the unrestricted delivery of humanitarian aid to the people in need in Gaza.

Secondly, we must ensure strict observance of and full respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law, with the aim of saving innocent civilian populations.

Thirdly and finally, we renew our call for the urgent implementation of a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side as good neighbours, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

Mr. Gaouaoui (Algeria) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Wennesland and Mr. Lockyear for their comprehensive briefings. I also want to express our condolences for the humanitarian personnel of Médecins sans frontières who have died while carrying out their noble tasks.

As we gather today, the aggression against the Palestinian people has been ongoing for almost 140 days, and the situation remains unchanged. Scenes of destruction and devastation prevail throughout the besieged Gaza Strip. Acts of aggression by settlers and occupation forces are increasing in the West Bank and Al-Quds Al-Sharif. The world, including the Security Council, remains unable to stop a barbaric killing machine that has grown accustomed to acting with impunity.

Anyone who believes that it is possible to use weapons and bombs to crush the desire to be free and liberated is wrong, as is anyone who believes that building settlements in the West Bank and in Al-Quds Al-Sharif, establishing settlers in them and encroaching on Palestinians' land will break the spirit of the Palestinian people or dash their hopes of establishing their State. As the President of Algeria has said,

“The will to live and to be free cannot be quashed by the atrocities of bombardment, the horrors of destruction, the plots of forced displacement and the scenarios of ethnic cleansing that the Zionist occupation persists in using against our brothers in occupied Palestine. That will cannot be quashed by the crimes of genocide and war crimes that continue to be committed in the Gaza Strip. History will remember the people who are behind all of that as war criminals and enemies of life and humankind”.

The situation in Gaza is on the brink of collapse. The decision of the World Food Programme to suspend its operations in the northern Gaza Strip is another indication of the inevitable fate awaiting the approximately 300,000 people who simply have nothing to eat. We call once again for an immediate and durable ceasefire in order to put an end to that humanitarian tragedy. That has now become an urgent necessity as the situation has continued to deteriorate. We reiterate our support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and all the other United Nations agencies and humanitarian workers being targeted by smear campaigns, which are desperate attempts to destroy Palestinian resilience on Palestinian land. We reject the completely unacceptable threats to attack Rafah and prevent the delivery of humanitarian aid, as well as the use of flimsy pretexts designed to strip Palestinians of their dignity and push them to leave their land. Once again, we completely reject any plot to forcibly displace Palestinians.

We also warn of the potential grave repercussions of measures to limit and restrict Palestinians' access to Al-Aqsa Mosque during the holy month of Ramadan, which risk inflaming the situation even further so that it spirals out of control. We affirm the need to respect the legal and historical status of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the custodianship of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan over the Muslim and Christian holy sites. The Al-Aqsa Mosque, with its area of 144 dunums, is a place of worship exclusively for Muslims. We reiterate our rejection of any attempts to divide it temporally or spatially. There can be no solution to the Palestinian question other than by establishing a Palestinian State and allowing the Palestinian people to obtain all their legitimate and inalienable rights.

In conclusion, I would like to quote from a letter by President Tebboune of Algeria on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

“I would like to emphasize that Algeria, which paid a high price to recover its sovereignty and independence, and whose land witnessed the proclamation of the Palestinian State 35 years ago, will remain faithful to its commitment to supporting the causes of liberation and will spare no effort to support the resistance of the Palestinian people until all of their rights have been fully restored.”

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Guyana.

I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his very sobering briefing, in which he presented the grim realities on the ground. I thank Mr. Lockyear for his frankness, even in the face of possible reprisals. We also offer our condolences following the loss of his colleagues' lives and salute the bravery of those who continue to work to bring services to Gaza in these very trying times.

Guyana is deeply disturbed that the Council has been unable to unite to secure relief for the Palestinian people from a war that is relentless in scope and scale and that has driven the population of Gaza to unprecedented levels of desperation and loss. The blatant disregard for international law, including for obligations based on international instruments to which the occupying Power is party, is wholly unacceptable. Equally unacceptable is the manner in which words have been toyed with in the Council to deny the Palestinians what they so desperately need at this time — a ceasefire. All of that comes amid growing international outrage about the Council's paralysis, which is preventing it from delivering fully on its mandate.

Palestinians in Gaza have been pushed from the north to the very south of the Strip, forcibly displaced many times over, killed and injured in the process, with no means of escape. They have now been cornered in Rafah, faced with the impossible choice between a forced transfer outside of Gaza or becoming the targets of the instruments of war. The Council must stand up now for Gaza.

We know the conditions in Gaza. We heard more about them this morning. We know that the population is starving and suffering in the cold. We know how women and children are disproportionately affected by this senseless war. We know that the health-care system has broken down, with essential medical supplies not allowed in at scale and hospitals the targets of military operations. Humanitarian supplies into Gaza are subject to slow and stringent verification processes, with only

a trickle of aid entering the Strip. Desperation among the population is therefore high. As we think about Gaza, we are deeply concerned whenever we consider the psychological trauma, on top of everything else, that people are experiencing. We think of the children. Every time we meet here to discuss Gaza, we hear of misery, on top of misery, on top of misery. What else needs to happen before we are compelled to end this misery for the people in Gaza?

Guyana also acknowledges, with sadness, the many United Nations and other humanitarian personnel whose lives have been lost in the war. We also recognize those who continue to give selfless service under these extremely difficult conditions and stress that their safety and security should be equally concerning to us as a Council.

The funding cuts to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) are also having a detrimental impact, given the critical work of the Agency both in Gaza and in the West Bank. For us, those cuts are tantamount to collective punishment for the Palestinian people. Guyana appeals for the restoration of funding for UNRWA and for other donors to scale up funding to the Agency. We recently made our own contribution.

The events in Gaza are having a tremendous impact on an already volatile region, creating legitimate concerns about a regional conflagration. Guyana calls on all parties to exercise restraint and to refrain from actions that will only further exacerbate the situation in the region.

The Security Council's actions must match the level of urgency. People are depending on us to stay alive. We must send a strong and unequivocal message that the Council does not support the violations of international law that are taking place in Gaza.

Guyana urges the Council to safeguard the rights and dignity of the Palestinian people; in particular, their right to a State of their own and to live in peace and security, away from the shadows of war.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 12.15 p.m.