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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL VTC OPEN DEBATE ON THE MIDDLE
EAST INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION
16 MAY 2021

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Members of the Security Council,

The past week has seen a deadly escalation between Israeli military forces and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza that is the most serious we have seen in years. We have also witnessed dramatic scenes of violence across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Tensions have been ongoing for weeks. In the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem there have been protests and clashes over the threat of Palestinian evictions commenced by settler organizations. In the Old City, including in the Holy Esplanade, there have been violent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli civilians and police. Police deployed a heavy presence in the area in the context of a large number of visitors for Ramadan prayers, protests and Israeli extremist demonstrations, leading to clashes.

With some 181 Palestinians and nine Israelis killed as a result of Israeli airstrikes and Palestinian militant rockets, based on preliminary figures, the toll of this deadly confrontation is already too high.

I extend my sincere condolences to the families of all those who have lost loved ones in the violence.

Mr. President,

Since 10 May, according to Israeli official sources, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other militants have launched over 2900 indiscriminate rockets from the Gaza Strip towards Israel. According to Israel's Office of the Prime Minister, nine Israelis, including five women and two children, and one Indian national were

killed, and over 250 injured, 23 severely wounded. Civilians across the south and the center of the country have been repeatedly sent to shelters. An anti-tank missile fired at a vehicle near the Gaza perimeter fence, killed an Israeli soldier and injured two others.

Rockets have reached as far as the outskirts of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and its suburbs and Ben Gurion airport. While a significant number of rockets were intercepted by Iron Dome, some 450 fell short inside Gaza, accounting for some Palestinian casualties according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Direct hits have been reported in multiple locations, causing damage to residential and commercial property, as well as schools and a crude oil pipeline.

In Gaza, the humanitarian and security situation is more dire by the day. In response to the Palestinian militant rocket attacks that began on 10 May, the IDF has conducted over 950 strikes against what it said were militant targets, including weapons factories and depots, tunnel networks, Hamas training facilities, intelligence and security headquarters and offices and homes of senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives. These strikes have killed over 100 operatives, including senior commanders, according to the IDF. Nevertheless, the civilian death toll, including children, continues to mount.

As of this afternoon local time, Health Authorities in Gaza report 181 Palestinians, including at least 52 children, 31 women and a person with disabilities, were killed and 1,200 injured in these strikes. The population must repeatedly try to find cover from the strikes absent proper shelters and over 34,000 people have been displaced from their homes. Over 40 UNRWA schools are now open in Gaza as shelters with limited access to water and no access to health care or food and serve for protection purposes only. The dense and closed context of Gaza makes seeking shelter all the more difficult. As a result of the military operations, seven factories, 40 schools and at least four hospitals sustained complete or partial damage. At least 18 buildings, including four high-rise towers, including one hosting international media outlets, have been destroyed and over 350 buildings damaged. According to the IDF, these buildings contained Hamas military installations.

Mr. President,

Reports continue of families – women, children and infants – killed in their homes by the airstrikes. Early this morning, several houses were struck, while residents

[As delivered]

were inside, killing 12 people and injuring over 50 others. I note also the deaths yesterday of nine family members – two women and seven children – in the al-Shati camp, among so many others.

In Israel, a five-year old boy was killed by a rocket in Sderot and a sixteen-year old girl and her father were killed in Lod.

Such tragedies are unacceptable and cannot be justified nor measured.

Mr. President,

This escalation has already produced tragic results. A further intensification of hostilities would have devastating consequences for both Palestinians and Israelis.

The United Nations is working tirelessly with all sides to restore calm.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's urgent call on Israel and Palestinian armed groups to take immediate and decisive steps to de-escalate the situation and prevent any further loss of life.

Israelis and Palestinians have a legitimate right to safety and security. The violence we are witnessing now is unacceptable and unjustifiable.

Hamas and other militants' indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars from highly populated civilian neighborhoods into civilian population centers in Israel violates international humanitarian law and must cease immediately. Civilian areas must never be used for military purposes.

Israeli authorities must abide by international humanitarian law principles governing armed conflict, including the proportional use of force, exercising maximum restraint to spare civilians and civilian objects in the conduct of military operations.

I reiterate that children should not be the target of violence or put in harm's way.

Mr. President,

Turning briefly to ongoing regional dynamics, on 13 May, the IDF informed that three rockets were fired from Lebanon into the sea off the coast of northern Israel. Lebanese Armed Forces confirmed the firing and reported finding materiel close to a Palestine refugee camp in Rashidiyeh. On 14 May, up to 100 individuals protested north of the Blue Line, some waving Palestinian and Hizbullah flags. UNIFIL observed several protesters cross the Blue Line close to the town of Metula. IDF

personnel fired multiple warning shots, reportedly injuring two. According to Lebanese authorities, a Lebanese citizen later died. The Lebanese Armed Forces arrested several protestors following the incident.

In addition, three rockets were launched from Syria. There were no reports of damage or injuries.

Mass protests in solidarity with Palestinians also occurred at Israeli borders with Jordan, where thousands of Jordanians marched towards the bridge connecting Jordan to the occupied West Bank but were reportedly stopped short by the Jordanian security forces.

Mr. President,

Violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, continues to increase. Since 10 May, 19 Palestinians were killed, including two children, and some 1844 Palestinians were injured in the West Bank by Israeli Security Forces in either clashes or other incidents, with 444 injured by live ammunition. At least eight Israelis were injured in these incidents, according to Israeli Government sources.

On 10 May, amid heavy presence of Israeli security forces ahead of planned Jerusalem day marches thousands of Palestinians clashed with police in and around the Holy Esplanade and other parts of the Old City. ISF reportedly shot and injured over 650 Palestinians with rubber-coated metal bullets and other crowd-control means. 32 ISF personnel were injured in the clashes. Although, Israeli authorities took steps to reroute the Jerusalem day marches, leading to their cancelation, tensions continued, particularly within the Holy Esplanade.

In Sheikh Jarrah, ISF dispersed demonstrators using skunk water, sponge-tipped bullets and stun grenades. One Palestinian was killed and another shot and injured in separate incidents after they attempted to attack Israeli soldiers.

On 14 May, violence escalated as Palestinians held a “Day of Rage” in support of Gaza, with clashes between Palestinians and ISF in Qalqilyia, Ramallah, Nablus, Bethlehem, Hebron and dozens of other locations. Ten Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces, in addition to one Palestinian killed near Ofra settlement in an alleged stabbing attack against ISF. This is the highest number of Palestinian fatalities recorded in a single day in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since the UN began recording fatalities in 2008.

Mr. President,

Turning again to Gaza, the damage to infrastructure in the Strip has been substantial and a humanitarian emergency is unfolding.

The Gaza Power Plant is operating at reduced capacity due to Israel's closure of the Kerem Shalom crossing. Reports from Gaza suggest rolling daily power cuts of 5-6 hours in some areas. With current stocks, it could operate at reduced capacity for another four days only. The lack of electricity has resulted in a decrease of clean water and sewage treatment affecting hundreds of thousands. The health system, already overwhelmed by chronic drug shortages, inadequate equipment and the COVID-19 pandemic will likely be unable to meet the needs of those injured during the violence, particularly as hospitals face equipment and electricity shortages.

Since 10 May, Israeli authorities have kept Gaza crossings for people and goods closed. This includes humanitarian personnel and critical aid, such as fuel and medical supplies. The fishing zone off the coast of Gaza also remains closed. The Rafah crossing was closed on 12 May and reopened this morning.

It is vital that, mindful of its security concerns, Israel open the crossings for movement of critical staff in and out of Gaza and for the entry of fuel for the GPP. The UN must also be able to bring in key items needed for trauma care and to adequately supply shelters given the huge influx of IDPs. This requires a pause in fighting to allow limited movement for a restock of supplies and to assess damages and needs including to electricity infrastructure.

I remind all sides that the UN and its partners have nearly completed a massive, multi-billion-dollar reconstruction effort following the 2014 conflict. Given the range of current global challenges, an outpouring of international support on the same scale is highly unlikely. All sides should be mindful of this as the fighting and destruction continues.

Mr. President,

We cannot allow the situation to slide further into chaos.

The hostilities must stop.

I reiterate the appeal just given by the Secretary-General for an immediate cessation of hostilities and for his dire warning that this conflict will increase radicalization and extremism in the whole region.

[As delivered]

The international community has a crucial role to play. It must take action now to enable the parties to step back from the brink.

I welcome the statements from members of the Security Council, the Arab League and others aimed at finding a diplomatic solution to the immediate crisis. I also appreciate the efforts of leaders across the international community over the past days urging all parties to exercise restraint, deescalate tensions and prevent further civilian casualties.

Mr. President,

We are once again witnessing the tragic results of the failure to address the core issues that have driven the conflict for decades.

Palestinian and Israeli civilians continue to endure the suffering that accompanies repeated cycles of violence and conflict.

These cycles of violence will only stop with a political resolution of the conflict, including addressing the status of Jerusalem and other final status issues, with an end to the occupation, and the realization of a two-State solution on the basis of the 1967 lines, UN resolutions, international law and mutual agreements, with Jerusalem as capital of both Israel and Palestine.

I reiterate my call to the members of the Middle East Quartet, key Arab and international partners, as well as to Israeli and Palestinian leadership, to strengthen efforts to return to meaningful negotiations towards a viable two-State solution.

I thank you Mr. President.