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

30 March 2020

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I will devote this briefing to presenting the thirteenth report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334, covering the period from 18 December 2019 to 20 March of this year.

Let me begin however by praising the far-reaching measures that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have taken to try and contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The coordination that has been put in place and the joint commitment to tackle the threat to both populations is exemplary. Their efforts have been supported by the UN. The UN Country Team, led by the Deputy Special Coordinator and the World Health Organization, is working closely with all partners and the authorities to ensure coordinated assistance to the health networks dealing with the spread of the virus in the West Bank and to support preparedness in Gaza.

I am grateful to all those who have pledged assistance to our efforts as well.

Returning to the report, let me reiterate that developments during this reporting period cannot be divorced from the broader context: Israel's continued military occupation of Palestinian territory, illegal settlement activity and the threat of annexation; Hamas' continuing hold over Gaza and its militant activity; Israeli closures on Gaza; unilateral actions that undermine peace efforts; severe challenges to the fiscal viability of the Palestinian Authority; and the persistent risk of military escalation. All of these developments collectively erode the prospects of achieving a viable two-State solution.

In today's briefing, I will focus on developments on the ground in accordance with the provisions of the resolution, including on regional and international efforts to advance peace.

Mister President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to "immediately and completely cease all settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem" and to "fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard". No steps have been taken to this effect during the reporting period.

Israeli authorities advanced or approved plans for some 3,800 housing units in West Bank settlements, including about 100 in East Jerusalem. Tenders for a total of some 3,200 housing units

were announced, including 1,077 in Givat Hamatos, an area strategically located between the East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhood of Beit Safafa and Bethlehem. About thirty per cent of the units advanced, approved or tendered are to be built in outlying locations, deep inside the occupied West Bank.

On 25 February, the Israeli government announced it would advance two plans for a total of 3,500 units in the E1 area in the West Bank. If constructed, these units would expand the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim towards Jerusalem, severing the connection between the northern and southern West Bank, thereby further undermining the possibility of a viable and contiguous Palestinian state.

On 9 March, Israel's Defense Minister advanced a plan for a so-called "sovereignty road" between the southern and northern West Bank, bypassing the Ma'ale Adumim settlement and areas around it, and stated that its construction would enable settlement construction in E1. Settlement expansion in E1 has long been considered controversial due to the area's importance for the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state

On 15 January, following a ruling by Israel's High Court of Justice, Israeli authorities demolished two houses in the outpost of Kumi Ori, in Area B of the West Bank. Structures were reportedly also demolished during the reporting period in the outposts of Ma'ale Shlomo and Ma'ale Pinhas. In all of these cases, clashes were reported between settlers and security forces.

Mister President,

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures by Israeli authorities continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Citing the absence of Israeli-issued building permits, which remain very difficult for Palestinians to obtain, the Israeli authorities demolished or seized 96 Palestinian-owned structures, including 50 in East Jerusalem, in addition to 29 structures self-demolished by their owners, resulting in the displacement of 227 people, including 53 women and 122 children.

During the reporting period, the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court ordered the eviction of several Palestinian families from their homes in the Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem, pursuant to lawsuits brought by an Israeli settler-related organization citing pre-1948 ownership of the properties. The families intend to appeal the cases. However, if upheld, the rulings could put hundreds of Palestinians living in the area at risk of forced eviction.

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, sporadic violence continued during the reporting period.

Between 18 December and 20 March in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, 9 Palestinians, including 2 children were killed and some 30 injured, while some 30 Israelis, including 4 children and 19 security personnel, were injured in various incidents.

On 5 February, during clashes in Hebron, ISF shot and killed a 17-year-old Palestinian boy, as he was allegedly throwing Molotov cocktails.

On 6 February, a Palestinian man was shot and killed during clashes in Jenin, while in a separate incident, a Palestinian Authority policeman was killed after being hit by a live bullet shot by ISF while he was inside a police station. ISF have opened an investigation into the second incident.

On the same day, a Palestinian man shot and wounded a soldier near the entrance of Jerusalem's Old City. He was killed by ISF. 12 Israeli soldiers were injured in a car ramming attack in Jerusalem, carried out by a Palestinian, who was later arrested.

On 6 January an Israeli girl and a man were reportedly injured, and at least eight vehicles owned by Israelis were damaged, following throwing of stones, and in one case a Molotov cocktail, by Palestinians on West Bank roads.

On 18 January, an Israeli man was wounded in a stabbing attack carried out by a Palestinian youth in Hebron. The perpetrator was arrested.

On 7 February, another Palestinian succumbed to his wounds after having been shot during clashes in the village of Qaffin in the northern West Bank.

On 18 February, during clashes between police and local residents, a Palestinian security forces shot and killed a 15-year old Palestinian boy in Qabatia, Jenin.

On 22 February, Israeli forces shot and killed a Palestinian man near Lions Gate at the entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem, reportedly as he attempted to stab them. On 11 March, during clashes with local residents trying to block Israelis from entering a historical site, the ISF shot and killed a 15-year old Palestinian boy in Jabal al-'Arma in Beita, Nablus.

In March, there have been a number of incursions by settlers in Palestinian towns particularly in Ramallah and Nablus Governorates.

Mister President,

In Gaza, despite several days of renewed hostilities in late February, the understandings brokered by Egypt and the United Nations continue to be largely upheld and a fragile calm currently prevails.

On 26 December, the organizers of the protests along the Gaza perimeter fence announced that they would be put on hold until 30 March, leading to a period of relative calm along the fence, despite occasional violent incidents.

On 21 January, three Palestinians, including a 17-year-old boy, crossed the fence into Israel from Gaza and were were shot by ISF after they threw explosive devices towards them.

On 31 January, a 14-year-old Palestinian boy was pronounced dead from tear gas canister wounds he sustained during demonstrations held on 11 October 2019.

Rocket fire from Gaza towards Israel, the launching of balloons carrying explosive devices, and Israeli retaliatory strikes have also continued. On 23 February, two Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) militants attempted to place an explosive device along the fence. One of them was killed by the IDF who retrieved his body using a bulldozer inside Gaza in an incident that caused outrage and a serious escalation.

In the following two days, PIJ launched over 100 rockets and mortar shells towards Israel, including one that landed in a playground. Israel responded by firing at PIJ targets in the Strip. Overall, 18 Palestinians and 16 Israelis were injured in the exchanges before UN and Egyptian-led efforts succeeded in restoring calm on 24 February.

Mister President,

Despite the call in Security Council resolution 2334 for the parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric, such statements continued.

Palestinian leaders continued to make inciteful and provocative statements. Fatah's official social media pages glorified perpetrators of previous terror attacks against Israelis, and displayed content encouraging children to carry out violence against Jews. PA officials also delivered speeches praising perpetrators of attacks, denying Israel's existence, and denying the Jewish historic connection to Jerusalem. Hamas officials encouraged attacks against Israelis in the West Bank and the launching of explosive devices using balloons from Gaza.

Israeli officials continued to make dangerous and discriminatory statements. Senior officials have repeatedly called for annexation of Israeli settlements and other parts of the occupied West Bank. An Israeli minister called for the toppling of the PA if it did not withdraw its claims against Israel at the International Criminal Court (ICC). Some Israeli politicians also made a series of discriminatory statements against Israeli Arabs.

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." Over the past months, Israel has removed restrictions and monitoring requirements on a number of materials entering Gaza, including some that previously entered through the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism. These materials included equipment needed for the construction of critical water and sanitation infrastructure as well as tires, and certain types of cement.

During January 2020, the number of people exiting Gaza via Erez Crossing was around 27,000, of whom 78 per cent were businesspersons and merchants. This is the highest number of exits recorded since 2007. In a related development, in mid-February, Israel raised the number of business permits for entry from Gaza into Israel to 7,000, the highest it has been since 2007.

Progress has also continued on the reconstruction of damage incurred during the 2014 escalation. To date, 9,000 out of 11,000 totally destroyed houses have been rebuilt, and work on another 800 houses is underway. There remains a funding gap of some USD 35 million needed to complete the

reconstruction of 1,000 destroyed homes and USD75 million for the repair of just over 56,000 partially damaged homes. Over 1,000 families remain internally displaced.

Mister President,

Despite continued progress on the implementation of critical interventions in support of the economy, and Gaza's water, energy and health sectors, the humanitarian and socio-economic situations remain dire. Gaza's health system continues to be on the brink of collapse, overstretched and burdened by chronic shortages of drugs and supplies. In January and February 2020, the percentage of medical-related exit permit requests that were delayed or denied by Israeli authorities was 30 and 31 per cent, respectively. As of February 2020, stock levels for 39 per cent of essential medicines have been completely depleted.

Gaza's failing healthcare system is particularly worrying in the context of the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the region. Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world – this coupled with its already fragile health care system makes it a particularly high-risk case for the COVID-19 outbreak. In early March, the phased introduction of measures to stem COVID-19 led UNRWA to close down schools throughout the oPt indefinitely, though essential medical and other operations continue.

We were informed today by UNRWA that in Gaza they will provide primary health services also to Palestinians who do not have a refugee status in order to assist with the efforts to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak in Gaza.

The UN is working to increase its support for Gaza's health system, including in the context of the COVID-19 response.

On the positive side, according to data compiled by OCHA in January, the increased energy supply since October 2018 has contributed to significantly reduced amounts of pollution into the sea alongside increased availability of piped and desalinated water for Gaza's population. It is imperative that sustainable solutions are found to Gaza's energy deficit.

There has been no progress during the reporting period towards intra-Palestinian reconciliation or Palestinian presidential and legislative elections, which have not taken place since 2006. Between 27 February and 17 March, the Russian Federation hosted a series of bilateral discussions with representatives of various Palestinian factions. Discussions focused on the need to advance intra-Palestinian unity and convene an inclusive dialogue to further prospects of reconciliation.

Mister President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) called on Member States "to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied in 1967."

On 12 February, the UN Human Rights Office issued its report on businesses involved in activities related to settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, as requested by the Human Rights

Council in its Resolution 31/36, adopted on 24 March 2016. As noted in paragraph 19 of the report it “does not purport to constitute a judicial or quasi-judicial process of any kind or legal characterization of the listed activities or business enterprises involvement therein”.

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

On 28 January, the United States released its “Peace to Prosperity” vision for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. As stated by the Secretary-General in his 11 February briefing to this Council, the position of the United Nations in this regard has been defined, throughout the years, by resolutions of the Security Council and General Assembly, by which the Secretariat is bound. The United Nations remains committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict on the basis of relevant UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements and realizing the vision of two States –Israel and Palestine –living side by side in peace and security within recognized borders, on the basis of the pre-1967 lines.

Mister President,

In closing, I would like to share some broad observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of resolution 2334 during the reporting period.

1. The expansion of Israeli settlements continues to pose a significant obstacle to achieving a viable two-State solution. Their establishment has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, as stated in Security Council resolution 2334 (2016). They should stop immediately and completely. Potential settlement advancement in the E1 area of the occupied West Bank, or in East Jerusalem neighborhoods that are crucial to the contiguity of a future Palestinian state, are particularly concerning. The existence and expansion of settlements further entrench the occupation and systematically erode the possibility of establishing a contiguous and viable Palestinian state, and fuel anger and resentment among the Palestinian population.
2. Unilateral steps are detrimental to peace. In recent months, Israeli officials have repeatedly stated their intention to annex Israeli settlements and other parts of the occupied West Bank. If implemented, such steps would not only constitute a serious violation of international law, but they would also effectively end the prospect of the two-State solution and close the door to negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.
3. The demolition and seizure of Palestinian structures, including internationally funded humanitarian projects must stop. This practice violates international humanitarian law and must cease. Affected populations must be duly compensated for damages.
4. There is no justification for violence against civilians, including children, and I call upon all members of the international community to join the United Nations in condemning it unequivocally and calling for all perpetrators to be held accountable.
5. The indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars towards civilian population centres is prohibited by international humanitarian law and Palestinian militants must cease this

practice immediately. Israeli security forces must exercise maximum restraint and only intentionally use lethal force when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life, in accordance with international law. All incidents must be thoroughly investigated.

6. Incitement to violence and provocative rhetoric continue to sow fear and deepen mistrust between both sides, eroding hopes for a peaceful solution. All sides must unequivocally condemn attacks when they occur. All perpetrators must be held accountable. Settler-related violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem also remains a serious concern.
7. Despite the fragile calm in Gaza, and the limited improvements the situation remains a major concern. I reiterate that the only sustainable solution to Gaza's challenges is political and requires concrete steps to ensure that Gaza and the occupied West Bank are reunited under a single legitimate Palestinian national authority, in accordance with the recommendations of the 2016 Middle East Quartet Report. It is critical to end the militant build-up of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the constant threat of rocket fire from the Strip. At the same time, while taking into consideration its legitimate security concerns, Israel must continue to implement additional measures to significantly improve the movement and access of goods and people to and from Gaza, with the goal of ultimately lifting the closures, in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).
8. The reconstruction effort in Gaza continues to make important progress and it is important that the remaining projects receive funding and are completed. The United Nations and its partners continue to support this effort as well as other projects aimed at the revival and strengthening of Gaza's industrial and agricultural sectors. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority must do much more to support Gaza's health system, particularly in relation to COVID-19 preparedness, but also in light of systemic difficulties and chronic drug shortages. I encourage the Palestinian Government and donors to work with the UN to this end.
9. Efforts to improve the situation in Gaza are vital to bolstering the ongoing conflict prevention efforts of Egypt and the United Nations.
10. It is highly regrettable that there has been no progress made towards the holding of long overdue Palestinian presidential and legislative elections. The Palestinian people must be allowed to exercise their democratic right to vote and elect their leaders and representatives. It is critical that the important Egyptian-led intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts also continue. Palestinian leaders must engage positively with Egypt, reverse the negative trajectory, take concrete steps to end division and schedule elections.
11. On 8 March, the UN Country Team celebrated International Women's Day and took the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of Palestinian women to the development of their communities. This is happening alongside tremendous efforts by UN Agencies and partners to support civil society actors and the Government to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Notwithstanding the continued challenges posed by Israel's military occupation, Palestinian women remain concerned about safety and security, livelihoods, employment opportunities,

lack of political participation, access to education, health care and other services. I will report in greater detail over the coming months on UN efforts to support more gender focused programming as well as to promote greater engagement of women.

12. The Security Council's 24 February press elements reiterating support for a negotiated two-State solution in accordance with UN resolutions and international law was an encouraging sign. Thank you for that. Now is the time to find a way to move the process forward, and to advance proposals to bring the parties back into a mutually agreed framework that allows for meaningful negotiations to commence. The United Nations remains committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict on the basis of relevant United Nations resolutions, multilateral agreements and international law, and realizing the vision of two states -- Israel and Palestine -- with Jerusalem as the shared capital -living side by side in peace and security within recognized borders, on the basis of the pre-1967 lines.

Mr. President,

As the region continues to confront the enormity of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader geopolitical tensions, the situation on the ground remains fragile. Credible negotiations have yet to be launched that will end the occupation and realize a negotiated two-State solution. In the absence of a renewed commitment of the parties to pursue concrete measures that will lead to genuine political progress, the situation I'm afraid will continue to deteriorate.

Thank you.