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SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNSCR
2334 (2016)
22 March 2023

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

Before turning to the Secretary-General’s report, I would like to note the beginning of the holiday period when the holy month of Ramadan coincides with Passover and Easter. I extend my good wishes to those who are observing these upcoming holy days. At the onset, I remind all that the status quo at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem must be respected. This should be a period for safe and peaceful religious reflections and celebrations for all. I urge all sides to refrain from unilateral steps that escalate tensions. I call on all leaders to engage to this end and refrain from provocative actions and messages at this sensitive time. I ask for calm.

Turning now to the Secretary-General’s 25th report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), covering the period from 8 December 2022 to 13 March 2023.

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to “immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and to “fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard.” Settlement activities have, nevertheless, continued during the reporting period.

On 27 December, Israeli settlers took control of a parcel of agricultural land leased by a Palestinian family from the Greek Orthodox Church since 1931 in the Silwan area of occupied East Jerusalem. The settlers maintain that they have purchased the land from the Church, a deal that the Church rejected as fraudulent.

On 2 January, the Israeli Government informed the High Court of Justice that it intends to legalize – under Israeli law – the outpost of Homesh, built on private Palestinian-owned land, including by repealing part of the 2005 Disengagement Law; relevant legislation is currently being advanced in the Knesset. On the same day, the Court gave the Government 90 days to explain why the outpost should not be evacuated.

On 12 February, the Israeli Government announced that it authorized nine outposts in the occupied West Bank and that the Higher Planning Committee (HPC) would convene within days to advance settlement housing units. The Committee subsequently advanced plans for over 7,200 settlement housing units, with approximately 4,000 located deep in the occupied West Bank. Nearly 1,000 of these are in outposts that are in the process of legalization under Israeli law.

Following multiple postponements, a meeting of the HPC Subcommittee for Objections on sensitive E1 settlement plans has been rescheduled for 12 June.

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Israeli authorities, citing the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, demolished, seized or forced people to demolish 331 structures. These actions displaced 388 people, including 89 women and 197 children. 61 structures were donor-funded.

On 7 February, Israel's High Court of Justice gave the Government until 2 April to submit its response to a petition to implement demolition orders on Khan al-Ahmar. The deadline was subsequently extended to 23 April. A hearing is set for 1 May.

On 7 February, Israeli authorities postponed demolition of a multi-story building housing 74 Palestinians in Silwan in occupied East Jerusalem.

Mister President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for “immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including all acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction.” Unfortunately, daily violence increased significantly during the reporting period.

Eighty-two Palestinians, including one woman and 17 children, were killed by Israeli security forces during demonstrations, clashes, security operations, attacks against Israelis, and other incidents. 2,683 Palestinians, including 123 women and 320 children, were injured. Of that number, 308 were injured by live ammunition, while 2110 were injured from tear gas inhalation. In addition, four Palestinians were killed and 89 injured, including 14 women and 12 children, in a growing number of attacks by Israeli settlers that also caused damage to Palestinian-owned property.

13 Israeli civilians, including one woman and three children, and one foreign national were killed, and 49 Israelis, including two women and seven children, and six Israeli security forces personnel, were injured by Palestinians in shooting and ramming attacks, clashes, and other incidents. The majority of them were stone-throwing attacks against Israelis, including settlers, that resulted in injuries or damage to Israeli-owned property. One Israeli security forces personnel was shot and killed by a fellow soldier in the context of a stabbing attack by a Palestinian.

Israeli security forces carried out 1,084 search-and-arrest operations in the West Bank, resulting in 1,906 Palestinians arrested, including 133 children. Israel currently holds 967 Palestinians in administrative detention, the highest number in over a decade.

Mister President,

The high number of fatal incidents during the reporting period precludes us from detailing all but allow me to highlight a few.

In four Israeli search and arrest operations in Palestinian cities in Area A – on 26 January in Jenin, 6 February in Jericho, 22 February in Nablus, and 7 March in Jenin – 33 Palestinians, including a woman, an elderly man and four children, were killed by Israeli security forces amid armed exchanges. Of those killed, Palestinian militant groups have claimed 21 as members. The death toll in Nablus, with 11 Palestinians killed, was the highest recorded by the UN in a single West Bank incident since 2005.

The reporting period has also been marked by a spate of violence against civilians, including acts of terror.

In occupied East Jerusalem, six Israelis, including a child, and one foreign national were killed in a Palestinian shooting attack outside a synagogue on 27 January, the highest death toll in an attack against Israelis since 2005; and three Israelis, including two children, were killed in a ramming attack on 10 February in occupied East Jerusalem. Shooting attacks by Palestinians killed three Israelis, including one dual national, in other parts of the West Bank on 26 and 27 February, and seriously injured three others in Tel Aviv on 9 March, one of whom later succumbed to his wounds.

In separate incidents, two Palestinians were shot and killed by Israeli settlers in the course of carrying out stabbing attacks – on 11 and 21 January. On 11 February, a third Palestinian was shot by an Israeli settler at close range in a confrontation on the edge of a Palestinian village near Salfit. Following the 26 February killing by a Palestinian of two Israelis from the Har Bracha settlement in Huwwara, hundreds of settlers descended on the West Bank town and neighboring villages, carrying out, with ISF present, arson and other attacks. Amid the violence, one Palestinian man was shot and killed; 387 others, including 137 women and 89 children, were injured, of which one was injured with live ammunition and 377 with tear gas, and extensive damage to Palestinian private property was reported.

In the aftermath of fatal incidents in the West Bank, Palestinian armed groups launched seven rockets from Gaza towards Israel, of which one fell short within the Strip, one landed in an open space inside Israel, and five were intercepted by the Israeli air defence system. In retaliation, the Israel Defense Forces conducted two airstrikes against what it said were militant targets in Gaza, with no reported injuries.

Mister President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for the parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric. Unfortunately, such acts continued and intensified.

Some Fatah officials and social media pages, as well as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, praised and glorified perpetrators of attacks against Israelis and called for additional attacks. One senior Fatah official called Israel a “fascist enemy that loves to murder and spill blood.”

An Israeli minister conducted an inflammatory visit to Jerusalem’s Holy Sites. Several Members of Knesset praised the attacks by settlers against Palestinians and their property in Huwwara and an Israeli minister said Huwwara should be “wiped out” by Israeli authorities. Another Member of Knesset called Israeli-Arab colleagues “supporters of terrorism” and vowed to ban them from the Knesset; while another said they were inhuman and likened them to livestock.

Mister President,

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated calls by the Middle East Quartet for “affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-State solution.” Notwithstanding some positive steps, negative trends on the ground continued.

On 6 January, the Israeli Government approved a series of measures against the Palestinian Authority, including the transfer of Palestinian Authority tax revenues withheld by Israel of some USD 39 million to families of Israelis killed in Palestinian attacks. This measure was in response to the 30 December adoption of a UN General Assembly resolution requesting an advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) relating to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. On 16 January, 39 Member States signed a joint statement, reconfirming support for the ICJ and noting deep concern regarding the Israeli Government's punitive measures.

The Israeli Government announced on 29 January and 12 February that, following acts of terrorism by Palestinians against Israelis, it would take steps in response including reinforcing security forces and broadening operations, strengthening and expanding Israeli settlements, and taking punitive measures against the perpetrators and their families.

Following a 1 February announcement by the Israeli Minister of National Security of new restrictions on Palestinian security prisoners, prisoners launched a mass civil disobedience campaign and announced their intention to begin a hunger strike from tomorrow if restrictions are not eased.

On 2 February, Israel's Finance Minister announced that Israel would double – to approximately USD 30 million – the monthly deductions from tax revenues that is withheld based on its law mandating the withholding of what it says the Palestinian Authority (PA) pays to perpetrators of attacks against Israelis or their families. The PA's difficult financial situation has resulted in ongoing cuts to public sector salaries. Since early February, Palestinian teachers have conducted strikes demanding salary increases to compensate for the rising cost of living.

On 15 February, the Knesset approved legislation enabling the revocation of citizenship of Israeli citizens or residents imprisoned for terrorism-related offences, who have received money from the Palestinian Authority connected to these offences.

On 23 February, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office announced an agreement between Defense Minister Gallant and the additional Minister in the Defense Ministry Smotrich on the division of responsibilities between them that reportedly grants Finance Minister Smotrich expanded authority over settlement-related activities and civil affairs in the occupied West Bank.

In Gaza, the United Nations continued to deliver vital humanitarian and development assistance to Palestinians in Gaza and remains engaged with all parties to reduce access restrictions to support the Gaza economy and basic service delivery.

The period witnessed a higher flow of people and goods through Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings, with Israeli issued worker and business permits standing today at over 20,500, the highest number in years. As of 9 March, Israeli Authorities enabled 44 previously restricted commodities to enter Gaza without special coordination.

Mister President,

In its resolution 2334 (2016), the Security Council also called upon all States “to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967.” No such steps were taken during the reporting period.

Resolution 2334 (2016) also called upon “all parties to continue, *inter alia*, to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations.”

On 12 February, the League of Arab States convened the “Jerusalem: Resilience and Development” Conference in Cairo. In the final communiqué, participants called for the establishment of a committee of legal experts tasked with helping give “justice to the Palestinian people” and financing a mechanism to support small and medium-sized enterprises.

On 26 February, senior Jordanian, Egyptian, Israeli, Palestinian and U.S. officials met in Aqaba, Jordan. In a Joint Communiqué, Israeli and Palestinian participants reaffirmed “their commitment to all previous agreements between them, and to work towards a just and lasting peace.” The parties committed to steps to deescalate the situation on the ground, pause unilateral measures and prevent further violence, including through upholding the status quo at the Holy Sites.

On 20 February, the Security Council adopted a Presidential Statement reaffirming, *inter alia*, its commitment to the two-State solution, opposition to unilateral actions, including settlement expansion, and condemnation of violence against civilians, including acts of terrorism.

On 4 and 8 March, respectively, five EU countries plus the United Kingdom and all 27 EU Member States issued statements condemning the increasing violence on the ground and calling for de-escalation.

Mister President,

In closing, I would like to share the Secretary-General’s observations concerning the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016).

1. I remain deeply troubled by continued Israeli settlement expansion, including the recent authorization of nine illegal outposts and the advancement of over 7,000 settlement housing units and the potential settlement advancement in the E1 area that is crucial to the contiguity of a future Palestinian State. Settlements further entrench the occupation, fuel tensions, and systematically erode the viability of a Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution. Israeli settlements have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation of international law and United Nations resolutions. I call on the Government of Israel to cease all settlement activity immediately, in line with its obligations under international law.
2. The demolition and seizure of Palestinian structures, including the significant increase in occupied East Jerusalem, entail numerous human rights violations and raise concerns about the risk of forcible transfer. I call upon the Government of Israel to immediately end this practice in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.
3. I am deeply disturbed by the intensifying cycle of violence that threatens to plunge Palestinians and Israelis deeper into deadly crisis, while further eroding hope for a political solution. I condemn all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, which have led to an increase in the tragic loss of life. I reiterate that perpetrators must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice. There can be no justification for terrorism, nor the glorification

of such acts. These should be clearly condemned by all. I call on leaders on all sides to help calm the situation, avoid spreading inflammatory rhetoric and speak up against those seeking to incite and escalate the situation.

4. Israeli security forces operations in the occupied West Bank and subsequent clashes have led to a staggering number of Palestinians killed and injured. I reiterate that security forces must use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable to protect life and must promptly and thoroughly investigate all instances of death or injury resulting from its use, holding those responsible accountable.
5. I am particularly appalled that children continue to be killed and injured in large numbers. Children must never be the target of violence, used or put in harm's way.
6. I remain deeply concerned by the increase in levels of settler-related violence in the occupied West Bank sometimes in proximity of Israeli security forces. I am particularly appalled by the brutal sequence of events in Huwvara. All perpetrators must be held accountable. I urge Israel, as the occupying Power, to abide by its obligations under international law to protect the Palestinian population against all acts or threats of violence.
7. It is critical to de-escalate the situation and move towards re-establishing a political horizon. The statements from the European Member States, the PRST and the Joint Communiqué from Aqaba are welcome calls for calm. If implemented, the steps outlined in Aqaba could be an important start to reversing negative trends on the ground.
8. I am also particularly concerned about steps, incitement and provocations that could escalate tensions in and around the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. I call upon all to refrain from such actions and to uphold the status quo, in line with the special and historic role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as custodian of the holy sites in Jerusalem.
9. In Gaza, a fragile calm continues, but the risk of escalation persists. Despite improvements in access and movement, much more remains to be done to alleviate the dire humanitarian situation and improve the economy, with the ultimate goal of lifting the debilitating closures, in line with UNSCR 1860 (2009).
10. The absence of intra-Palestinian unity continues to undermine Palestinian national aspirations. I call upon all factions to take concrete steps towards reuniting Gaza and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, under a single, democratic Government. Gaza is, and must remain, an integral part of a future Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution.
11. I am concerned by the critical condition of the Palestinian economy that is impacting the PA's ability to deliver services and pay public sector salaries. The implications of Israel's announced increase in monthly deductions from Palestinian clearance revenues add to the already very difficult situation. I urge the parties to work together to find urgent and

sustainable solutions. I call on the international community to redouble efforts to strengthen the PA's fiscal and institutional health.

12. I call on the Member States to support UNRWA with sustainable funding sources to protect the delivery of vital services to millions of Palestine refugees, crucial to stability throughout the region.
13. I remain committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict and end the occupation in line with international law, relevant United Nations resolutions, and bilateral agreements in pursuit of the vision of two States – Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestine – living side-by-side in peace and security within secure and recognized borders, on the basis of the pre-1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.
14. Lastly, there is no substitute for a legitimate political process that will resolve the core issues driving the conflict. Efforts to manage the conflict are not a substitute for real progress towards resolving it. I urge Israelis, Palestinians, regional States and the broader international community to take steps to re-engage on meaningful negotiations and, ultimately, peace.

Thank you.