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Seventy-eighth year

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Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mrs. Baeriswyl	(Switzerland)
 <i>Members:</i>	Albania	Mr. Hoxha
	Brazil	Mr. De Almeida Filho
	China	Mr. Geng Shuang
	Ecuador	Mr. Pérez Loose
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Gabon	Ms. Bongo
	Ghana	Mr. Boateng
	Japan	Mrs. Shino
	Malta	Ms. Gatt
	Mozambique	Mr. Afonso
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	United Arab Emirates	Mr. Abushahab
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Dame Barbara Woodward
	United States of America	Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Tor Wennesland, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process; and Ms. Tania Hary, Executive Director of Gisha.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Wennesland.

Mr. Wennesland: This past month, we have been reminded again of the volatile security situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, as yet another deadly escalation between Israel and Palestinian armed factions in Gaza took place. While the ceasefire is holding, conflict mitigation efforts must also be met with steps by both sides, supported by the international community, to reset a trajectory out of the cycle of violence. I call on all parties to stop unilateral and inflammatory actions that undermine prospects for peace and to address the acute financial and institutional challenges faced by the Palestinian Authority (PA).

I am particularly alarmed by the funding crisis facing United Nations agencies supporting basic services and social support, including emergency food assistance, to Palestinians. Without new funding, the World Food Programme (WFP) will suspend cash assistance to approximately 200,000 Palestinians next week, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) will not have the resources to deliver core services in September. That comes alongside existing financial challenges faced by the PA and declining donor support overall. I encourage Member States to immediately seek ways to increase their support for Palestinians, including funding to UNRWA and WFP, without which we will face serious humanitarian and, potentially, security challenges. There is no time to spare.

Tensions increased between Israel and Palestinian armed factions in the Gaza Strip on 2 May, when a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leader, Khader Adnan,

died in an Israeli jail following an 86-day hunger strike. In response, PIJ and other armed factions in Gaza fired more than 100 rockets towards Israel, causing damage, but no injuries. The Israeli Air Force responded with air attacks against what it said were Hamas and PIJ targets in the Strip, killing one Palestinian and causing damage. Following intensive efforts by Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations, hostilities ended on 3 May. One week later, in the early hours of 9 May, the Israeli Air Force carried out air strikes in Gaza that killed three senior members of PIJ's military wing in their homes. Israeli officials said that the three were responsible for firing the rockets on 2 May. The strikes against residential structures also killed 10 civilians — family members and neighbours — including women and children. Over five days, Israel conducted 323 air strikes against what it said were PIJ military targets in Gaza, while Palestinian militants — mainly PIJ's Al-Quds Brigades — launched more than 1,200 rockets and 250 mortars towards Israel, of which nearly 300 fell short within Gaza, and more than 400 were intercepted by Israel's aerial defence system.

Thirty-three Palestinians, including at least 12 civilians, four women and six children, were killed during the hostilities. Of those, one Palestinian worker was killed in Israel by rocket fire from Gaza, and the United Nations is verifying reports that at least three fatalities were due to rockets falling short within the Strip. According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, 190 Palestinians were injured, including at least 38 women and 64 children. One Israeli civilian woman was killed by rocket fire. According to Israeli authorities, six Israelis were moderately injured, and 89 lightly injured.

The escalation compounded the already dire humanitarian situation in the Strip. According to authorities in Gaza, nearly 100 housing units were completely destroyed, and more than 125 were damaged and rendered uninhabitable, displacing more than 1,100 Palestinians. Israeli authorities closed both crossings between Gaza and Israel, preventing the entry of food, medical supplies and fuel for the Gaza power plant. As a result, hundreds of patients were unable to access essential medical care in the West Bank or Israel. Throughout the reporting period, the United Nations engaged intensively with all parties, alongside with efforts by Egypt, together with regional and international partners, including Qatar, to end the hostilities and prevent further loss of life. I commend Egypt for its role in bringing the parties to a ceasefire.

I am deeply concerned that civilians continue to bear the brunt of such hostilities. I am particularly appalled that children, who must never be the target of violence, continue to be victims. I echo the Secretary-General's condemnation of the unacceptable loss of civilian lives and his call on Israel to abide by its obligations under international humanitarian law, including the proportional use of force and the taking of all feasible precautions to spare civilians in the conduct of military operations. I also reiterate the Secretary-General's condemnation of the indiscriminate launching of rockets from Gaza towards Israel, including from densely populated residential areas, which violates international humanitarian law.

Turning to the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the level of violence remained high. Seventeen Palestinians, including two children, were killed and 138 Palestinians, including two women and 23 children, were injured by Israeli security forces during demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged attacks on Israelis and other incidents. Another 24 Palestinians, including two children, were injured by Israeli settlers or other civilians in shooting attacks, stone-throwing and other incidents. Thirty-three Israeli civilians, including four women, as well as four Israeli security forces personnel, were injured by Palestinians in shooting and ramming attacks, clashes, the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails and other incidents.

As in previous months, many Palestinian casualties occurred in the context of Israeli military operations in Area A and subsequent armed clashes. On 4 May in Nablus, Israeli security forces killed three Palestinian members of Hamas's military wing who, according to Israeli security forces, were responsible for the April killing of three Israeli civilians in the Jordan Valley. Israeli security forces also killed three Palestinians during an operation in Qabatiya, south of Jenin, on 10 May, one of whom was an unarmed bystander. Three Palestinians were killed while carrying out attacks or alleged attacks on Israeli security forces, including a person killed in an alleged ramming attack near Salfit on 27 April, a Palestinian woman who committed a stabbing attack that resulted in light injury in Huwvara, near Nablus, on 4 May, and one person killed in an alleged stabbing attempt at a checkpoint west of Jenin on 13 May.

During the reporting period, Israeli forces imposed significant movement restrictions, particularly around

Jericho, Nablus and Hebron, following either Palestinian attacks or stone-throwing, affecting tens of thousands of Palestinians and their local economies.

Thousands of right-wing Israeli activists, including senior Government ministers, participated in the highly provocative annual Flag Day march through Jerusalem's Old City, marking Jerusalem Day. Many chanted racist slogans, including "Death to Arabs", with scuffles breaking out between Israeli participants and Palestinians. Israelis also threw bottles and other objects at media personnel covering the event, injuring two journalists. Such provocations and incitements — which continued in the days after the march — are unacceptable and should be condemned by all. I also reiterate that the status quo at the holy sites must be respected. Levels of settler-related violence also remained high, with five Palestinians shot and injured by Israeli settlers using live ammunition. I reiterate that all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice. Security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

From 3 to 4 May, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee convened in Brussels, where the parties and donors discussed measures to support Palestinian institution-building and strengthen the Palestinian Authority and economy. The Chair's summary called on both sides to implement previous agreements between them, commit to de-escalation and refrain from steps that undermine Palestinian institutions and the possibility of a two-State solution, while calling on the international community to increase assistance to the Palestinians, including through support to UNRWA.

I regret to say that we have observed more settlement plans being moved forward, with tenders published for some 310 housing units in Area C and demolitions continuing. On 18 May, the Israeli military issued an order, in line with the Knesset's March amendment to the 2005 Disengagement Plan, to allow Israelis to re-enter the area of the evacuated settlement of Homesh, built on private Palestinian-owned land in the northern West Bank. During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished, seized or forced owners to demolish 33 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 17 in East Jerusalem, including a donor-funded school east of Bethlehem, displacing 89 Palestinians, including 45 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 7 May, Israel's High Court of Justice rejected a petition to compel Israeli authorities to carry out demolition orders against the Palestinian village of Khan Al-Ahmar. The justices agreed with the Government of Israel's position that the Court should not intervene in setting a timeline for the demolition. The Court also agreed that the demolition would not be carried out at this time, citing Israel's security and foreign relations as reasons. I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and a substantial obstacle to peace, and they must stop. I also call on Israeli authorities to end the displacement and eviction of Palestinians and to approve plans that will enable Palestinians to build legally and address their development needs.

Turning to the region, in the Golan, while the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained, the situation continues to be volatile owing to violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement by the parties. The situation along the Blue Line remained stable following the 6 April breach of the cessation of hostilities.

In recent weeks, the United Nations, together with regional and international partners, mobilized once again to end hostilities between armed factions in Gaza and Israel. Such efforts are crucial to saving Palestinian and Israeli lives. Nevertheless, we must also keep at the forefront the issues that are fundamental to creating the conditions for a lasting peace. The immediate priority is to support steps to bolster the Palestinian Authority and preserve the provision of critical services to the Palestinian people. Those steps should be implemented in a way that encourages the Palestinian parties to engage with each other, including on underlying political issues. That requires greater efforts by Israeli and Palestinian leaders, alongside increased support and attention from the international community. We must take action, not only to ensure Palestinians' well-being and governance but also as an integral part of ending the occupation and restoring a political horizon toward a viable two-State solution, based on United Nations resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Wennesland for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Hary.

Ms. Hary: My name is Tania Hary, and I am the executive director of Gisha. We are an Israeli human rights organization that promotes the freedom of movement and other rights that are dependent on it,

especially in the Gaza Strip. *Gisha* means "access" and "approach" in Hebrew.

Gisha was founded in 2005 in response to Israel's removal of its settlements and military installations from the Gaza Strip because we knew that Israel's occupation there was not ending. Eighteen years later, Israel's control persists, particularly over movement and access; over the Palestinian population registry determining where people can live and over Gaza's electricity supply, communications network and air and sea spaces.

I am here today, just a week and a half after a ceasefire agreement was reached following yet another escalation in the region. Tel Aviv and Jerusalem have returned to normal. Diplomats have moved on and are dealing with other priorities. Gaza has also returned to normal, but for Gaza, normal means Israeli drones buzzing overhead at all hours and the familiar cycle of destruction, reconstruction, mourning and trauma. Between the wars, when Gaza is out of the headlines and fewer people are paying attention, the ongoing warfare of movement restrictions continues. Security Council members regularly call for the lifting of those movement restrictions, and those calls are vital and must continue. But what do systemic movement restrictions look like on the ground? What does closure really mean? Closure means that people are likely to wait for weeks or even months to get a permit to go from Gaza to Jerusalem to access life-saving medical treatment. In 2022, one third of patients' permit applications and 62 per cent of companions' permit applications were delayed or denied. One quarter of patients exited the Strip without a companion, including hundreds of children without their parents.

Closure means that if your mother in the West Bank is sick, you have to prove to the Israeli military that she is at risk of death in order to hope to get a permit that will be valid only three to five days, at most. It means that if you want to start a company in Gaza, most likely all the equipment, machinery and raw materials you would need are considered by Israel to be dual-use. Getting those items can take months or even years, and sometimes it is impossible. In those and hundreds of other ways, Israel's decisions continue to have a deep impact on every aspect of life in Gaza. That level of control creates responsibility.

This was the sixth major Israel military attack in Gaza, among hundreds of smaller campaigns, over the

past 15 years. Our former Minister of Defence referred to it as “mowing the lawn”. Officials say things, such as “we have no choice but to manage the situation” because “there is no solution”. True leadership would work tirelessly to create hope instead of surrendering to perpetual occupation, recurrent military attacks, rocket fire from Gaza and other travesties.

As in previous rounds, Israeli officials said they were protecting Israeli citizens from rocket fire. I am one of those citizens. I do not wish the reality of rocket fire on anyone. The question should be: what do we need to do to break that cycle?

Today 2.2 million people live in the Gaza Strip. Half of them are children, and nearly 70 per cent are under the age of 30. Young people in Gaza know no other reality than closure and war. Most of the population has never been out of the Strip. Unemployment is 46 per cent, and among young people it is 68 per cent. Some 80 per cent of children in Gaza are said to suffer from emotional distress. Children and their parents know the names of all six children who were killed in the most recent military campaign. The wounds that cannot be seen — the trauma, hopelessness and helplessness — are the hardest to heal. How can the situation possibly contribute to security? Real, sustainable security and deterrence are not created by force, they are created by hope.

The closure of Gaza is part of what Israel calls the separation policy. Movement between Gaza, Israel and the West Bank is barred other than in exceptional circumstances. Israel faces legitimate security challenges, but movement restrictions are not in place for security needs alone. They drive political goals to pressure the population and maintain control over the West Bank. Most importantly, Israel’s narrow interpretation of its obligations towards Palestinians creates a crisis of accountability.

Settlements and the separation policy are two sides of the same coin — the same push towards annexation of the West Bank. Isolating Gaza, or the Gaza Bantustan, as the Palestinian human rights organization Al Mezan Center for Human Rights coined it, fragments Palestinians and reinforces the disastrous Palestinian political division. Access via Egypt is more possible than in previous years, but Egypt does not connect Gaza to the West Bank and Israel. It is as if New York City were cut off from the rest of the state and the states around it, for decades.

Recently, more movement has also been possible via Erez, the pedestrian crossing between Gaza and Israel, but for one category only: Palestinian day labourers. More than 140,000 people applied for a 20,000-permit quota, before registration was closed. That means that less than 1 per cent of demand in Gaza is being met with those permits. Women in Gaza are not included in that 1 per cent. Their needs for professional access continue to go unacknowledged in Israel’s criteria for permits. An agenda that prioritizes women and peace and security must take into account the impact of the closure on the specific needs of women.

Gisha represents a minority view in Israel, but we are part of a vibrant civil society in Israel and in Palestine under increasing threat. Our allies and potential allies are being silenced by false accusations of anti-Semitism, which undermine the necessary fight against the real and dangerous forms of anti-Semitism growing around the world. This is a critical time for the Council’s leadership and courage, as extremism in our region is feeding on incitement, poverty and oppression.

What gives me hope are the many young people in Gaza who dare to dream of a better future and know they deserve it, despite the leaders around them who are failing them. People around the world also realize that the struggle for freedom and dignity cannot be suppressed forever, not with the highest walls or the strongest armies.

I would like to end with four recommendations. First, let the hopes of Gaza’s young people guide Council members as they consider bold actions that their Governments might take. There is no reason not to facilitate the freedom of movement that women and young people need to fulfil their dreams. Secondly, we must protect the space for humanitarian and human rights work in Israel and in Palestine. In a situation of rising extremism, civil society is critical. Thirdly, we must recall the crisis of accountability. As a matter of routine, Palestinians are punished for actions beyond their control. The international community has a particularly important role to play in bringing the closure — a persistent and pernicious injustice and form of collective punishment — to an end. Finally, I ask the Council not to let another military assault put Gaza and Palestine back on the agenda, but to put it there because members know that it is the right thing to do.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Hary for her briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield (United States of America): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his informative briefing. I also sincerely thank Ms. Hary for her presentation today.

It has been a challenging month for the region, and the United States extends condolences to all Israelis and Palestinians affected by the ongoing violence.

When the Council last convened on this issue (see S/PV.9309), it was against the backdrop of hundreds of rockets being fired at Israel by Gaza-based Palestinian terrorist groups. Those attacks posed a threat to civilians in Israel and harmed Palestinian civilians in Gaza. At that time, the United States reaffirmed its support for Israel's inherent right to self-defence. We unequivocally condemned the attacks on Israel, and we called on all parties to exercise restraint in both action and rhetoric. I am pleased that, with the assistance of Egypt and Qatar, the parties took steps to de-escalate the situation, and that the ceasefire announced on 14 May has held, with the exception of only one incident. The question we must ask today, in the aftermath of the most recent round of fighting, is: what can be done to prevent future violence and better protect Israeli and Palestinian civilians? We believe diplomacy and direct engagement must be central to those efforts.

This year's meeting in Aqaba, Jordan, and Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, convened by Egypt, Jordan and the United States, resulted in several important commitments. Now, the parties must focus on implementation, just as the parties must refrain from further escalatory actions. That includes racist statements and incitement, as well as violence.

President Abbas's statement on 15 May, equating Israel with the lies of infamous Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, offers a case in point. His comments are a gross affront to Holocaust victims and survivors. Making that kind of statement about the world's only Jewish State is entirely unacceptable, especially during a time of rising anti-Semitic violence around the world. Similarly, President Abbas's claim that the United States "wanted to get rid of the Jews and benefit from their presence in Palestine", is totally without basis and

deeply offensive to the American people. As I have said many times before, the United States supports all efforts to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the two-State solution, but violence and incitement only move us away from that shared goal.

The United States is also concerned about the provocative visit made by an Israeli Minister to Al-Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem on 21 May and the accompanying inflammatory rhetoric. That holy place should not be used for political purposes, and we call on all parties to respect its sanctity. Furthermore, I want to reaffirm our long-standing position in support of the historic status quo at Jerusalem's holy sites. We are deeply troubled by Israel's decision to allow citizens to establish a permanent presence at the Homesh outpost in the northern West Bank, which according to Israeli law was illegally built on private Palestinian land. That order is inconsistent both with former Prime Minister Sharon's written commitment in 2004 and the commitments made by the current Israeli Government through the Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh process. Let me be clear. Advancing Israeli settlements in the West Bank undermines the prospects for peace. We also unequivocally condemn the racist speech that occurred during the Flag Day march through Jerusalem on 18 May, including chants of "Death to Arabs". Those chants are outrageous and unacceptable. Hateful speech of any kind, such as the examples I just noted, runs counter to the efforts of the Secretary-General and Under-Secretary-General Moratinos to combat racism and other forms of bigotry, including antisemitism.

The United States also recognizes the severe fiscal crisis that the Palestinian Authority is facing is fostering further instability in the West Bank. We encourage all parties in the region to consider ways to support the Palestinian Authority and alleviate that financial crisis. Now is the time to make meaningful contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and pursue further efforts toward the long-term stabilization of its finances.

In conclusion, I want to again urge all parties to exercise restraint in both action and rhetoric and to find ways to build confidence, such as by returning the remains of those killed in conflict. In that regard I make particular reference to Hadar Golden. We must find a way to give his parents peace. All parties need to de-escalate tensions, prevent any further loss of life and recommit to efforts such as those agreed in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh, which will rebuild trust and create

conditions for constructive dialogue. Let us all do our part, as members of the Council, to help build a future where Israelis and Palestinians enjoy equal measures of freedom, security and dignity.

Mrs. Shino (Japan): I thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland and Ms. Tania Hary for their briefings.

The most important recent development is last week's ceasefire between Israel and Gaza, ending days of violence during which many were killed or wounded. Japan commends Egypt, along with Qatar, Lebanon and the United States, for their roles in brokering the ceasefire, and we are encouraged that it has largely held. The Security Council should call on all sides to observe the ceasefire and maintain its efforts to ensure that the agreement will improve regional peace and security in a sustainable manner.

The numbers of casualties that we have seen this year are totally unacceptable. We urge all parties to implement the commitments outlined in the communiqués that came out of the five-party talks in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh. The Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority must refrain from provocations, including incitement to violence, and should work together in a constructive manner.

Japan continues to be one of the largest donors to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). This year we are commemorating the seventieth anniversary of Japan's partnership with the Agency. It was in 1953, even before Japan joined the United Nations itself, that we made our first financial contribution to the Agency, at a time when Japan was still struggling to overcome the ravages of war. Last week we hosted an event at which UNRWA's Deputy Commissioner-General, Ms. Leni Stenseth, emphasized the crucial role that the Agency plays in providing fundamental social services, including health and education, to Palestinian refugees. With UNRWA facing a serious funding shortfall, Japan highlights the importance of the pledging conference to be held on 2 June and calls on all Member States to support the Agency in continuing its essential work.

We condemn the ongoing unacceptable unilateral acts by both parties. Japan calls on Israel to immediately stop settlement expansion, demolitions, forced transfers, evictions, settler violence and military incursions. We also call on Palestinian militant groups to stop attacks on Israeli civilians and to refrain from attacking Israel with rockets.

On Japan's part, Prime Minister Kishida recently held a summit meeting in Tokyo with His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The two leaders stressed the need for both parties to exercise maximum restraint and avoid unilateral actions. Ultimately, the conflict will be resolved only through direct negotiations between the parties to achieve a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine existing side by side in peace, security and mutual respect. Japan supports every effort to achieve that goal.

Mr. Abushahab (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland for his comprehensive briefing and for his continued efforts to de-escalate the situation, especially in recent months. I also thank Ms. Tania Hary for her briefing, in which she shed light on the challenging situation in the Gaza Strip.

Our meeting today is taking place during a month that has been marked by grave developments in the occupied Palestinian territory. Those events further contribute to the ongoing escalation since the start of this year, despite the Council's numerous meetings and the international community's repeated calls to halt all unilateral measures. The current situation portends additional worrisome repercussions. We therefore need to make significant progress towards restoring calm and charting a clear political path that can pave the way to ending the conflict and achieving a two-State solution.

We must acknowledge that recurring provocative actions are driving the continued escalation, with results that serve the interests of none of the parties. The state of escalation witnessed this month in both the Gaza Strip and Israel are testament to that fact. There must therefore be a clear commitment to ceasing all hostilities and illegal practices and to exercising maximum restraint if we are to avoid a spiral into unprecedented levels of violence and large-scale confrontations. In that context, we condemn the Israeli raids that targeted areas in the Gaza Strip and left several Palestinians, including women and children, dead or injured. Likewise, we condemn the incendiary speeches during the Flag Day march and the repeated storming of the Al-Aqsa Mosque by extremists, members of the Knesset and the Israeli Government, the last of whom was Minister Ben-Gvir, who stormed the site yet again on Sunday. Those provocations, which resulted in clashes just days after a ceasefire in Gaza was reached, underline the extreme fragility of the situation and the high levels of tension. We reiterate once again our firm position

calling for the full protection of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and respect for the role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as Custodian of the Holy Sites and Endowments in Jerusalem in accordance with international law. We also underscore the urgent need to renounce hate speech and violence, particularly in areas rife with tension.

While the parties involved bear the responsibility to de-escalate the situation, we stress the important contributions made by regional and international mediators to contain the situation and promote peace, the most recent of which have been the tireless efforts made by the Arab Republic of Egypt to reach a ceasefire, restore calm in Gaza and stop the civilian bloodshed. Therefore, it is imperative that the international community continue to work in the coming period to sustainably maintain and consolidate the fragile ceasefire, while also exploring new paths to create an environment conducive to peace and a political horizon that will bring the parties back to the negotiating table. In that regard, we look forward to building on the meetings held in Aqaba, Jordan, and Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, while maintaining the progress achieved during the talks.

The humanitarian and economic conditions in the occupied Palestinian territory remain a matter of great concern, which is particularly worrisome with regard to the Gaza Strip, which cannot withstand any further escalation. Its population is already grappling with high levels of poverty and unemployment, while also trying to recover from the events of recent years. In that context, we welcome this month's meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of the International Assistance to Palestinians to discuss the challenges involved in improving the economic conditions of the Palestinian people and potential solutions. We note, however, that improving living conditions in the occupied Palestinian territory requires, above all, putting an end to the ongoing settlement activities, demolitions, displacement and restrictions on the movement of people and goods. They all constitute violations of international law, including international humanitarian law, and further exacerbate humanitarian and economic conditions. We condemn the recent order by the Israeli Government to establish a permanent presence in one of the outposts in the northern West Bank and all attempts to legitimize such settlement outposts.

Lastly, we reaffirm the call made in the final communiqué of the Arab League Summit held in

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, last week to step up efforts to reach a comprehensive and just settlement of the Palestinian question in accordance with the agreed international references, particularly the Arab Peace Initiative and the relevant international resolutions. We stress that the Palestinian people deserve to live in security, peace and dignity.

Mr. De Almeida Filho (Brazil): Let me start by thanking Mr. Tor Wennesland for his informative briefing and Ms. Tania Hary for her sobering intervention.

Brazil remains deeply concerned about the situation in Israel and Palestine. The loss of lives, including children, as a result of Israeli air strikes, and the indiscriminate firing of rockets against Israeli territory during another eventful month, is deeply regrettable. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families who have lost their loved ones.

Brazil commends Egypt for its central role in facilitating the cessation of hostilities and expresses gratitude to all parties that have put effort into the achievement of the ceasefire. We call on all parties to respect the agreement and to intensify their efforts to exercise restraint. Regrettably, not long after the ceasefire announcement, distressing incidents occurred during the annual flag march in Jerusalem's Old City. The participation of Israeli high-ranking authorities in the march and in a visit to Haram Al-Sharif does not contribute to stabilizing the situation and bringing calm to the region. As Mr. Wennesland noted — and we agree — leaders bear the responsibility to take a stand against extremism and condemn acts of violence and incitement unequivocally. The unjustifiable attacks on journalists during the flag march are also deeply concerning. During conflicts, journalists and media workers, as civilians, are protected by international humanitarian law. They play an invaluable role by ensuring the free flow of information.

Brazil reaffirms its long-standing commitment to the two-State solution, with Palestine and Israel living together in peace and security within mutually agreed and internationally recognized borders. Ending the protracted conflict requires confronting some challenging outstanding issues. The expansion of Israeli settlements, in flagrant violation of international law, is one such issue. In addition to igniting violence and hatred, settlement activities obstruct the path to peace by undermining the feasibility of a contiguous Palestinian State. Recent reports about the intention to further

expand Israeli settlements in the West Bank in large numbers are alarming. Brazil also calls on Israel to stop the continued demolitions and seizure of Palestinian structures and the displacement of Palestinian families. We strongly condemn the demolition of a European Union-funded school in Area C on 7 May. In that regard, it is worth recalling resolution 2601 (2021), which calls for safeguarding the right to education and emphasizes the necessity of uninterrupted educational services in conflict situations.

The matter is also related to the critical financial situation faced by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Ensuring adequate funding and support for the Agency is paramount to sustaining essential services for the Palestinian people, including education programmes, which are crucial to offering Palestinian children quality education and fostering hope for a better future. UNRWA plays an indispensable role in maintaining stability in the Middle East, particularly in sustaining the livelihoods of Gaza residents. In offering essential services, UNRWA not only improves their quality of life, but also promotes social stability, which is crucial to peacebuilding efforts in the region.

Since the beginning of the year, parties have made commitments to desist from provocative unilateral actions and to pursue further actions in support of de-escalation. Brazil hopes that they will work to translate promises into responsible and constructive policies and initiatives aimed at improving the situation on the ground. That would be an important first step to fostering an environment conducive to dialogue aimed at a just and comprehensive solution to the conflict.

In conclusion, I would like once again to express Brazil's appreciation for the work of the Special Coordinator, Mr. Wennesland. We value his detailed briefings to the Security Council and his relentless efforts to ease tensions on the ground. Brazil agrees with his overall assessment that merely managing this conflict indefinitely is unsustainable. The Council must seriously reflect on its role in breaking those vicious cycles of violence and revitalizing the stalled peace process.

Mr. Hoxha (Albania): I too would like to thank the Special Coordinator for his update on the developments on the ground and for his continued efforts. I also thank Ms. Hary for her striking testimony and insightful remarks.

We have just left behind weeks of escalatory tensions and exchanges of fire, with large numbers of victims and many wounded waiting to recover. Those events, with huge repercussions for civilians, are becoming more frequent, and the increase in the death toll of Palestinians and Israelis is a matter of primary concern. We welcome the ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and commend Egypt and other international and regional actors for their efforts to prevent escalation on the ground. We call on the parties to fully implement the ceasefire, preserve the calm recently restored and bear in mind that it is always the civilians who pay the high price of any tensions and violence.

The people of Israel do not deserve to live under the threat of blind and indiscriminatory rocket attacks from Gaza from terrorist groups or other terrorist acts against them. We fully support Israel's right to proportionate self-defence. It should be noted that many of the rockets recklessly launched by Islamic groups are also falling inside Palestine territory, claiming innocent lives. We are deeply troubled by the negative impact that the conflict is having on Palestinian civilians, including women and children. International humanitarian law must be fully observed and respected and civilian casualties must be avoided. Whether lives are Israeli or Palestinian, they are worth the same. The cycle of violence must end, and unilateral actions that trigger its proliferation should be avoided. Both sides must exercise maximum restraint. That is the prerequisite for generating what is missing nowadays — hope.

It is troubling to note that discriminatory rhetoric, racism and antisemitism are more and more frequent. Albania strongly condemns all those provocative and harmful displays, which are inciting hatred among people and becoming a direct source of violence. We are concerned about the impact that such behaviour is having on journalists and free reporting. Marching and chanting "Death to Palestinians" is unacceptable. It is as reprehensible as calling for death to Israelis. All leaders have a responsibility to act against extremists and to speak out against violence and incitement.

Albania fully supports freedom of religion and belief and the historic status quo of the holy sites in Jerusalem. We praise the special role of Jordan's custodianship. The holy sites in Jerusalem are a place only for prayer. We call on those responsible to refrain from provocative actions that undermine the rights and sensibilities of those worshipping at Al-Haram

Al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Jews and Christians, respect for religious diversity and tolerance towards different faiths and beliefs are fundamental values to be diligently preserved and further cherished.

The commitments made in the Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh meetings are clear about what the parties should be doing in good faith to prevent escalation and take useful measures for a peaceful settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We call on the parties to abide by those commitments and to refrain from actions that undermine the prospects for peace. In that context, we reiterate our position that settlements and outposts are illegal under international law and that their advancement is an obstacle to a two-State solution. The indiscriminate violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians, including the destruction of homes, schools and property, are deplorable and should be properly investigated.

We welcome the efforts of Germany, France, Egypt and Jordan to restore the political horizon for a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East and their commitment to working with all the parties for a resumption of a credible political process. We also commend all the efforts in advancing and expanding the Abraham Accords. The security, economy and good-neighbourly relationships between the countries in the Middle East are beneficial to all. In that context, I would like to reiterate Albania's full support for a negotiated and just two-State solution within the 1967 borders. Any and all efforts leading to it are positive and welcomed. A comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians with a safe and secure Israel and a viable, independent and democratic Palestine is the only way forward. We cannot not say it enough — a solution with two States, for two peoples, with mutual recognition and Jerusalem as their shared capital, will ensure that both sides, Israelis and Palestinians, can live as neighbours in safety and security and enjoy freedom, dignity and justice.

Peace is needed and peace is possible. But it will never come as a surprise, and it will not fall from the sky. It requires courage, vision, leadership and trust between the parties for it not to be and remain, as it looks now, a Sisyphean task.

Mr. Afonso (Mozambique): We thank the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Tor Wennesland, for his important update and his efforts

for peace, stability and understanding in the Middle East. We express our appreciation to Ms. Tania Hary, Executive Director of Gisha, for her excellent briefing to the Security Council.

During our previous meeting on the Middle East peace process and the Israeli-Palestine conflict in April (see S/PV.9309), we expressed our condemnation of the high number of deaths, injuries, imprisonments and land occupations that have been unfolding in the region. Today we want to reiterate our call for the illegal occupation and aggression to cease. Most importantly, we advocate an immediate resumption of negotiations and a revitalization of the peace process between the conflicting parties. Amid what appear to be promising signs of normalization and détente in the Middle East, the continued plight of the Palestinians in the occupied territories and the erosion of hope for any prospect of a two-State solution are deeply disturbing. They testify to the abysmal failure of our collective efforts to force the parties to the conflict towards the real concessions necessary for peace to prevail after nearly seven decades of conflict.

We commend recent diplomatic efforts in the region aimed at reviving the peace process and addressing major impediments to peace between Israelis and Palestinians. We encourage those initiatives and further urge the parties to pursue them in earnest. In that context, we strongly urge Israel to halt all of its settlement expansion and land occupation, as those actions frustrate the major goal of achieving a two-State solution. We call on the Council to exercise its influence to ensure that Israelis and Palestinians abide by the internationally endorsed decisions for a just solution, based on the decisions of the Council, the resolutions of the General Assembly, the Madrid principles and the Arab Peace Initiative.

We call on the international community for urgent, greater and more predictable and sustainable support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the World Food Programme. They need to be able to respond to the dire humanitarian situation facing Palestine. We reaffirm our profound appreciation for the Special Coordinator's sustained and continued efforts to restart a genuine and legitimate political process, leading to peace. Mozambique wishes to reiterate its long-standing and principled position in support of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people and the right to exist of the State of Israel.

Mr. Pérez Loose (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would like to begin by thanking Mr. Tor Wennesland, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his briefing and you, Madam President, for convening today's meeting. I also thank Tania Hary, whose statement we listened to carefully.

In this month of May we have witnessed the indiscriminate launch of hundreds of rockets from Gaza into Israel, resulting in the death of at least one civilian and a number of injured, as well as an Israeli military operation in Gaza that killed dozens, including several civilians, women and children. Those events, as with all acts of violence against civilians wherever they occur, are worrisome and reprehensible.

We recognize the right to legitimate self-defence. At the same time, we want to remind everyone that compliance with the norms of international law and international humanitarian law is not optional. And no one is exempt. We welcome efforts to put an end to the clashes and urge the parties to continue respecting the ceasefire that has been agreed to. The Council must do all it can to help avoid another escalation. In that regard, we again call on the parties to refrain from inciting violence or provocative acts. Extremist or fanatical positions, rhetoric and acts are the fuel that fans the flames of a cycle of violence that must end now. A few days ago, we witnessed new tensions at the holy sites of Jerusalem, whose status quo must be respected, and elsewhere. At the risk of repeating myself, I underscore the call for restraint and common sense. We must be able to understand that violence only leads to more violence.

The persistent factors of conflict create a climate of mistrust and tension that undermines the prospects for a political solution. As we said in the Council's presidential statement in February (S/PRST/2023/1), we strongly oppose all unilateral measures that are obstacles to peace, including Israel's construction and expansion of settlements, confiscation of Palestinians' land, its so-called legalization of settlement outposts, demolition of Palestinians' homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians. In that regard, we condemn the demolition on 7 May of a school in the West Bank close to Bethlehem. Such actions affect the right of children to education and in no way help to create a climate of peace or dialogue.

We know that resources are scarce and must be prioritized. On the third floor of the General Assembly

building, just a few metres from this Chamber, there is a chart that compares the resources allocated to weapons with those directed to development and humanitarian assistance. With that in mind, I would like to address the humanitarian situation, in particular the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and its precarious financial situation. Meeting the needs of displaced people is a responsibility of the international community, regardless of the causes of the conflict or the people who caused it. We call on all who can contribute to do so in this case and in every case. If even a fraction of what is spent on rockets, war planes and missiles were allocated to funding the development and welfare of populations, there is every likelihood that we would be closer to solutions that today appear distant if not almost impossible.

Dame Barbara Woodward (United Kingdom): I would like to start by thanking Special Coordinator Wennesland and Ms. Hary for their informative briefings.

The security situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories has deteriorated further, to the detriment of Israelis and Palestinians alike. In Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other militant factions fired 1,748 rockets at Israel. Indiscriminate rockets from Gaza caused the deaths of an Israeli and four Gazans. The United Kingdom unequivocally condemns the indiscriminate firing of rockets against civilians, and indeed all forms of terrorism. The Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom welcomed the announcement of a ceasefire between Israel and militant factions in Gaza and is grateful for the support of Egypt, Qatar and the United States. We urge all parties to honour the ceasefire and prevent further loss of life.

The United Kingdom supports Israel's right to self-defence. But Israeli conduct must always be in line with international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, humanity, proportionality and military necessity. We were concerned about reports of at least 12 civilian deaths, including of six children, in Israeli strikes on Gaza. This month we have also seen further deaths in the West Bank, where Israeli security forces have killed 110 Palestinians this year, including militants and civilians. If killing continues at that rate, 2023 will be the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since United Nations records began in 2004. Israeli security forces must show restraint in their use of force and investigate civilian casualties. Nineteen Israelis, residents and tourists, including Lucy, Maia and

Rina Dee, have already been killed in terrorist attacks in 2023. The Palestinian Authority must also reassert control over Area A and take steps to tackle terrorism.

A solution to the conflict will not be found until both Israel and the Palestinians tackle inflammatory rhetoric and incitement, as they agreed to do in Sharm El-Sheikh on 19 March. Yet only last week we heard racist slogans and slurs from President Abbas and from Israeli participants in the Flag Day march in Jerusalem. Such rhetoric and incitement, including by both Israeli and Palestinian political leaders, undermines the cause of peace. Israel must also tackle increasing settler violence and coercion — which on Monday resulted in the forcible transfer of the Palestinian population from Ein Samiya — and desist from settler expansion, which is illegal under international law.

Finally, the United Kingdom also strongly supports the historic status quo governing Jerusalem's holy sites and values the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan's important role as custodian. The United Kingdom remains firm in its belief that a negotiated two-State solution, based on the 1967 lines and with Jerusalem as a shared capital, is the only way to ensure lasting peace and security and prosperity between the parties.

At the Ad Hoc Committee of the General Assembly for the announcement of voluntary contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to be held in June, it will be vital for the international community to put the Agency on a sustainable footing if we are to protect the delivery of critical services to millions of Palestinian refugees. UNRWA is crucial to stability throughout the region.

As its Foreign Secretary stated on 14 May, the United Kingdom will support all efforts to promote dialogue and create a pathway towards a just and sustainable peace. The first step on that pathway is clear. Both sides must honour the commitments that they made in good faith in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. Tor Wennesland, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his substantive briefing on the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. We also listened to the remarks by Ms. Tania Hary.

The unprecedented escalation of violence in the Arab-Israeli conflict zone remains a focus of

international attention. As a result of Israeli military raids in the West Bank in Jenin, Jericho, Nablus and Huwwara, clashes in the context of violations of the status quo in Jerusalem's holy sites, especially the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, and the escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip, more than 100 Palestinians have died and thousands more have been injured since the beginning of this year. The number of Israeli casualties is also growing. The Israeli Air Force continues to launch indiscriminate strikes against Syria, including on Aleppo airport, which is being used to transport humanitarian aid to victims of the devastating earthquake. There has been an alarming increase in incidents along the Blue Line with Lebanon, culminating in the most intense exchange of rocket fire since 2006.

There can be no question that the triggers of the deteriorating situation on the ground continue to include unilateral steps aimed at establishing irreversible facts on the ground and the lack of prospects for reviving the peace process. Above all, that is a result of the record rate of Israeli settlement construction activity, with 7,157 housing units approved this year, which is double the numbers for 2021 and 2022, along with the retrospective legalization of outposts, with corresponding expropriations of land and demolitions of Palestinian homes. In addition, the number of arbitrary arrests of Palestinians has increased, with more than 2,000 people, including minors, detained since the beginning of the year. Incidents involving the disproportionate use of force and the heightened use of socioeconomic pressure measures are also on the rise. It is noteworthy that neither the meetings in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh nor the Security Council presidential statement condemning those unilateral Israeli actions (S/PRST/2023/1) have had any tangible effect. Meanwhile, 700 housing units in the settlement of Givat Hamatos in East Jerusalem were approved for construction in April of this year.

In the circumstances, Palestinians are increasingly opting for resistance and stepping up efforts to defend their legitimate rights before international bodies such as the International Court of Justice, the Security Council and the General Assembly. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has clearly exposed the double standards of our colleagues from the United States, which has continued its unilateral attempts to reverse the deteriorating situation on the ground by substituting an economic truce for a genuinely political peace.

Having blocked the work of the Middle East Quartet of international mediators, the United States is stubbornly promoting Arab-Israeli normalization while bypassing a just settlement of the Palestinian question. The real paradox here is that Washington, which aspires to the role of sole sponsor of the Middle East peace process, long ago and definitively lost the neutrality and impartiality essential to an honest broker. The previous Administration's decisions to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights effectively erased the United States' commitment to the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

Against that worrisome backdrop, we can only welcome the long-awaited decision of the League of Arab States to restore Syria's membership. We believe that Syria's resumption of its participation in the work of the Arab League, of which it is a founding member, will help to improve the atmosphere in the Middle East, including with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The League's decision demonstrates the Arab world's desire to strengthen the coordination of efforts to resolve the region's outstanding problems through negotiations.

We believe that the international community must continue to advocate the necessity of relaunching direct negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis on a universally recognized international legal basis on all final status issues — that is, borders, refugees, water resources and Jerusalem. Only a genuine resumption of the peace process, with a two-State solution at its core, will contribute to reducing violence and radicalization and to restoring mutual trust in the Middle East.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Wennesland and Ms. Hary for their briefings.

France is concerned about the continuing use of unilateral measures. It condemns the decision by the Israeli authorities to authorize the establishment of settlers in Homesh, in the northern occupied West Bank. That decision, like all announcements of the establishment or extension of settlements, is contrary to international law. It also contravenes the commitments made by Israel at the Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh meetings. France calls on the Israeli Government to reverse its decision. France will never recognize the illegal annexation of territories or the legalization of illegal settlements.

France also expresses its concern about the second visit by the Israeli Minister of National Security to the

Esplanade of the Mosques on 21 May, which constitutes a provocation. We emphasize the importance of preserving the historic status quo of the holy sites in Jerusalem and stress the importance of Jordan's specific role in that regard.

The unilateral measures are fuelling tensions on the ground. France welcomed the ceasefire that entered into force on the evening of 13 May thanks to the mediation efforts of Egypt, with the support of the United Nations and Qatar. We call for a lasting opening of access to Gaza and an end to the blockade, accompanied by credible security guarantees for Israel. France will continue to condemn any attacks on Israel and reiterates its unwavering commitment to its security. Any loss of civilian life is unacceptable. The recent escalation has only increased the suffering of the civilian population. The situation in the occupied territories remains precarious. United Nations agencies, funds and programmes no longer have the financial resources to operate normally. Between now and August, the World Food Programme will be forced to suspend part of its operations in the West Bank and Gaza if it does not receive the necessary funds. Similarly, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East needs additional resources between now and the summer to continue its operations.

The Council therefore has a responsibility to defend the possibility of a two-State solution and to ensure that its adopted decisions are respected. France welcomes the efforts of the United States, Egypt and Jordan to enable the parties to resume dialogue. We call on the parties to respect their commitments, in particular with regard to settlements, but also with regard to respect for the security prerogatives of the Palestinian Authority in Area A.

As the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of France, Germany, Egypt and Jordan recalled at the seventh meeting of the Munich Group on 11 May, it is imperative to relaunch a credible political process leading to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. France stands ready to contribute to such efforts together with its partners. The United Nations, and especially the Special Coordinator, has an important role to play.

Mr. Geng Shuang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland and Ms. Hary for their briefings.

This month, the occupied Palestinian territories, in particular the Gaza Strip, once again saw tensions. On 10 May, the Security Council held emergency consultations at the request of the United Arab Emirates, France and China. Through the mediation efforts of Egypt and other relevant countries, the parties concerned finally reached a ceasefire. However, it must be noted that the tensions and conflict between Palestine and Israel have reoccurred repeatedly over the past few years, and they have therefore fully shown that the long-stalled peace process and piecemeal crisis management are unsustainable and that there is no alternative to a comprehensive and just solution.

In that regard, I would like to stress three points.

First, the historical status quo of religious holy sites in Jerusalem must be respected and upheld. On 21 May, a senior Israeli security official entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound for a second time this year and reignited tensions. With regard to the issue of religious holy sites, Israel must stop its provocations, guarantee Muslim worshippers their right to worship, uphold the peace and tranquillity of religious holy sites and respect the custodianship of Jordan.

Secondly, the illegal expansion of settlements on the occupied territories must stop. Settlement activities violate international law and resolution 2334 (2016). Since the beginning of the year, Israel has continued to advance unilateral measures on approving returns, building new settlements and legalizing settlements. We urge Israel to immediately halt those actions and stop encroaching upon the land and resources of the Palestinian people.

Thirdly, international humanitarian law must be observed. Since the beginning of the year, more than 100 Palestinians, including children, have lost their lives in clashes. Israel has also suffered civilian casualties. All parties concerned should stop all forms of violence against civilians and targeting schools, hospitals and other civilian infrastructure. The plight of Palestinian refugees should be alleviated, and the economic and livelihood needs of Palestine should be met. Israel should lift the blockade on Gaza as soon as possible. The unhindered flow of people and reconstruction supplies in and out of Gaza should be maintained.

Upholding the historical status quo of religious holy sites, halting the expansion of settlements and respecting international humanitarian law are key requirements for preventing the repeated escalations

of tensions between Palestine and Israel. The parties concerned are duty-bound to implement them and should not use them as bargaining chips. The international community shoulders the responsibility of ensuring their implementation and should not remain indifferent. Meeting those three requirements is also a fundamental step towards reviving the two-State solution. The international community should not merely pay lip service to supporting the two-State solution or use supporting direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations as an excuse for shirking its own responsibilities. The country that has major influence on the parties concerned should make concrete efforts to advance the Middle East peace process and should not unjustifiably prevent the Security Council from arriving at a minimum consensus on the Palestine-Israeli issue.

China will continue to firmly support the Palestinian people in their just cause to restore their legitimate national rights and the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent State of Palestine, based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. We will join hands with the international community and contribute positively to the early achievement of a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the Palestinian question and the realization of the harmonious coexistence and common development of the Arab and Jewish peoples.

Ms. Bongo (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland for his briefing and reiterate my delegation's support for his work. We listened to Ms. Tania Hary's briefing with great interest.

This month of May has been characterized by an escalation of particularly deadly violence, despite the international community's many calls for restraint. Women and children have once again paid a heavy price. After dozens of days of fighting, the entry into force of a ceasefire on 14 May is therefore a genuine relief. We are aware of the precariousness of the calm, given the latest reports that three Palestinian fighters were killed in the northern part of the occupied West Bank on the night of Sunday, 21 May to Monday, 22 May, during a raid by the Israeli army. We urge both sides to refrain from belligerent rhetoric and other provocations that could reignite tensions. Settlement activities, which contravene international law, must also cease.

Gabon reiterates its call for restraint, dialogue and a diplomatic solution. The key role played by Egypt in the cessation of hostilities and the efforts made by the United States, Lebanon and Qatar to reach a ceasefire

are to be commended. Both Palestinian and Israeli civilian populations must be able to live in safety.

Let me to conclude by recalling that a political resolution of the conflict will undoubtedly improve the alarming security, economic and humanitarian situation on the ground, whose negative impact on the region is no longer the subject of debate. All initiatives aimed at peace and a negotiated political solution must lead to the realization of the two-State solution, which will ensure shared prosperity and stability for the entire region.

Mr. Boateng (Ghana): Let me thank the Special Coordinator for his in-depth briefing and Ms. Tania Hary for sharing her perspective.

We take note of the sobering account of events on the ground, as well as the measures being taken to address the main triggers of the conflict and to prevent their reoccurrence. It is regrettable that the briefings paint not only a deteriorating security and a dire humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, but also a reversal of the goodwill and momentum that had been achieved after the Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh meetings in February and March. We encourage further diplomatic and mediation efforts by friendly countries of the region to stave off the worrisome tide of violence between Israel and Palestine and bring the parties to the negotiating table.

We note with regret the escalation of violent clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian groups in the wake of Israeli military search-and-arrest operations in places such as the Jenin, Askar and Balata refugee camps in Nablus, the Aqabat Jabr refugee camp, in the eastern part of the West Bank, and the Nur Al-Shams and Tulkarm refugee camps, in the north-western part of the West Bank. We are concerned that, despite the fact that the military operations resulted in the seizure of a number of weapons, including rifles and explosive devices, they have also exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories and have aggravated the already-volatile situation on the ground as a result of the mass arrest of hundreds of Palestinian youths, the demolition of Palestinian-owned structures and the displacement of Palestinian families from their farms and villages.

While noting the legitimate security concerns of Israel, especially on following Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian militants recently firing rockets and mortar shells from Gaza against

its population and at Israeli towns situated along the border, we urge the Government of Israel to always weigh the anticipated military advantage against the expected collateral damage in order to ensure that attacks are not excessive or disproportionate.

We are saddened by the fact that, between the period from 2 to 15 May, 45 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces and an Israeli was killed by Palestinians, as set out in the report on the protection of civilians issued by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. We convey our deepest and heartfelt condolences to the families and friends of the victims and to the Governments of Israel and Palestine for their loss.

We remain deeply concerned about the recent plans of the current Government of Israel to advance further expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, including the initial approval granted by the Jerusalem District Planning and Building Committee last week to pave the way for 400 new homes for Jewish residents inside the Palestinian neighbourhood of Abu Dis.

We encourage a deliberate policy of restraint by the senior officials of Israel and Palestine in order to preserve the viability of the two-State solution.

We acknowledge the importance of upholding the historic status quo at the holy sites in Jerusalem in word and practice and stress in that regard the special role of Jordan as the Custodian of the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. Visits such as the one recently undertaken by the Israel's National Security Minister to the Temple Mount on Sunday, 21 May could provoke negative reactions and lead to a destructive path of disengagement.

We remain deeply concerned that the collective aspirations of the Security Council, the countries in the Middle East and the international community for Israel and Palestine to live peacefully side by side as two sovereign States, with Jerusalem as the shared capital, continues to be obscured by the highly degenerative environment witnessed in recent weeks.

We reaffirm our belief that the path for lasting peace and stability in the Middle East runs through the two-State solution and urge all stakeholders, especially senior political leaders on both sides, to refrain from inflammatory actions and rhetoric, while also renewing their commitment to pursuing confidence-building measures and strengthening mutual trust in order to address outstanding issues through direct dialogue.

Ms. Gatt (Malta): I would like to thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing and Ms. Hary for her insightful remarks and recommendations.

At the outset, in the wake of the recent hostilities, we commend the Egyptian authorities for brokering a ceasefire and returning the situation to relative calm. Those events have once more highlighted how precarious and unsustainable the situation in the Gaza Strip remains. Gaza is home to some of the highest levels of humanitarian needs in the world, with 80 per cent of the population in need of humanitarian aid — a situation exacerbated by Israel's continued blockade. We stress the obligation to ensure unhindered humanitarian access to Gaza.

As a signatory to the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, it was particularly distressing for my country to watch, yet again, renewed bombing and devastation in Gaza — one of the most densely populated areas in the world. In that latest round of fighting, homes have been damaged and destroyed, and there are reports of partial damage to several hospitals and health-care facilities.

For Malta, the protection of civilians in conflict, including children and women, and respect for international humanitarian law is paramount. Regrettably, it is too often disregarded in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Malta strongly condemns all acts that result in the killing of civilians on both sides. We strongly condemn the indiscriminate rocket fire towards Israel, as well as all acts of terrorism and incitements to terrorism, which continue to threaten civilians and result in further tragic loss of life.

While we reiterate that Israel has the right to self-defence, the principles of necessity and proportionality must also be respected. We are concerned that the frequent, systematic and violent raids by Israeli forces in the West Bank continue to endanger civilians, including children.

Echoing the Security Council's presidential statement of 20 February (S/PRST/2023/1), Malta reiterates its strong opposition to unilateral measures that impede peace. Those include the further expansion of Israeli settlements — which are illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace — the retroactive legalisation

of settlement outposts, the demolition of Palestinian homes and the further displacement of Palestinian civilians. The reports detailing the exploratory attempts to substantially increase the number of settlers in the West Bank are also deeply concerning.

We unreservedly condemn the demolitions of European Union (EU)-funded projects, including the recent demolition of the EU-funded school in Jubbet al-Dhib. That unilateral act denied 81 Palestinian children their inherent right to education.

We are also alarmed by the provocative Israeli flag march witnessed last week in Jerusalem, which saw thousands of settlers marching through the Muslim quarter of the Old City and hundreds storming the Al-Aqsa Mosque, under the protection of heavy security. Those acts, coupled with inflammatory hate speech, push tensions closer to a breaking point. Such measures deny the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and fracture any prospects of a contiguous Palestinian State, entrenching a one-State reality that runs contrary to resolution 2334 (2016).

We are also deeply concerned about the dire financial situation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and appeal for the sustained and predictable funding of its indispensable services, without which there will be dire humanitarian consequences.

Inter-Palestinian reconciliation is crucial if we are to move closer to a two-State solution. Malta urges the Palestinian factions to deliver on the commitments made in the 2022 Algiers Declaration, including the holding of democratic and inclusive elections. The rights of women, including their full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership, must be central to those processes and discussions.

Malta underscores the critical need for all the parties to engage in good-faith dialogue. We encourage the parties to continue the discussions following-up on the agreements made in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh and to establish confidence-building measures and the constructive implementation of the commitments made, including the need to cease conflict drivers and ensure the fiscal stability of the Palestinian economy. That is necessary to lay the groundwork for a much-needed peace plan.

Malta remains committed to the realization of the two-State Solution, in which two democratic

States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders, consistent with international law and the relevant resolutions of the United Nations.

The President (*spoke in French*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Switzerland.

I would like to begin by thanking Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland for his briefing. Above all, we commend him for his efforts, as well as Egypt and Qatar for the role they played, both in negotiating and supporting respect for the ceasefire reached on 13 May amid the latest hostilities in Gaza and Israel.

The incidents of the past week demonstrate that tensions and the risk of an escalation of violence remain very high. The racist slogans and incitement to hatred against Palestinian residents, as well as the attacks against journalists, are unacceptable. Switzerland calls on the leaders of all parties to refrain from any provocations. The historical status quo of Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount, including Jordan's role as Custodian of the Holy Sites, must be respected. Furthermore, Switzerland considers East Jerusalem as occupied territory, whose final status, including as the capital of two States, must be negotiated between the parties.

We call on the parties to do all in their power to achieve a lasting de-escalation, in particular by implementing the commitments made in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh, which followed the presidential statement (S/PRST/2023/1) adopted by the Council. In that regard, we call on Israel to revoke the order allowing its nationals to settle in Homesh, an outpost that is illegal under international humanitarian law. We also deplore the fact that the members of a Palestinian community had to leave their land in Ein Samia.

Switzerland condemns the deaths of Palestinian civilians, including children, caused by Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip two weeks ago. We also

condemn the indiscriminate firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel. In the West Bank, more than 100 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces this year, including 19 children. We call on the parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution, as well as human rights.

As we heard in the briefing by Ms. Tania Hary, whom I thank, Gaza has been under blockade for 16 years. The blockade must be lifted. An immediate easing of restrictions on access and movement of people between Gaza and Israel is crucial. As the occupying Power, Israel is obliged under international humanitarian law to ensure, to the best of its ability, that the basic needs of the population are met. Open crossings must therefore remain open.

Finally, the funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is insufficient to cover operations that are essential to the survival of its beneficiaries. That situation is of concern. We hope that the annual donors' conference in New York, to be held in early June, will alleviate the financial burden on the Agency.

Developments over the past few days and weeks, including in connection with various dates of historical significance, have once again demonstrated the urgency of resuming a credible political process that addresses the root causes of the conflict. Switzerland stands ready, including through its good offices, to facilitate the resumption of a credible dialogue for a negotiated two-State solution, in accordance with international law and internationally agreed parameters, including Security Council resolutions.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.