



Security Council SC/11467

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

Security Council
7214th Meeting (AM)

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST ACCELERATE EFFORTS TO HALT VIOLENCE IN GAZA, ISRAEL FROM SPIRALLING OUT OF CONTROL, SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

Warning at an emergency Security Council meeting this morning of violence spiralling out of control in Gaza, Israel and the West Bank, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on the international community to accelerate efforts to immediately halt the escalation as he condemned the rising toll on Palestinian civilians.

"We must keep the situation from getting any further out of control," said the Secretary-General in a briefing that also heard from the Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to United Nations, Riyad Mansour, and Israel's Permanent Representative, Ron Prosor.

"We face the risk of an all-out escalation in Israel and Gaza, with the threat of a ground offensive still palpable," he added, pointing to a barrage of more than 500 rockets and mortars from Gaza into Israel and more than 500 air strikes on Gaza undertaken by Israel primarily targeted at Hamas and Islamic Jihad facilities and residences of their members.

He said that 88 Palestinians, many of them civilians, were reported to have been killed and 339 injured, and some 150 homes had been destroyed or severely damaged with nearly 900 people displaced. "I continue to condemn the rising number of civilian lives lost in Gaza. Once again, Palestinian civilians are caught between Hamas' irresponsibility and Israel's tough response," he said.

He reported that projectiles were being fired from Gaza at multiple Israeli population centres, some intercepted by the Iron Dome defence system, others causing damage and injuries, with one reported to have struck northern Jerusalem. An attempted infiltration by Palestinian militants by sea from Gaza into Ashkelon on the night of 8 July had reportedly been foiled, and the militants killed.

He recalled the lead-up to the current tensions included the murder of three Israeli students and a Palestinian teenager, which he said "shattered a period of relative calm and were widely condemned by the United Nations and the international community".

The turmoil in the West Bank had continued, he observed, with clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in and around refugee camps and other areas, with some 10 Palestinians reportedly injured on Wednesday during protests.

"It is clear that the international community must accelerate efforts to achieve an immediate halt to this escalation and reach a durable ceasefire. All actors must exercise maximum restraint and respect international humanitarian law. I will continue my efforts to bridge gaps and revive negotiations," he said.

More than ever, the situation called for "bold thinking and creative ideas", he said. "We must strive to restore not only calm today, but a political horizon for tomorrow." He recognized that confidence in the peace process had been undermined by the lack of progress despite recent efforts. "But surely no one can wish for the alternative — perpetual cycles of violence, pervasive mistrust, polarized peoples."

Mr. Mansour said he came to the Security Council with the support of the Arab Group, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to call on the Council to immediately protect civilian lives being lost with each passing minute of what he called the Israeli military aggression being waged against the Palestinian people under illegal, inhumane occupation.

"Enough of the bloodshed of the Palestinian people, enough of their oppression under Israeli occupation, enough of this injustice and enough of this violence and conflict that is inflicting so much suffering on innocent people on both sides and undermining regional and international peace and stability," he said.

Recalling his recent communications to the Council, he said that he had been trying to draw attention to the crisis and Israeli actions that contravened international humanitarian law, with barely any reaction.

In the past few days alone, he said, Israel had persisted with relentless attacks on Gaza. Those attacks had terrorized the people, killed dozens of civilians and injured hundreds, including a family of eight with five children killed that day. He noted that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had declared an emergency in Gaza.

In the West Bank, he said, Israeli military raids continued daily in Palestinian areas, resulting in dozens of casualties, demolished homes and pushing the number of Palestinians captive in Israeli jails to more than 6,000. Settler violence, terrorism and incitement against Palestinians, particularly children and farmers, continued unabated.

He called on the Security Council to send a firm message to Israel to immediately cease its aggressions against the Palestinian people and to abide by its obligations under international law. It was high time that Israel, the occupying Power, be held accountable for countless human rights violations and war crimes, including the killing of Palestinian civilians, the wanton destruction of Palestinian property and the malicious colonization of Palestinian land.

He rejected claims by Israel that Palestinian civilians in Gaza were being used as human shields by Hamas while densely populated areas were being targeted, saying there could be no justification for killing innocent civilians. He recalled Israel's suspension of peace negotiations in April in response to the reconciliation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas, which he called a legitimate and necessary step.

He finally called on the Council not only to end the "bleeding" in Gaza, but also to revive "our dying hopes in the prospects for an end to the occupation, an end to this tragic conflict and the achievement of peace and for the realization of the Palestinian aspirations for their freedom".

Mr. Prosor replied that Hamas had dragged Israel into the conflict and was intentionally threatening the lives of 3.5 million innocent people in his country. As they spoke, a rocket was being fired into Israel every 10 minutes, with hundreds of rockets raining indiscriminately following the murders of the Israeli teenagers. He played a recording of an air raid siren to emphasize the point.

Israel, he said, had exercise restraint and was now being criticized for finally responding to those provocations by launching a self-defence operation to counter Hamas' attacks and to defend Israeli citizens.

The operation aimed to remove the threat posed by Hamas by dismantling what he called the massive military machine of 10,000 rockets that Hamas had built up over the last few years. His Government was determined to give Israelis the safety and security they deserved. No country would accept the threats Israel faced.

"We aren't looking for a band-aid solution that will allow Hamas to rest and recoup," he said, emphasizing that, at the same time, Israel was taking great measures to avoid harming innocent civilians. The Defense Forces warned Palestinians in Gaza of imminent strikes, while Hamas instructed those same civilians to stand on the roof of buildings and act as human shields.

Hamas, he said, was also targeting the only border crossing through which food, medicine and other essentials entered Gaza. Despite the attacks, Israel was keeping the Kerem Shalom crossing open and on Tuesday and Wednesday, 242 truckloads of goods had been delivered into the Gaza Strip.

He said that Hamas was not only behind the attacks, but in the last year alone had attempted to kidnap 64 Israelis, and was recognized as a terrorist organization by many nations. It now had a seat in the Palestinian unity Government. Members of the international community had embraced the Fatah-Hamas partnership even though Hamas had not acted in concert with the Quartet principles, nor had it recognized Israel, renounced violence or accepted previous agreements.

It was time, he said, for the international community to right this wrong and make it clear to Hamas that unity did not equal impunity. He noted that, in his remarks, the Palestinian delegate had not mentioned a single one of the 442 rockets fired into Israel.

Israel was at the forefront of the free world fighting radical Islamic terrorism, he said. The threat posed by terrorism was global. No nation was immune. The call

must be loud and clear — opposing terrorism in one place meant opposing terrorism everywhere. “There is only one responsible course of action for this Council — condemn Hamas. Condemn the rocket fire. Call on President [Mahmoud] Abbas to dissolve the unity Government and support Israel’s right to defend itself,” he said.

The meeting began at 10:04 a.m. and ended at 10:53 a.m., when Council members were invited into consultations on the Middle East.

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