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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST,
REPORTING ON UNSCR 2334 (2016)**

24 June 2021

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I am devoting my regular briefing on the situation in the Middle East to the eighteenth report on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016). The written report you have already received covers the period between 23 March and 11 June 2021.

Before turning to recent developments, I wish to reiterate that the cessation of hostilities reached last month between Israel and Hamas remains very fragile. The UN is working closely with all concerned parties and partners, including Egypt, to solidify a ceasefire, allow the entry of urgent humanitarian assistance and stabilize the situation in Gaza.

I urge all sides to refrain from unilateral steps and provocations, take steps to reduce tensions, and allow these efforts to succeed. Everyone must do their part to facilitate ongoing discussions to stabilize the situation on the ground and avoid another devastating escalation in Gaza.

Mister President,

I also wish to acknowledge the new Israeli coalition Government that was sworn in on 13 June, under the leadership of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. I congratulate the members of the new Government, and I look forward to working with them to advance a two-State solution and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Mister President,

I now turn to developments since the submission of the written report. In occupied East Jerusalem, fifteen Palestinian households still face the imminent threat of eviction by the Israeli authorities from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah. The High Court has scheduled a hearing on 2 August to consider a leave to appeal request by some of the families.

Separately, the Jerusalem District Court postponed until 8 July its decision on an appeal against an eviction order related to two residential buildings, in the Batan al Hawa neighbourhood of Silwan in East Jerusalem.

Mr. President,

Violent incidents have, unfortunately, continued on a daily basis throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory since the submission of the written report.

Clashes have repeatedly broken out in Beita village near Nablus in the West Bank, in the context of protests against the construction of a new Israeli settlement outpost, Evyatar. Although a military order was issued on 9 June designating the outpost a closed zone and ordering settlers to vacate, settler and significant ISF presence persisted, and Palestinian protests continued. On 11 June, ISF shot dead a 16-year-old Palestinian; and on 17 June, another 16-year-old Palestinian succumbed to his wounds from shots sustained by ISF the previous night after he reportedly threw an explosive device towards them. Since 3 May, five Palestinians have been killed and some 100 Palestinians have been injured by live ammunition in and around this area.

On 12 June, Israeli civilian security guards shot dead a Palestinian woman at the Qalandiya checkpoint near Jerusalem, after she reportedly ran towards them holding a knife.

On 15 June, several thousand right-wing Israeli activists, including Members of Knesset, marched through Jerusalem's Old City, with many participants chanting racist slogans against Arabs and Muslims. The march, initially set for 10 May, was held amidst a heavy Israeli police presence after having been re-routed by Israeli authorities from its planned trajectory throughout the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. In protests and clashes that occurred in the context of the march, in East Jerusalem as well as other parts of the West Bank, 66 Palestinians, including 12 children, were injured by rubber-bullets, sound grenades and physical assaults.

On the same day, rallies were organized throughout the Gaza Strip by national and Islamic forces, protests erupted at the fence and militants in Gaza released incendiary balloons towards Israel, starting dozens of fires. In response to these incendiary balloons, over 16 – 17 June, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) targeted what it said were five Hamas facilities in the Strip, causing damage but no injuries.

On 16 June, a Palestinian woman was shot dead by ISF at the Hizma checkpoint near Jerusalem after reportedly attempting to carry out a ramming and stabbing attack against Israeli soldiers.

Between 19-23 June, confrontations continued between Israeli civilians and Palestinian residents in Sheikh Jarrah.

On 23 June, Palestinian activist and parliamentary candidate Nizar Banat was pronounced dead, hours after being arrested by Palestinian Security Forces (PSF)

at a house in Hebron. According to the victim's family, PSF aggressively beat and physically assaulted the victim during the arrest.

Mister President,

I will now turn to several observations concerning the implementation of Resolution 2334 during the reporting period.

I remain deeply troubled by continued Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. In particular, I am concerned by the approval of a plan to expand the Har Homa settlement in East Jerusalem. If implemented, this plan would further consolidate the continuum of illegal settlements separating East Jerusalem from Bethlehem and other Palestinian communities in the southern part of the West Bank. I am also concerned by the continued establishment of settlement outposts, illegal also under Israeli law. As we have seen, the recent establishment of Eviatar has already led to protests and clashes with tragic outcomes.

I again underscore, in no uncertain terms, that Israeli settlements constitute a flagrant violation of United Nations resolutions and international law. They are a major obstacle to the achievement of a two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace. The advancement of all settlement activity must cease immediately.

The continued demolition and seizure of Palestinian structures, including humanitarian projects and schools, is also deeply concerning. I call on Israeli authorities to end the demolition of Palestinian property and the displacement of Palestinians, and to approve plans that would enable these communities to build legally and address their development needs.

Mister President,

The reporting period witnessed an alarming increase in the level of violence between Israelis and Palestinians, including hostilities between Israel and factions in Gaza at a scale and intensity not seen in years. I am especially concerned by the attempt to exploit the sensitive status of Jerusalem and to use it to justify a broader armed conflict. These events have only deepened the divisions between Israelis and Palestinians and made progress towards peace an even greater challenge. The incitement and the violence must stop immediately.

The indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars towards Israeli civilian population centers from highly populated civilian neighborhoods by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad or others is prohibited by international humanitarian law, and Palestinian militants must cease this practice immediately. Israeli authorities must also abide by the rules of international humanitarian law

governing armed conflict and take all feasible precautions to spare civilians and civilian objects in the conduct of military activity.

I am appalled that children continue to be victims of violence. Children should be afforded special protection from violence, never be the target of violence or put in harm's way, or encouraged to commit, or participate in, acts of incitement and violence.

I am also deeply concerned by the increased intensity of settler-related violence and by violent attacks between Israeli and Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank. I urge Israel to ensure the safety and security of the Palestinian population, in line with its responsibilities under international law. Perpetrators of violence on all sides must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.

I also note with concern reports of armed civilians carrying out attacks against Palestinians in proximity of the ISF. I reiterate that security forces must exercise maximum restraint and may use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. Israeli and Palestinian authorities must carry out thorough, independent, impartial and prompt investigations into all instances of possible excessive use of force.

Mister President,

On too many occasions during the reporting period, officials exacerbated tensions and violence with unacceptable rhetoric or provocative actions that contributed to the dangerous dynamics on the ground. Violence and incitement must be clearly condemned and unequivocally rejected by all. In this context, I commend initiatives by civil society organizations and other leaders calling for peace, reconciliation and rejection of violence.

The fate of two Israeli civilians and the bodies of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas in Gaza remains an important humanitarian concern. I call upon Hamas to release full information on their status immediately, as required by international humanitarian law.

I also remain concerned at the continued Israeli practice of holding the bodies of killed Palestinians and call on Israel to return withheld bodies to their families, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.

Mister President,

Turning back to Gaza, in the context of a fragile cessation of hostilities, the United Nations is continuing to coordinate the delivery of urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza. I highlight the 95 million US dollar humanitarian flash appeal launched on 27 May and thank Member States for the pledges and

contributions made so far. All parties must also facilitate unimpeded access for humanitarian relief.

We are now moving quickly to ensure that there is a well-coordinated international response focused on the 2 million people in Gaza who have suffered for far too long.

I am particularly concerned that Kerem Shalom crossing to Gaza from Israel has been effectively closed for over five weeks, with some narrow exceptions for food, animal feed and limited humanitarian items. Kerem Shalom should be open for regular, non-sensitive trade.

In the coming days, the UN, the World Bank and the EU will soon release a Rapid Damage Needs Assessment that will estimate the longer-term reconstruction and recovery needs in Gaza.

In the first week of July, the AHLC donor group will convene an emergency meeting. They will discuss how to quickly mobilize donor support in a common effort with the Palestinian Authority.

UNRWA's 150 million US dollar programme budget shortfall remains a major concern. I welcome the resumption of funding from the United States last April and call on Member States to ensure the organization has the resources needed to conduct operations.

Mister President,

It is also critical that Egyptian-led intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts continue. The United Nations stands firm in its support of Egypt in this regard, and I call upon all Palestinian factions to make serious efforts to ensure the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under a single, legitimate, democratic, national government. Gaza is and must remain an integral part of a future Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution.

In this context, I note that the postponement of the Palestinian elections compounded frustrations and undermined hope for the Palestinian national project. I commend the tireless efforts of the Palestinian Central Elections Commission, which ensured that all the technical aspects were effectively implemented.

I am deeply concerned by today's death of former political candidate and activist Nizar Banat, who died in the context of a Palestinian Security Forces arrest operation. I call for an independent investigation into his death and for those responsible to be held accountable.

Mister President,

In closing, I would like to again highlight the significant risks we face over the coming period as we confront the prospect of a renewed escalation.

While immediate international efforts are rightly focused on solidifying the cessation of hostilities, providing humanitarian assistance and beginning the process of Gaza reconstruction, recent events have also highlighted the urgent need to re-establish a political horizon and restore hope to Palestinians and Israelis.

The UN remains committed to supporting the parties to resolve the conflict and end the occupation in line with relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements in pursuit of achieving the vision of two States – Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State – 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.

Even as we focus on the pressing challenges in Gaza, I reiterate our determination to work with Israelis and Palestinians, fellow members of the Middle East Quartet and key regional and international partners to lay the groundwork for a return to meaningful negotiations towards a viable two-State solution.

Thank you.