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<i>President:</i>	Mr. De La Gasca/Mr. Montalvo Sosa.	(Ecuador)
<i>Members:</i>	Albania	Mr. Hoxha
	Brazil.	Mr. França Danese
	China	Mr. Geng Shuang
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Gabon	Mrs. Ngyema Ndong
	Ghana	Mr. Agyeman
	Japan	Mr. Yamazaki
	Malta	Ms. Gatt
	Mozambique	Mr. Fernandes
	Russian Federation.	Mr. Nebenzia
	Switzerland	Mr. Hauri
	United Arab Emirates	Mrs. Nusseibeh
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Dame Barbara Woodward
	United States of America.	Mr. Kelley

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 11 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of Israel to participate in this meeting.

I propose that the Council invite the observer of the Observer State of Palestine to participate in the meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Khaled Khiari, Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific in the Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations; Mr. Marwan Muasher, Vice-President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former Deputy Prime Minister of Jordan; and Mr. Itay Epshtain, Special Advisor and Senior Humanitarian Law and Policy Consultant at the Norwegian Refugee Council.

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

I give the floor to Mr. Khiari.

Mr. Khiari: The situation in the Middle East is alarming. That includes several interconnected theatres of conflict. In Gaza, intense Israeli ground operations and fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas and others continued in most areas. Hamas and other Palestinian factions continued to fire rockets from Gaza into Israel. Civilians from both sides, particularly in the Gaza Strip, currently continue to bear the brunt of this conflict. The humanitarian situation in Gaza continues to deteriorate. I reiterate the Secretary-General's call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. The implementation of resolution 2712 (2023) will be reported on next week, pursuant to resolution 2720 (2023).

The risk of a regional spillover of this conflict, with potentially devastating consequences for the entire region, remains high given the multitude of actors

involved. The continued daily exchange of fire across the Blue Line poses a grave risk to regional stability. Increasingly, there have been strikes on civilian areas, with civilian casualties on both sides of the Blue Line, in addition to a rising number of fatalities among combatants. While most of those exchanges have been contained to areas within a few kilometres on either side of the Blue Line, there have been several instances of strikes deeper into the territories of Lebanon and Israel, raising the spectre of an uncontained conflict with potentially devastating consequences for the people of both countries. With the risk of miscalculation and further escalation increasing as the conflict in Gaza continues, it is vital that all actors immediately de-escalate and return to a cessation of hostilities under the framework of resolution 1701 (2006).

Attacks on United States bases in Iraq and Syria now take place on a daily basis, with the United States conducting some air strikes against groups suspected of those actions in Iraq and Syria. There are also reported Israeli air strikes inside Syria.

The continued Houthi threats to maritime navigation in the Red Sea are of growing concern. They risk exacerbating regional tensions and further escalation, while also having potentially grave political, economic and humanitarian ramifications for millions in Yemen and the region. Those threats also have potential ramifications on a global scale, if regional and international shipping and supply chains are adversely impacted by further escalation in the Red Sea.

The United Nations continues to encourage de-escalation and a cessation of attacks and threats so that traffic through the Red Sea can return to its normal state and the risk of Yemen being dragged into a regional conflagration can be avoided. The United Nations underscores the importance of ensuring that international law be respected in full in relation to maritime navigation. We appeal to all members of the international community to do everything in their power to use their influence on the relevant parties to prevent an escalation of the situation in the region.

Heightened tensions between Israeli security forces and Palestinians, intensive violence and widespread movement restrictions have continued across the occupied West Bank. Recent weeks have seen some of the most intensive Israeli operations in the West Bank since the second intifada. Many Palestinian casualties in the occupied West Bank occurred in the context of

Israeli operations in Area A, including some during subsequent armed clashes.

Since 7 October, 304 Palestinians, including 79 children, have been killed in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. In addition, two Palestinians from the West Bank were killed while carrying out an attack in Israel on 30 November. Over 70 per cent of the Palestinian fatalities in the West Bank since 7 October have occurred during Israel security forces operations, including some, mainly in Jenin and Tulkarm governorates, involving exchange of fire with Palestinians.

Since 7 October, four Israelis, including three members of the Israeli security forces, have been killed in attacks by Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Another four Israelis were killed during an attack by Palestinians in West Jerusalem. Earlier today, four Israelis were wounded in a reported car-ramping attack south-west of Hebron. The Palestinian driver of the vehicle was shot and killed by Israeli security forces.

On 28 December, two Israeli security forces personnel were stabbed and injured by Palestinians at a checkpoint near Jerusalem. The perpetrator was shot and killed by Israeli security forces. Also on 28 December, Israeli security forces killed a Palestinian man during an operation that involved an exchange of fire in the city of Ramallah. That incident took place in the context of widespread Israeli security forces operations in Ramallah and other cities in the occupied West Bank targeting foreign exchange and money transfer agencies that Israel said were being used to fund Hamas.

On 27 December, Israeli security forces conducted an operation in the Nur Shams refugee camp in Tulkarm, which led to clashes during which Palestinians used an improvised explosive device and Israeli security forces conducted drone strikes that killed six Palestinians, including two children. The Israel Defense Forces said the strikes targeted an armed group of militants who had thrown explosive devices at Israeli security forces.

Settler violence remains a grave concern and continues at high levels. However, there has been a decrease in settler attacks throughout November and December since the spike in violent settler attacks against Palestinians following 7 October.

On 28 December, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published its

report on the deterioration of the human rights situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

To prevent the recurrence of war and the endless cycle of violence, the current hostilities throughout the occupied Palestinian territory must end with a plan to meaningfully advance the parties towards a negotiated solution. We must restore a political horizon and move towards the only viable possibility for a peaceful future: a two-State solution with Gaza as an integral part of an independent Palestinian State, living side by side with Israel in peace and security, based on the 1967 lines and with Jerusalem as the capital of both States, in line with the resolutions adopted by the Council and international law.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Khiari for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Muasher.

Mr. Muasher: I will focus the bulk of my intervention today on the day after the war and the prospect for a political settlement. But first I need to point out that the first priority has to be to end the war on Gaza immediately and permanently. The Palestinians have suffered enough, and there is no humanitarian or international law that condones the carpet bombing of civilians that we witness today, regardless of the cause.

The question that is being asked repeatedly by the international community is: who is going to rule Gaza after Hamas? That is the wrong question to pose if the implication is that this is the end game. Any policy based on that will lead to disastrous results. The repeated killings of civilians on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, the destruction of Gaza once again, the creation of another potential 1.5 million Palestinian refugees and the looming danger of mass transfer should teach us that we cannot solve the problem by sticking to old paradigms that did not work. All the scenarios presented so far have been unrealistic because they focus on the day after Gaza, rather than present solutions with an overall package that goes beyond Gaza and addresses the root cause of the problem — the Israeli occupation. That is the context in which 7 October took place. As abhorrent as the targeting of civilians is, on both sides, the big prison that Gaza practically was, coupled with the lack of any political horizon in the past 10 years to end the occupation, are factors that cannot be ignored. One has to acknowledge a priori that the elements necessary for a serious political process are not there.

The three parties needed to be part of such a process do not seem to be ready. The United States is approaching an election year where the chances for launching a political process that will involve pressure on all sides, particularly Israel, are remote. The current Israeli Government has repeatedly and publicly declared that it has no intention of ending the occupation or helping to establish a Palestinian State. History, as well as public opinion, suggest that this Government will probably be out in a year or so because of Israeli public opinion holding it responsible for what happened on 7 October. All polls suggest that the opposition would handily win any new elections if they were held tomorrow. But the divide in Israel today is not between the pro-peace and anti-peace camps, as was the case decades ago. It is merely between the pro-Netanyahu and anti-Netanyahu camps, with both sides holding a hard line and almost identical stance against a Palestinian State.

The Palestinian Authority also has not had elections since 2006, and its approval rating was very low even before 7 October. No side can claim to represent the Palestinians in any political process without elections.

For all those reasons, the stars are not aligned for a political process that is going to be serious. If we are to learn from earlier processes, the one major shortcoming that all earlier processes had is that they were open-ended. They did not specify an end game, and therefore negotiations took place forever while Israel was building more settlements and rendering the very concept of a two-State solution, which we are all in support of, impossible.

If we cast those difficulties aside, I would like the Council to engage with me, at least hypothetically, in imagining the elements of a process that would learn lessons from the past, that would be seen as serious and that would address the root cause of the problem — the Israeli occupation. The contours of such a process might look like the following.

First, the United States would lead a political plan that would declare a priori a clearly defined objective of ending the occupation within a specified time frame — say, three to five years. Both sides will have to agree to that objective.

Second, the United Nations would adopt a resolution recognizing a Palestinian State on the basis of the 1967 borders a priori, with details to be worked out through negotiations.

Third, settlement activity would be completely frozen.

Fourth, in a reverse engineering process, negotiations become focused on the steps needed to reach that objective rather, than on what the end game looks like.

Fifth, fresh elections are held, both in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza. Over this plan, voters would go to the polls based on this clearly defined political horizon.

Sixth, the issue of who rules Gaza becomes a step along the road to end the occupation, rather than an end game by itself. Solutions that were rejected by both parties today because of the absence of an overall political framework will be revisited.

Seventh, the reconstruction of Gaza becomes a step along the road to a settlement with more parties, such as Gulf States, the European Union or the World Bank, ready to take part, where they are not today. Syria teaches us a lesson here. Despite the fact that the war has been largely over for the past five years there, no reconstruction has taken place in the absence of a plan for the future of the country.

Eighth, an international fund is set up to help Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank stay on their land, to alleviate fears of mass transfer of Palestinians outside Palestinian land.

Does that sound ambitious? It does not even start to address what to do with the settlements issue. Even if the political will were to exist to end the occupation and adopt a two-State solution, separating the two communities would still be a daunting task. But the purpose of my intervention is to indicate what a serious political process entails so that illusions of success — if the past is to be repeated — are cast aside. But if the international community decides that is too unrealistic, let us look at what the alternatives might look like.

First, there is waiting for better times to effect a two-State solution. That has been the preferred scenario for the Biden Administration, as well as that of the international community. That logic states that, in the end, that scenario is the preferred solution for all parties, which at one point in time will come to understand that there is no way out except to share the land by separating the two communities within two States. All one has to do is try to keep things quiet

and wait for a better time, when there are Israeli and Palestinian Governments willing to compromise.

The problem with that logic is that a preferred scenario is not a sufficient condition to make it happen. It assumes a static status quo, which is not the case with the continued expansion of settlements. If the number of settlers today makes it difficult to separate the two communities, the situation will irreversibly worsen in a few years, when the settler community could reach 1 million. If a two-State solution is deemed difficult to effect today, it will, in all probability, become impossible in the future due to those demographic and political realities.

The second scenario is the mass transfer of Palestinians by Israel outside of Palestinian territories. Israel today is faced with another factor that has become impossible to ignore: demography. The number of Palestinian Arabs in areas under Israel's control has become greater than the number of Israeli Jews. If Israel does not intend to end the occupation and accept a two-State solution, and if it does not want to become a minority ruling over a majority in a situation that many human rights organizations — including Israeli ones — have called apartheid, then Israel's preferred alternative under that scenario is to try to effect a mass transfer of Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt and from the West Bank to Jordan.

We are already witnessing several indications of that. Large parts of Gaza have become practically uninhabitable, and several Israeli Cabinet Ministers, including Netanyahu himself, have been directly or indirectly quoted as promoting the forcible or voluntary transfer of Palestinians. But mass transfers will not be easy to implement. Jordan and Egypt have succeeded in drawing international attention to that issue, to the point where the United States and other countries have publicly come out in strong opposition to mass transfer. The Palestinians themselves have learned that lesson from 1948, when 750,000 refugees were forced to leave their land and were never allowed to return by Israel, despite United Nations resolutions to the opposite effect.

The third scenario is that, if a two-State solution is not effected soon — indeed, now — and mass transfer proves to be sufficiently resisted by the Palestinians, then it is most likely that the occupation will continue, albeit with changing conditions. The demographic factor will increasingly matter in the years ahead, with a Palestinian birth rate higher than that of the Israelis.

The loss of hope for a Palestinian State will translate into Palestinians demanding equal rights with Israelis where they live. The Israelis will not be able to indefinitely rule over a majority in a system where Palestinians would be living under apartheid. If that is coupled with the issue of the generational gap we are witnessing in the West — where younger generations are increasingly more supportive of Palestinians and the issue of rights than older generations — then the world will become increasingly more critical of the occupation, and the problem will start shifting from one focusing on the shape of a solution to one anchored in equal rights.

Those are the options for the future. The international community is, in my view, certainly partly to blame for the situation in which we find ourselves today. By abandoning serious attempts to resolve the conflict in recent years and by ignoring the root cause of the problem — the occupation — we are where we are today. The option to pursue another process along the lines of earlier ones is certainly there, but it will fail, with violence continuing to define the world of Palestinians and Israelis in the foreseeable future. Either a bold decision must be taken to end the conflict now and, although still with great difficulty, to try to effect a viable two-State solution, or the world will have to deal not only with occupation, but with the more difficult question of apartheid. The choice is ours.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Muasher for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Epshtain.

Mr. Epshtain: Twelve weeks of unprecedented hostilities in Israel and Gaza and growing tensions and disturbances in the West Bank have elapsed. I wish to make a few legal observations that underpin the humanitarian crisis to which the Norwegian Refugee Council is responding. Some pertain to serious violations that have been perpetrated and continue to occur; others relate to premeditated atrocities, which should be prevented by the Security Council.

All parties — Palestinian armed groups and Israel — have shown reckless disregard for the preemptory norms of international law, including the basic rules of international humanitarian law. They have breached the very rules they must comply with in all circumstances.

The Norwegian Refugee Council has condemned the atrocious violence launched deliberately and indiscriminately by Hamas against Israeli civilians and continues to call for the immediate release of all hostages held *ultra vires* and for the humane treatment of Palestinian detainees in keeping with international law.

The same legal certainty must also mean a halt to the Israeli offensive, from which ordinary Gazans have no refuge, before it claims the lives of even more civilians — many of them women and children. Indiscriminate Israeli attacks affecting the civilian population and civilian objects, as well as those causing excessive loss of life, injury and damage, must be condemned. The unprecedented levels of loss and destruction require our collective efforts to help meet basic needs and redress the starvation of the civilian population of Gaza, which is ongoing at this very moment. Reversing arbitrary, capricious and unlawful limitations on humanitarian relief imposed by Israel, the occupying Power, remains a normative and operational challenge that must be addressed.

As Israeli military operations in Gaza drive civilians closer to its southern borders, the looming possibility of the mass deportation of Palestinians to Egypt grows. That concern follows Israel's forcible transfer of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians within Gaza, and explicit statements by Israeli officials endorsing such deportation without reasonable justification, without proper accommodation or services in places of refuge and without guarantees of return once hostilities end. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits individual or mass forcible transfer and deportations of protected persons from occupied territory, regardless of their motive. Doing so constitutes a grave breach of international humanitarian law, codified as a war crime.

A gross and systemic breach of a peremptory norm demands that all States cooperate in bringing wrongful behaviour to an end through lawful means, intended to induce the wrongdoing State to comply with its obligations. Every Member State of the Council is obligated to prevent war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, each constituting atrocity crimes.

While we mobilize to respond to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza, armed Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank have intensified their campaign of violence against Palestinians. In recent months, whole communities have been forcibly displaced owing to

settler violence. Israeli authorities are doing next to nothing to prevent those attacks, resulting in numerous fatalities. Settler violence is often overlooked by Israeli security forces, and even encouraged by officials and ministers of the Israeli Government.

Preventing settler violence and the corollary forcible transfer of Palestinians entails the invocation of Israel's responsibility for unlawfully transferring its population to occupied territory in order to colonize it. The Council should attribute responsibility to Israel when members of its armed forces, at all ranks and at all times, even when on short-term leave, allow for, and participate in, settler violence, as well as attribute responsibility to Israel when it directly allocates funds and arms to settlement guard squads, often seeming to operate in excess of their prescribed duties and partake in attacks on Palestinians. The Council must not allow Israel to forcibly transfer Palestinians from their land or to continue with the illegal annexation of occupied Palestinian territory in breach of international law. If Israel is not held accountable for those actions, even more Palestinian communities will be forcibly transferred.

Israel, as an occupying Power, is responsible for public life, order and safety in occupied territory, carried out within the framework of Article 43 of The Hague Regulations. Law enforcement operations, such as incursions into West Bank cities, are governed by the international human rights law norms and standards of policing, where the use of lethal force is exceptional and possibly unlawful. Israel is bound by the basic principles on the use of force by law enforcement officials, which establishes the use of lethal force as a measure of last resort. Disturbances and tensions in occupied territory allow no for derogation from that rule.

The Council must demand that Israeli authorities respect and protect the rights of Palestinians, abide by the provisions of the law of occupation and the applicable rules on the use of lethal force and work to de-escalate the ongoing violence in the West Bank. Israeli practices in occupied territory, including the extensive destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure, could push the population into forced and protracted displacement, with limited prospects for repatriation and return. The siege laid on Gaza — the maritime and air blockade and the closure on land severing it from the West Bank, which together form a single self-determination unit — must be lifted.

The prohibition on aggression precludes the acquisition of territory under the threat or use of force and annexation of any kind and for any alleged reason. Protecting civilians from harm — Israelis and Palestinians alike — by all possible means is a fundamental norm of international law that must be respected by all. Reversing annexation and redressing settlement expansion, settler violence and forcible transfer are therefore imperative demands. Civilians are desperate for safety, shelter, food and life-saving treatment for the injured and sick. The Norwegian Refugee Council stresses that peace is the only viable solution for civilians in occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. A mutually agreed armistice agreement suspending active hostilities between the belligerents is a necessary stepping stone towards the pacific resolution of the question of Palestine through such measures outlined in Article 33 of the Charter of the United Nations, including arbitration and judicial settlement. The Council can lay the path towards human security and peace by addressing the root causes of the conflict. Bringing the occupation of Palestinian territory to a close is essential to ending the suffering and enabling aid workers to deliver critical relief in the hope of recovery to those in need.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Epshtain for his briefing.

I now give the floor to the observer of the Observer State of Palestine.

Mr. Bamyá (Palestine): The killing of Palestinian civilians is not a collateral effect of the war. The Israeli assault relies by design on the mass and indiscriminate killing of civilians. The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza is not the consequence of a war. It is a tool employed by Israel to pressure people and force them out. The famine under way is not an undesired outcome of the war. It is starvation as a method of war. The collapse of the health system is not an unforeseen result of a war. It is the result of premeditated attacks against hospitals and medical personnel. The indiscriminate killing, the mass arrests, the filmed humiliation of Palestinians, the enforced disappearances, the abductions and the summary executions are aimed at terrorizing the Palestinian people as a whole.

This is an assault by atrocities — a full-fledged assault on 2.3 million Palestinians, besieged, bombarded, displaced and starved. For more than 80 days, 2.3 million Palestinians have been fighting for

their lives, from dawn until dusk and dusk until dawn, every single day for 80 days. There is undeniable evidence and multiple confessions of the criminal nature of the assault and of its criminal objectives: the destruction of a people to force their displacement. That is why people around the world, States and across the globe and moral voices are expressing outrage and calling for an end to the massacres.

What do you say on behalf of a people enduring a genocide, blamed for their own deaths by those killing them and blamed for the oppression that they are subjected to by those occupying them; and on behalf of a people facing an existential threat, while those responsible for that threat insist that it is their survival that is at stake. The killers demand apologies from those criticizing them for their crimes. They demand political, financial and military support from the allies that they humiliate and dismiss. They demand from their victims to be grateful that they have not imposed on them even more death and destruction. And they demand from the world witnessing their crimes to recognize that they are the most moral army in the world.

Israel considers that the problem lies with those condemning the crimes, not those committing them. It openly attempts to bully, intimidate and silence them. In order to try to justify the unjustifiable, Israel invokes a history that condemns them and principles that they breach. They invoke the Holocaust to justify the mass killing of innocent civilians — a shameful use and abuse of the memory of 6 million innocent victims. We honour the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, and all victims, by upholding international law, not justifying its breach; by saving innocent lives, not justifying indiscriminate killing; and by refusing to have different sets of laws applied based on the identity of the perpetrators and the identity of the victims, not promoting supremacy and discrimination.

The Security Council has called for the protection of civilians; for immediate, safe, unhindered and expanded humanitarian access; for the delivery of humanitarian assistance throughout the Gaza Strip; and for respect for the laws of war, and it has rejected forced displacement — all of which require an immediate ceasefire, which the Council has been repeatedly prevented from calling for. Israel has reacted with disregard and disdain. Why are they getting away with murder at such an unprecedented scale? It is because they have never been held accountable. That is why they confess to their crimes. That is why they steal our

lives, our land, our resources, our money, our past, our present and our future in broad daylight.

One day the massacres will stop. But how will we get over it? How will we get over the mass graves and the inability to bury our loved ones and offer them a dignified burial? How will we get over seeing them in plastic bags? How will we get over 1,000 Palestinian children amputated without anaesthesia? Can you hear their screams? Can you feel their pain? Can you imagine if they were your own children? How can we get over 8,000 Palestinians under the rubble — those who were blessed to die quickly and those who endured a terrible and terrifying death, a slow death under the rubble, while we were unable to save them? How do you get over a genocide?

We will be asked, nevertheless, despite all that we are enduring and all that we have endured for 75 years, to move on — to count on dead one more time, to count our wounded, our permanently disabled, the people scarred for life, the millions of victims — and move on. We will be asked to be peaceful; we will be asked to be grateful that this horrible chapter — among so many other chapters, even though this one is the worst one we have gone through — is over, until the next one begins.

This is the ultimate expression of double standards. The other side is never asked to move on if Israelis are killed. The other side is never asked to be peaceful in such situations. This is the ultimate expression of racism, of dehumanization of our nation. We should all be subject to the same rules and the same expectations. We should all have our humanity recognized and respected. Those who have dared, until now, to find a way or another to justify what is happening in the Gaza Strip, will have to endure shame forever.

For those calling on our people not to seek vengeance and not to resort to violence, they must support our efforts to deliver justice. That is the path we have chosen — justice, not vengeance. But so far that path has been obstructed for the Palestinian people, and no one has ever been held accountable for the crimes committed against the Palestinian people. In order for Palestinian survivors to live with the sense that the massacres will not resume, Israeli impunity cannot be allowed to survive this assault. The horrors that this impunity has led to will continue occurring until the impunity is brought to an end.

The world is discovering the true Gaza, while Israel is destroying it. As Israel destroys our universities and

schools, the world is discovering we have one of the highest literacy rates. As Israel destroys our historic mosques and churches, the world is discovering that we have religious diversity and a Christian community in Gaza — one that is an integral part of our history, our present and our future. The world is discovering the names of brave Palestinian journalists and doctors as it learns that they were killed. The world is discovering a young Palestinian generation that was able to be creative and to perform and to try to lead a life in impossible circumstances only to face death once again. The world is discovering human beings who, despite repeated assaults and a decade and a half of blockade, somehow preserved and cultivated hope, built their homes only to see them destroyed, built them once more and saw them destroyed once more, built them yet again and built their lives. Despite loss and suffering from within the ruins, they were able to rise again, only to face death once again. They found a way back to life only to see death and destruction haunting them once more. How long can that continue?

That is what Israel is attacking — hope. Its greatest enemy is the fact the Palestinian people have not relinquished hope and still have the ability to resurrect. Israel wants to make sure that Palestinians in Gaza have no homes to return to, that they have no life to return to. Israel wants to make sure that life in Gaza is no longer possible, with one aim — what they call “voluntary migration”. What it means is 21,000 people killed — almost half of them children. In addition to the women and children, many innocent men have also been killed. Voluntary migration is a code name for forced displacement. Those are the options for Palestinians — destruction or displacement, death or displacement.

In Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, celebrations were cancelled. But in reality, the message delivered and embodied by Jesus was celebrated by standing up and speaking out for the Palestinian people in Gaza, for the oppressed, those who suffer and those who endure — as he would have done. Bethlehem itself endures its share of pain and suffering, mutilated by a wall and, like all cities and villages of the West Bank, victim of constant attacks by settlers and occupation forces. The reality that the Christians of Palestine are enduring is unbearable. It is the same reality that all Palestinians are enduring, including in the Armenian quarter in occupied East Jerusalem, where they are fighting for their identity and their existence.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the occasion of the report, released yesterday, on the West Bank stressed that:

“the violations documented in this report repeat the pattern and nature of violations reported in the past, in the context of the long-standing Israeli occupation of the West Bank. However, the intensity and the violence and repression is something that has not been seen in years.”

These three months have been the deadliest the West Bank has witnessed in decades, including for children. But do not worry — instead of putting an end to its crimes, Israel will attack the United Nations for reporting on them. There is a war under way against the Palestinian people, as a whole, against our existence and our homeland, against our identity, our history and our future.

A few days ago, Netanyahu expressed his pride to have prevented the independence of the Palestinian State, to have undermined and destroyed the Oslo Peace Accords. He is bragging that he is destroying peace in our region. He is openly bragging that he has been obstructing the chance of peace. By doing so, he has been undermining the security of both the Palestinian people and the Israeli people. His intentions have always been clear to anybody willing to look. He has been one of the main protagonists of the war for Palestinian geography and against Palestinian demography over the past three decades. Netanyahu's political platform is denying Palestinian existence and rights. His political survival requires a never-ending and ever-spreading war. Netanyahu continues rewriting history 75 years after the Nakba, saying that Palestine was a wasteland, when more than 1 million Palestinians lived in cities and had a cultural life and a political life in that land, in order to justify prolonging the Nakba and attempting to finish the job.

We have been down the path of negating existence, killing and destroying so many times before. We have been down that path for 75 years. Does anybody think it is a good idea to continue down that path? Israel announced several times it had handled the Palestinian question. Netanyahu himself told the world a few weeks ago, here in the United Nations (see A/78/PV.10), that there was nothing to worry about, raising a map where Palestine had altogether disappeared. Does anyone believe that the matter was handled? Does anyone believe that more killing, destruction and denial of

rights will put an end to the matter? Recognition of, and respect for, our existence and our rights is the only way towards shared peace and security. That is our goal — shared peace and security.

How much injustice can a nation take — how much killing, how much humiliation, how much pain? Our suffering is not inevitable. It is human-made, occupation made. The powerlessness of some world Powers is not inevitable. It is self-inflicted. There is an international consensus. There is international law. They were not elaborated against anyone but, for the benefit of all, they need to be implemented. We remain committed to them. But they need to protect our people. We cannot only have obligations and be denied our rights, while the other side claims for itself all rights and no obligations. That is not how international law works. It needs to be implemented, as we are witnessing before our very eyes what a breach of that law leads to.

As we approach the new year, 75 years have come and gone, and there is a nation still deprived of its land and of its most fundamental rights — still occupied, oppressed and killed. Our people have outlasted the massacres before. They will outlast them once again. But those killed will not be brought back to life. Those scars will never truly heal. The impact of the Israeli massacres in Gaza will be felt for decades. That is true, of course, for the Palestinian people who bear the wounds on their flesh, but also in our region and across the world. And if hope is not restored and freedom does not prevail, no one can predict the next chapter of this tragedy. But everyone knows it will be worse.

As the world welcomes a new year, the massacres in Palestine continue, the injustice continues and the suffering continues. How many Palestinian generations will have to suffer before finally being able to live in freedom, dignity and peace in our ancestral land? We want to stop seeing our Nakba grow and to finally be able to see our children grow.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Erdan (Israel): I am honestly shocked to be sitting here today. I am shocked by the focus of this briefing. I am shocked by the blatant lies being spread. I am shocked at the utter dissonance from the reality on the ground. But most of all, I am shocked by the Security Council's willingness to waste its time focusing on such a marginal extremist phenomenon while the entire

region is on fire. And the true reason for this raging fire receives complete silence here.

Just yesterday morning, rockets were fired from Lebanon at population centres in Haifa and Acre in northern Israel. Two days ago, rockets were fired at the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shemona. And three days ago, Hizbullah fired guided anti-tank missiles at Saint Mary's Church in Western Galilee, injuring 11 people. Yet those brazen attacks on civilians, towns, cities and holy sites do not warrant an urgent briefing here in the Council. Do those attacks sound like a mere spillover? Is that violence occurring magically on its own? Is it not clear that genocidal terrorists are seeking to murder Israeli citizens every single day?

The Council is quick to show solidarity with civilians across the Middle East as long as they are not Israelis. In fact, hardly a week goes by without some meeting regarding the protection of civilians in Gaza, and not a week passes without the United Nations and its officials calling to shield Lebanon and Syria. So why, when it comes to innocent Israeli civilians being targeted in northern Israel every day by Hizbullah, Hamas and other Palestinian organizations, is the Council silent? Why has it not condemned the rocket fire from Lebanon, Syria and Yemen?

The situation in northern Israel is reaching a point of no return. Every day, innocent Israelis are under attack. If those attacks persist, Israel will ensure that those acts of terror stop. So why have Council members not spoken up? Why have they not demanded that Lebanon take action to prevent terror attacks being carried out from their territory? Why is it that the United Nations remains silent in the face of terror only when it is directed against Israel? A total of 50,000 Israeli civilians have been displaced along the northern border because of the Iranian-backed attacks by Hizbullah from Lebanon. Those attacks are a flagrant violation of Israel's sovereignty, international law and the resolutions of the Council, in particular resolution 1701 (2006).

If those attacks continue, I reiterate that the situation will escalate and may lead to a full-scale war. Lebanon must be held accountable for the aggression carried out from its territory. And let me be clear again — Israel will defend itself. I have warned the Council countless times and sent it letters, but instead of discussing this clear and present threat to the security of the Middle East, we are here again discussing a marginal issue that is a result of the conflict, but not its root cause.

Israel is currently fighting a war for its very future against genocidal Hamas terrorists, who committed the most widespread massacre of Israelis. Eighty-four days after 1,300 Israelis were butchered, and while 129 are still being held hostage in Hamas's terror tunnels, the Council still has not even condemned the Hamas Nazis' attack. Does the Council truly believe that the disgraceful act of a handful of Israeli extremists is the true roadblock to a solution? Is that the topic that the Council should be focused on today — acts of violence, mostly damage to property, which Israel's police force is cracking down upon to the full extent of the law? Rockets are raining down on Israel's north and south, and entire families have been burned alive by Hamas-Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham — but extremist violence is the hurdle to peace?

There were no Israelis in the West Bank in 1948. There were no Israelis in the West Bank in 1967. Yet the Palestinians and Arab countries still sought to annihilate Israel. Do Council members not see the absurdity? When will they address the true obstacles to peace in our region?

Last week, there were four instances of extremist violence against Palestinians in Judea and Samaria. And if we look at the numbers over the past three months, it is clear that extremist violence is de-escalating — contrary to the focus of this briefing. Israel condemns every act of violence. The Israeli leadership — contrary to what was said here today — has made that clear. We condemned it. And not only are such crimes condemned by Israel, severe action is also being taken to combat them. Arrests have been made, indictments have been issued, and we make every effort to bring all perpetrators to justice. But still, this is a marginal issue, and it is in decline. So why has the Council dedicated an urgent briefing to this topic in the midst of a war?

But if Council members want to discuss Judea and Samaria — or the West Bank, as they call it — despite a war raging in the south and another war brewing in the north, let us talk about the widespread phenomenon that is truly threatening the situation in Judea and Samaria: Palestinian terror. Let us talk numbers. Since 7 October, there have been 1,028 shootings, stabbings and improvised explosive device attacks by Palestinian terrorists against Israelis. In the same period, there have been 2,118 rock-throwing attacks and Molotov-cocktail fire-bombings by Palestinian terrorists on Israelis. That is the reality. In less than three months, there were more than 3,000 Palestinian terror attacks — 15 times more

than the number of incidents of extremist Israeli violence in the same time frame. Throughout 2023, nearly 8,000 Palestinian terror attacks have been carried out against Israelis in Judea and Samaria. Yet, according to reports by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, such attacks have been virtually non-existent.

The Council is being lied to, because for the United Nations and its agencies, the truth is subjective. That is not only the case regarding Palestinian terror in Judea and Samaria — it is also the case in Gaza and wherever there is Palestinian terror carried out against Israelis. The United Nations either distorts or ignores the facts regarding Israeli terror victims. The United Nations is one of the main driving forces for the sick phenomena we are seeing now. From the 7 October atrocity denial to the denial of rape and sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas, the United Nations is an accomplice of terror organizations and antisemites — because for the United Nations, Israeli lives do not matter. Why is it that the casualty numbers supplied by the Hamas Ministry of Health are immediately taken at face value here, while Israeli evidence of Hamas atrocities needs to be authenticated through the United Nations rigorous triangular verification process?

As we count our injured, missing and murdered in the wake of the 7 October massacre, we are again learning just what a long process it is to draw up an accurate and reliable list of civilian casualties, even with the most sophisticated capabilities in place. Yet Hamas's so-called Ministry of Health is always able to immediately determine the number of injured or dead after every incident. Does that not lead members to question whether there is any truth to Hamas's numbers, which the United Nations is so quick to parrot?

The United Nations has no system to verify the lies of terrorists. I have said so before and I am saying it again now. For the United Nations, genocidal terrorists are more trustworthy than the law-abiding democracy of Israel. For the United Nations, thousands of terror attacks against Israelis in the West Bank and elsewhere are not important enough to be reported upon, whereas marginal cases of extremist violence become the main focus of an urgent Council briefing. The poisonous bias of United Nations agencies truly knows no bounds.

This organ has been weaponized to brand the side defending itself against terror as the source of the problem. Rather than advancing real solutions to combat murderous terrorist organizations, the Council

is focusing on Israel's counter-terror operations in Judea and Samaria. I therefore want to make the facts clear.

Every single one of Israel's military operations in Judea and Samaria has one goal and one goal only: to neutralize ticking time bombs of terror. Over 80 per cent of the Palestinian fatalities during Israel's counter-terror operations were known and armed terrorists. We have their names, but the United Nations refuses to verify the facts. The Council immediately accepts libellous numbers that are detached from the context of the war against terror.

As a result of this week's mission in Tulkarem — just one example — which targeted Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas terror infrastructure, the Israel Defense Forces seized many rockets and weapons and uncovered an explosives lab. Do members think that Israel wishes to risk the lives of its soldiers by entering those Palestinian cities? Do members truly think Israel wants to put its troops in harm's way? Of course not.

Sadly, the only reason that Israel is forced to carry out those operations is because the Palestinian Authority refuses to root out the jihadist terrorists themselves. Israel will always defend itself. We will always take action against threats to our citizens, just as any other country would. And if the Palestinian Authority stands idly by, Israel will act.

If one is truly impartial, then the truth about the Israeli Palestinian conflict is very simple. Israel's former Prime Minister, Golda Meir, summed it up in the past with perfect clarity:

"If the Arabs" — in our case, the Palestinians — "put down their weapons today, there would be no more violence. If the Jews put down their weapons today, there would be no more Israel."

I think all here know that in their hearts.

Ever since the United Nations adopted the partition plan in 1947, every enemy of Israel that laid down its arms and chose to live side by side with us was met with immediate coexistence and peace. It is not by chance that the conflict with the Palestinians continues to this day. It is not because of Israeli military operations; it is not because of extremist violence. It is solely because of Palestinian terror and Palestinian incitement against our right to exist as a Jewish State. It is the sheer evil of Hamas that prefers to annihilate Israel while oppressing Gazans. It is the pay-for-slay policy of the Palestinian Authority and its indoctrination to jihad.

Sadly, it is also the indifference of the United Nations and the Security Council to their heinous crimes. Time and again, the Council refuses to address the real obstacles and continues to dedicate time and energy to discussions that will bear no fruit. It is truly sad.

The Council is suffering from the streetlight effect. What is that effect, members may be wondering? I will remind them: a drunk man is stumbling around under a streetlight at night looking for his keys, which he has lost. A police officer approaches him and begins to help him search. After a couple of minutes, the police officer turns to the man and says: "I cannot see your keys anywhere. Are you sure that you lost them here, under the streetlamp?" The man turns to the officer and says: "No, I lost them in the park down the road. I am looking for them here only because this area is not dark."

Therefore, members of the Council are constantly being dragged underneath the streetlight. The distortion of United Nations agencies also drags them underneath the same streetlight. But there is nothing to be found under that streetlight — it is just easier to spend their time underneath it. Today members have been dragged here again by the League of Arab States to give them the impression that the core of the conflict is not Palestinian terror, but Israel's acts of self-defence against Palestinian terror.

Rather than spend the Council's valuable time discussing the only way to resolve the conflict, they are being briefed by vehemently biased anti-Israel briefers. The Council has never invited a briefer who is truly impartial or can say even one word of criticism against the Palestinian Authority or the Palestinian leadership. That is why members are being falsely told that Israel's actions are the obstacle to peace, while Palestinian terror is hardly even mentioned, let alone discussed or addressed.

If the Council's noble cause is to bring peace and security to the Middle East, I suggest it start with the situation at hand, namely, Hamas, Hizbullah and their Iranian puppet masters and all other genocidal jihadists threatening stability in the region. There is only one solution to ending the war in Gaza immediately: the Hamas terrorists must turn themselves in and release all hostages. That is the only solution, and that is precisely what the Council should be focused on advancing. Can the Council unite to back that solution? Sadly not. The

Council cannot even come together to condemn the atrocities of 7 October.

It is heartbreaking to see the Council not taking any constructive steps to end the war in Gaza, but it is particularly heart-wrenching to see the Council's inaction towards freeing our hostages from Hamas. It is shameful that the suffering of innocents — women, babies, the elderly — who were kidnaped from their beds have become a footnote to the Council, to the Secretary-General, to the International Committee of the Red Cross and to all United Nations bodies.

I reiterate that calling for the hostages' release is not enough. The world must remember them every day. They committed no crime, and now they are locked away in a dark terror tunnel in Gaza. While the United Nations may choose indifference, Israel will not stop until we bring them home. Our hostages will not be forgotten. The world and the people of Gaza must know their names in order to remember why the war in Gaza is ongoing and will continue until we bring all of the hostages home.

We will never stop fighting for our hostages, and I want to read their names here: Tamir Adar, Alon Ahal, Yosef Chaim Ohana, Dror Or, Avinatan Or, Tomer Yaakov Ahimas, Guy Iluz, Mohamed El Atrash, Liri Elbag, Itzhak Elgarat, Youssef Alziadana, Hamza Alziadana, Idan Alexander, Farhan Alkadi, Ronen Angel, Matan Angrest, Aviv Atzili, Noa Argamani, Karina Arieiev, Elkana Bohbot, Yagev Buchshtav, Amit Buskila, Kfir Bibas, Yarden Bibas, Ariel Bibas, Ohad Ben Ami, Ron Binyamin, Agam Berger, Kiril Brodsky, Sahar Baruch, Ariel Baruch, Rom Braslavski, Ziv Berman, Gali Berman, Almog Meir Jan, Ran Gvili, Many Godard, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, Oren Goldin, Romi Gonen, Maya Goren, Daniella Gilboa, Gal Gilboa-Dalal, Itzhak Gelerenter, Carmel Gat, Shaked Dahan, Eviatar David, Emily Damari, Oz Daniel, Ori Danino, Alexander Dancyg, Sagi Dekel Chen, Yair Horn, Eitan Horn, Inbar Haiman, Louis Har, Maxim Herkin, Omer Wenkert, Shlomi Ziv, Arye Zalmanovich, Gad Haggai, Tal Haimi, Asaf Hamami, Itai Chen, Alexander Trupanov, Dolev Yahud, Arbel Yahud, Ohad Yahalomi, Yair Yaakov, Eden Yerushalmi, Nimrod Cohen, Elia Cohen, Segev Kalfon, Ravid Arie Katz, Alexander Lobanov, Naama Levy, Eitan Levy, Or Levy, Shay Levinson, Shani Louk, Eliakim Liebman, Judi Lynne Weistein, Oded Lifshitz, Gadi Moshe Mosez, Abraham Munder, Eitan Mor, Omri Miran, Shlomo Mansour, Yoram Metzger, Eliyahu Margalit, Simon Marman,

Omer Maxim Neutra, Michel Nisenbaum, Tamir Nimrodi, Itay Svirsky, Keith Siegel, Shiri Silverman Bibas, Jonatan Samerano, Almog Sarusi, Tsachi Idan, Nadav Popplewell, Chaim Peri, Daniel Shimon Perez, Matan Zanguaker, Andrei Kozlov, David Cunio, Ariel Cunio, Amiram Cooper, Bar Kuperstein, Ofra Keider, Ofer Kalderon, Elad Katzir, Lior Rudaeff, Tal Shoham, Doron Steinbrecher, Omer Shem Tov, Yossi Sharabi, Eliyahu Sharabi, Orión Hernández Radoux, Bipin Joshi, Surasak Lamnau, Joshua Loitu Mollel, Sonthaya Akasri, Natthaphong Pinta, Sudthisak Rinthalak, Banawat Sayataso, Watchara Sriuan, Sathian Suwanakam and Pongsak Thaenna.

Those are our hostages, and, for them, we will never stop fighting. We are fighting for their release, and Council members should also be doing the same.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I shall now give the floor to those members of the Security Council who wish to make statements.

Mrs. Nusseibeh (United Arab Emirates): I would like to say at the outset that here has not been a Security Council meeting on the subject when the Council has not collectively demanded the urgent release of all hostages held in the Gaza Strip. In fact, the resolution adopted by the Council last week (resolution 2720 (2023)), penned by the United Arab Emirates, demanded their urgent release and for medical access to be provided immediately.

I would like to thank all the briefers here today for their powerful statements underscoring why the United Arab Emirates called for this urgent meeting on the very viability of the two-State solution and stability in our region. In this latest war of the decades-long conflict, it is clear that we are at a crossroads. Many of the countries represented in this Chamber, mine included, have to make bold and perhaps uncomfortable decisions at this moment. The alternative is the hellscape of Gaza, expanded into the West Bank, Israel, Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East. Gaza in 2023 demonstrates the immense capacity of humans to inflict untold horror on other humans. Advanced military systems have intensified beyond imagination the scale and pace of the death and destruction. This is a war of extremists, radicalizing youth in schools, universities and streets in the Middle East and beyond.

Since the horrific attacks of 7 October on Israel and the war that followed, we were told within and outside this Chamber that Israel's defence would decisively

achieve a clearly defined endgame, while following the rules of war, because that is what democracies do. After nearly three months and 21,000 Palestinians killed, those declarations and commitments are a fallacy. We have all been in frequent contact with humanitarians on the ground in Gaza, and their dystopian accounts, unbearable to hear let alone live through, are known to everybody here. Civilians move up and down this strip of land in a desperate futile search for safety, too often killed in the process. Two-thousand-pound munitions — bombs not used in half a century — are dropped on Gaza, risking the lives of more than 2 million Palestinians and, it must be said, the more than 129 hostages that remain in the Strip.

In the face of the carnage, we have all rediscovered the urgency of achieving the two-State solution as a way forward out of this. But the reawakened sense of historic and moral responsibility must manifest itself in decisive action, with clear guardrails defined to keep this on track. It must recognize that the violence visited by Israeli settlers on Palestinians in the West Bank is the logical endpoint of a settler enterprise that has been swallowing up Palestinian land for decades. With more than 300 dead in the West Bank, 80 of them children, and escalating Israeli raids across Palestinians towns and cities, it is clear that far more tectonic shifts are under way than Gaza alone.

When leaders proudly claim that their life's work was the prevention of the two-State solution, when they openly call for the expulsion of Palestinians from their land and when they routinely threaten other countries with a fate similar to that of Gaza, we must recognize the need here for a fundamental reset. This war is already different, and how it ends must be different. There must be an international presence to monitor the ceasefire, for it to hold. And there needs to be a plan towards separation that starts, rather than ends, with a Palestinian State. Bold steps like that are required, else how would Palestinians, subjected to the unrestrained slaughter of the war, turn around and, over bodies of their kin and rubble of their homes, stretch their hand out to make peace?

The late Yitzhak Rabin explained that sanctifying human life, as the Book of Books commands, requires not armoured plating or tanks or planes or concrete fortifications, but peace. Less than a year later, an extremist killed him after a rally in central Tel Aviv, where Israeli and Palestinian flags were flown by thousands yearning to sanctify their lives and the

lives of their neighbours. All of us have learned, some more recently than others, that we cannot make Israelis or Palestinians choose what we want them to do. But we can choose. We can choose to admit that we all know this to be true: what is happening in Gaza does not meet this language's, or any other language's, definition of self-defence. We can choose to make the hard and necessary sacrifices for peace and security to ensure that, once the war stops, it never restarts. We can choose to impose a prohibitive political, legal and financial cost on the extremist settler expansion and violence that has ravaged the West Bank. We can choose to recognize that, for the Jewish homeland to truly realize its founding aspirations, it cannot be built on top of an occupation. We can choose to deny extremists and their many enablers — however they sound or look — the legitimacy of leadership and our backing. We can choose to understand that 7 October evoked moments of visceral fear and vulnerability among Jews in Israel and around the world. We can choose to finally uphold the promise of “never again” and ensure its universality. We can choose to learn the lessons of this ancient playbook and refuse to allow it to unfold once more in generational hatred and grievance.

Nothing about this conflict was inevitable. Nothing about where we go from here is inevitable. At every moment, there was, and is, choice. But we must make those decisions now and use the collective courage of the countries within and outside this Chamber to change course. We must give an alternative vision of hope against the raging nihilistic extremism that wishes to see our region swallowed whole in this wave.

Mr. Kelley (United States of America): I would like to thank our three briefers for their helpful remarks this morning.

The United States shares the concern regarding the sharp increase in violence by extremist settlers in the West Bank and the unprecedented number of Palestinian fatalities both there and in Gaza over the past three months.

We know that 2023 has been the deadliest year for the Palestinians in the West Bank. As we have said repeatedly, the death of any civilian — whether they were one of the individuals killed by Hamas terrorists on 7 October in Israel, or one of the Palestinians killed in the West Bank or Gaza — is a tragedy. The United States continues to stress to the Israeli Government the importance of preventing extremist settler violence,

as well as investigating and holding accountable those who commit acts of violence.

To that end, the United States will continue to implement visa restrictions as announced on 5 December, targeting individuals believed to have been involved in, or to have meaningfully contributed to, undermining peace, security or stability in the West Bank. And we have already taken steps to impose visa restrictions on dozens of individuals under that policy. Those restrictions reinforce the United States' long-held belief that advancing settlements in the West Bank undermines the prospects of a future Palestinian State and a two-State solution — as do any actions that undermine stability in the West Bank, including attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians and Palestinian attacks against Israelis. As President Biden has repeatedly said, those attacks are unacceptable.

Let us be clear: a two-State solution, where Israelis and Palestinians live side by side in peace, is the path to peace. That path to peace is not a smooth or a fast one. And the ongoing construction of settlements and the increase in violence in the West Bank makes this challenging journey even more difficult. In addition, we also know the continued control of Gaza by Hamas, a group that has dedicated its entire existence to the elimination of Israel, precludes a pathway to a viable two-State solution in which Israel's security is guaranteed and the Palestinian people can fully realize their aspirations.

As we work towards a lasting peace, we must all continue to call out and condemn dehumanizing rhetoric, which persists at alarming levels on all sides. There can be no justification for terrorism or attacks on civilians, and we condemn horrific Hamas's glorification of violence. And yet, some members of the Council cannot bring themselves to condemn Hamas's brutal terrorist attacks on 7 October. It is outrageous and beneath the dignity of the Council. Moreover, it is striking that even as, again, we hear many countries urging the end to this conflict, which we would all like to see, we hear very few demands on Hamas to stop hiding behind civilians, lay down its arms and surrender. How can it be that we hear so few demands directed at Hamas? We all need to press Hamas to do what is necessary to end the conflict it set in motion.

That brings me to the dire humanitarian situation facing the Palestinian people. Last week, in adopting a humanitarian-focused resolution (resolution 2720

(2023)), the Council spoke out about this crisis, and we made it clear that aid must be scaled up and humanitarian actors on the ground must be supported and protected. Now we need to see those words realized on the ground. And for our part, the United States will continue to lead and work with regional partners, humanitarian organizations and the United Nations to get aid into the hands of those in need. To that end, we welcome the appointment of Ms. Sigrid Kaag, who will serve as the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza. She has the depth of experience and relationships in the region to hit the ground running. We look forward to coordinating closely with Ms. Kaag and the United Nations on efforts to accelerate and streamline the delivery of live-saving humanitarian relief to Palestinian civilians living in Gaza. We also expect, per her title, that she will play an important role in coordinating reconstruction efforts in Gaza. We continue to look to Israel to enable humanitarian actors' distribution of assistance inside Gaza, including with a strong and responsive deconfliction and telecommunications mechanism. Such steps should have a meaningful impact as we look to increase aid flows to Gaza.

Last week's resolution also emphasized that all parties must respect international humanitarian law. And, as we have made clear time and time again, that includes Israel, which should take additional actions to avoid civilian harm. As Secretary Blinken noted last week, it is clear the conflict needs to move to a lower-intensity phase, and we would like to see a shift to more targeted operations with a smaller number of forces focused on dealing with the leadership of Hamas and the tunnel network. Such a shift should help reduce harm to civilians.

Of course, another important humanitarian dimension of the conflict is the hostage situation. Israel has been clear it would welcome returning to a pause and the further release of hostages. Hamas therefore remains a problem. They reneged on commitments they made during the first pause for hostage releases, and we question whether they are in fact willing to resume that effort. We remain engaged in efforts to secure another pause and once again get hostages moving out of Gaza.

Finally, the United States reiterates that regional actors should not seek to widen this conflict. We join other members of the Security Council in condemning the Houthis' attacks on commercial shipping vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. We call for the

Council to speak out and take action against those attacks without delay. We are also concerned by the renewed violence along the border between Israel and Lebanon, and underscore to both Governments the need to address the situation through diplomacy rather than force. And we continue to condemn Iran's support for partner and proxy groups throughout the region.

We meet just two days before the New Year. And the past year, and especially the last few months, have been immensely difficult and painful — for Israelis and Palestinians first and foremost, but also for all of us, who have watched devastating images of suffering pour out across our screens. Our goal in the year to come must be to work towards a lasting peace and a two-State solution so that the next generation, and the generations to come, need not experience the devastation of the last year and can finally live side by side in States of their own, with equal measures of security, freedom, opportunity and dignity.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the United Arab Emirates for convening this meeting. We also thank our briefers — Mr. Khaled Khiari, Mr. Marwan Muasher and Mr. Itay Epshtain — for their interesting and valuable briefings.

We are following with concern the situation in the West Bank, which continues to be very tense and where, against the backdrop of Israel's deadly cleansing of the Gaza Strip, no less brutal attacks by extremist settlers and forceful raids by Israeli security forces are taking place. That threatens not only to expand the scale of the humanitarian disaster in the occupied Palestinian territories but also to spread the crisis to the entire region. Security in Lebanon and Syria is at risk. In addition to that, violence around the enclave is provoking tensions in Iraq and Yemen, whereas Egypt and Jordan are facing unprecedented risks of a mass exodus of Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank.

According to United Nations statistics, 304 Palestinians, including 79 children, have been killed by the Israeli military and settlers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since 7 October this year. That amounts to 60 per cent of all Palestinians — 504 people — who have been killed in the West Bank in 2023. The year 2023 was therefore the deadliest year on record for the inhabitants of the West Bank. The number of those wounded by the Israeli military, as well as settlers, stands at almost 4,000 Palestinians,

including 576 children. In the context of violence in the West Bank, we would like to underscore, on a separate note, that Israel's numerous security operations in that part of the occupied Palestinian territories began long before the terrorist attack of 7 October, which, I wish to stress once again, we categorically condemn. Those raids began without any linkage to the terrorist threat, which the Israelis have used as a pretext to embark upon a cleansing of Gaza that is unprecedented in the casualties and destruction it has caused, with the number of victims having already exceeded 21,000 and the number of casualties among United Nations personnel having reached 144, including staff members of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Development Programme. In addition, 311 health-care workers and 103 journalists have fallen victim to Israeli attacks. Against that backdrop, the confiscation of Palestinian property and the demolition of their homes continue, while West Jerusalem pursues its illegal policy towards expanding Israeli settlements, in violation of the provisions of resolution 2334 (2016).

We believe that the primary task is to stop the bloodshed and create conditions for the provision of necessary humanitarian assistance to all those in need in the occupied Palestinian territories. Unfortunately, the numerous attempts that we have made, together with like-minded delegations, to have the Security Council adopt a resolution demanding an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire, at least for humanitarian purposes, have been met with firm opposition from the United States. Such an approach from Washington stems from its one-sided and selfish position aimed at derailing any Middle East settlement process and covering up any steps taken by its ally in the region, Israel. In fact, the United States is today the only State in the world, apart from Israel, that opposes the international consensus that there is no alternative to a humanitarian cessation of hostilities in Gaza.

As a result, since the beginning of the crisis, the Council has adopted two toothless resolutions, 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023), which Washington left emasculated and lacking any direct demand for the parties to cease fire — something that heads of international humanitarian agencies and Secretary-General Guterres have called for repeatedly. Without a hint of hesitation, the United States deleted any such passages when the delegations first started

negotiations. The Americans allowed only extremely weakened language that would in no way prevent the continuation of Israel's military operation in Gaza. As a result, through the fault of the United States alone, the Council, the main United Nations body for maintaining international peace and security, has been unable to fulfil its direct mandate for three months now. This unacceptable situation reveals the obvious double standards of our American colleagues with regard to the crises in Gaza and other regions of the world.

The Russian Federation abstained in the voting on both resolutions in response to appeals of Palestinian and Arab representatives. At the same time, we cherish our historically close relations with both Palestinians and Israelis and reaffirm our unchanged approaches. We condemn the terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October, but that should not and cannot justify the ensuing collective punishment of Palestinian civilians. The Permanent Representative of Israel has just named all the remaining Israeli hostages in Gaza. I would like to reaffirm, as my colleague from the United Arab Emirates has already done, that we call for their immediate release in all our statements and the Council calls for that in all its products. That being said, I would like to ask a question: how many hostages have been released during Israel's operation in Gaza? How many were killed by friendly fire and how many during the seven-day humanitarian pause? The answer is obvious. How does the indiscriminate killing of Palestinian women and children in Gaza advance the task of releasing hostages? That is why we have consistently advocated for an urgent ceasefire as a prerequisite for ensuring the safety of the civilian population, unimpeded humanitarian access to all those in need, the release of detainees, including hostages, and the return of this conflict's resolution process to the political and diplomatic track.

Unfortunately, the political horizon that many are talking about is not yet in sight. But it is important to work now to restore that political horizon in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement process on a universally recognized international legal basis that provides for the establishment of an independent Palestinian State within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, coexisting in peace and security with Israel. Only this balanced, unbiased approach based on international law, rather than attempts to achieve economic pacts between a number of Arab States and

Israel without a just solution to the Palestinian problem, can secure a sustainable peace in the Middle East.

Ms. Gatt (Malta): I would like to thank Assistant Secretary-General Khiari, Mr. Muasher and Mr. Epshtain for their remarks. They truly illustrate the precarious situation we continue to witness in the region.

The catastrophic humanitarian situation and the continued state of hostilities in Gaza are untenable. They are leading to unprecedented levels of human suffering, with thousands of civilians being killed and thousands more injured or maimed. The continued bombardment of the middle of Gaza, including the air strikes on three refugee camps, is especially worrisome. Those attacks come after instructions from Israeli forces for residents from the south of Wadi Gaza to move to middle Gaza. The resulting scenes, including strikes that hit residential buildings in Al-Maghazi refugee camp, are truly harrowing.

On several occasions, Malta has unreservedly condemned Hamas's acts of terror, including the heinous attacks of 7 October. Terror has no justification, and the Security Council must also be clear in rejecting it. We once again call for the safe and unconditional release of all remaining hostages.

At the same time, Malta has also reiterated Israel's right to protect her citizens. However, we continue to stress that it is paramount that any such actions be taken with respect for international humanitarian law. The principles of international humanitarian law, including distinction, proportionality and precaution, must be respected at all times. All parties are obliged to ensure that all measures to protect civilians are taken.

As highlighted by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, most people in Gaza have been displaced on multiple occasions. The civilian population continues to suffer from limited food supplies and lack basic survival items. Forty per cent are at risk of famine. Despite this desperate situation, continued hostilities continue to impede the delivery of aid. In such circumstances, the full implementation of all provisions of resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023) and the establishment of an immediate humanitarian ceasefire are the only ways to avoid further death and destruction.

Malta remains deeply concerned about the rapidly deteriorating situation in the West Bank, including the

scale of recent Israeli military operations in the West Bank. This threatens to lead to even more violence. Malta urges Israel to exercise utmost restraint, including in the usage of live ammunition and explosive weapons, to abide by international humanitarian law and to prioritize the protection of civilians.

In that context, we stress our concern about the recent report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which reports on the use of military tactics, disproportionate force and the imposition of movement restrictions in the West Bank. Those measures impact broad segments of the Palestinian population. We echo the call of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for Israeli authorities to take clear and effective steps towards ceasing such practices. We also remain deeply concerned about demolitions, the forcible transfer of Palestinian communities and the resurgence of illegal settler encroachment and violence. Settlements are illegal under international law and constitute an obstacle to peace. Attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinian residents and properties are inexcusable and cannot be met with impunity. The continued recurrence of such acts only threatens the viability of a two-State solution, which remains the only path to a lasting and sustainable peace in the Middle East. Provocations and increased tensions around the holy sites in Jerusalem is another factor that only serves to exacerbate tensions. The integrity of the holy sites and the legal and historical status quo must be upheld and fully respected at all times. Any act that undermines that is unacceptable.

The situation poses a serious threat to regional peace with international repercussions. Continued and escalatory skirmishes along the Blue Line continue to raise tensions. We strongly call on all parties, including non-State actors in the region, to exercise restraint — including in their messaging — de-escalate and respect the norms of international law.

The deteriorating maritime security situation in the Red Sea is also of deep concern. Avoiding a regional conflagration is of the utmost importance and must be avoided at all costs.

This violence continues to push us away from a political horizon to the conflict. Malta reaffirms its unwavering commitment to a two-State solution along the pre-1967 borders, addressing the legitimate aspirations of both sides, with Jerusalem as the future capital of two States living side-by-side in peace and

security, in line with the relevant Security Council resolutions and internationally agreed parameters.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mr. Khiari, Mr. Muasher and Mr. Epshtain for their briefings.

France remains deeply concerned about the current crisis in Gaza, which continues to worsen. I have three points to make in that regard.

First, I call for the implementation, as a matter of priority, of a lasting ceasefire, with the help of all regional and international partners, as French President Emmanuel Macron insistently proposed.

There is an urgent need to deliver more humanitarian aid to population, who need it more than ever, and to ensure unhindered access to that aid. In that respect, I welcome the commitment of the United Nations, particularly that of the staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. France calls on Israel to facilitate the delivery of aid throughout the Gaza Strip. The use of all access routes must be facilitated, including through the opening of the Kerem Shalom crossing. France supports the Organization's call to open useful crossing points, including the Erez crossing in the north, the Israeli port of Ashdod and a direct maritime corridor between Gaza and Cyprus.

The two resolutions adopted by the Council in recent weeks (resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023)) must be applied. In that respect, France reiterates that international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions must be applied by all in all circumstances, as expressly indicated by the Council.

France welcomes the appointment of Ms. Sigrid Kaag as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza and assures her of its full support. France will continue to play its full role in the humanitarian plan and to provide humanitarian, financial and material aid to the civilian population of the Gaza Strip.

Responding to the humanitarian crisis is an urgent necessity, but the Council cannot treat only the symptoms of the crisis. My second point therefore concerns the attacks of 7 October and their consequences. All hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally, as called for in resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023).

The Council must condemn the terrorist attacks committed by Hamas and other terrorist groups on 7 October, including the sexual violence. It is incomprehensible that the Council has still been unable to do so. France will continue to take action in order to impose sanctions against Hamas at the European level.

Finally, on the political front, France will continue to work towards a rapid end to the crisis, based on the two-State solution — the only solution that can help build a just and lasting peace. We must work to build a State for the Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority has a central role to play in that process, both in the West Bank and in Gaza, which is destined to become part of that Palestinian State.

It is now critical to prevent a regional escalation, and France is making every effort to that end. The situation in the West Bank is deteriorating by the day. The stability of Lebanon and the region requires full compliance with resolution 1701 (2006) by all parties. France strongly condemns the Houthi attacks against commercial vessels in the Red Sea. It will continue to work to contribute to maritime safety in the region and to preserve freedom of navigation.

Mr. Agyeman (Ghana): Let me begin by thanking Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khiari and the other two briefers for their perspectives on the precarious and volatile security situation prevailing across the Middle East against the backdrop of the war in the Gaza Strip that has been ongoing since the horrific attacks of 7 October. We have also listened carefully to the representatives of the Observer State of Palestine and the State of Israel and note their perspectives.

In ordinary times, the end of the year should be a time of deep reflection and a period for renewing optimism and hope for the future. As it relates to Palestine, however, the unfolding events, including the growing risk of a regional spillover, have obscured the prospects for durable and sustainable peace and diminished the horizon for a viable pathway away from the brutality of war.

Even as the Council meets, families in the region and beyond are in anguish. The fate of loved ones still held captive by Hamas remains uncertain, and more than 21,000 civilians — mainly women and children — have been reported killed in the Gaza Strip, in addition to those killed on 7 October in Israel. With the grave situation in Gaza threatening even more lives, time is running out to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

We therefore welcome the Secretary-General's expeditious appointment of Sigrid Kaag as the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator and encourage her efforts, as mandated by the Council in resolution 2720 (2023), paragraph 4. We consider the success of the Senior Coordinator as critical for the intermediate goals that support the overall peace objectives for Palestine and urge the cooperation and support of all.

We reiterate the demands of resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023) for all parties to the conflict to comply with international law, including as it relates to their conduct of hostilities and the protection of civilians and civilian objects, especially critical infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

Based on the expanding situation on the ground, we are compelled to reiterate our call for practical and urgent steps on the part of the parties to the conflict to protect civilians on both sides, including by taking constant care to spare them in military operations, as required by the principles of international humanitarian law governing the use of force in armed conflict.

Like all other countries, Ghana is worried about the forced displacement of the civilian population in the occupied Palestinian territories, including the West Bank, resulting from the activities of nationalist settlers and Israeli security operations. The creation of illegal outposts and the demolition and seizure of Palestinian-owned structures do not only serve to stoke tensions and deepen mistrust, but also diminish the prospects for sustainable peace in the Middle East. We urge Israel to enhance its investigations against nationalist crimes and to make the necessary administrative orders that would reduce the access of Israeli settlers and the consequential violence that it generates.

We are equally concerned about the actions of Palestinian armed groups that are threatening the security of Israel, including through the continuous firing of rockets into Israel and attacks against innocent Israeli citizens. We demand that all such actions and the opening of new front lines by Hamas, as well as cross-border incidents across the Blue Line and within the wider region should stop. The war must indeed stop, and it must stop now.

As we have stated previously, urgent efforts must be made by both sides, supported by the international community, to stop the present war, address the root causes of the conflict, promote dialogue and find a

peaceful resolution that ensures security, justice and self-determination. At this crucial time, every voice of moderation and positive influence on the parties to help de-escalate the conflict and prevent its further spread in the region is needed.

In that context, it is also important for the Palestinian Liberation Organization, as the recognized representative of all of the Palestinian people, to activate its institutional authority in reinvigorating inclusive and accountable governance across the occupied territory of Palestine.

Ghana believes that what is required is a deepened commitment to a negotiated two-State solution, on the basis of the pre-1967 borders, with Jerusalem as the shared capital. As the Security Council, we have an enduring responsibility to end the present conflict, bring the parties to the table of dialogue and help deliver a secure and assured statehood for both Israel and Palestine, sooner rather than later. The peace process must also resume in earnest, without preconditions and with a clear and definite horizon.

Mr. França Danese (Brazil): Brazil thanks Ecuador for convening this important meeting and the United Arab Emirates for its timely request to do so. We also thank the briefers for their insightful and distressful updates and comments, shedding further light on the harrowing realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I will first make a statement on behalf of Brazil and Switzerland, as the informal co-focal points on conflict and hunger, with regard to the special brief of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) on acute food insecurity in the Gaza Strip published on 21 December.

According to the report, more than 90 per cent of Gaza's population is currently experiencing crisis-level food insecurity. More than 500,000 people are facing catastrophic hunger conditions. Nearly 2 million people are either not meeting their daily food needs or are meeting minimal nourishment requirements only by selling their possessions. Virtually all households are skipping meals every day. Many families go entire days and nights without eating. Adults go hungry so children can eat. It is estimated that until February 2024 the entire population in the Gaza Strip will face high levels of food insecurity. Those levels of acute food insecurity are unprecedented in recent history.

The risk of Gaza experiencing famine increases each day, with the hostilities are the main driver. Crucial infrastructure, such as bakeries, water reservoirs, agricultural lands and fishing ports, have been destroyed or severely damaged. Agricultural activities have collapsed. Access to adequate food, water, health services and humanitarian aid has been severely disrupted in the Gaza strip. The delivery of humanitarian assistance is hindered due to the ongoing hostilities and large-scale devastation. We welcome the delivery of an initial aid convoy by the World Food Programme from Jordan to Gaza, reaching half a million people with food assistance. That could pave the way for a sustained corridor allowing for expanded humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, only the resumption of commercial cargo moving into Gaza can ensure the much-needed scale-up to provide relief to the people in need. It is critical that the commercial and public sectors resume their activities in Gaza, including agricultural production, so that markets can replenish their shelves. The governing bodies of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Food Programme and the Committee on World Food Security have also underscored their concern over Gaza's dire food security crisis, in line with last week's IPC report.

Food is running out in the Gaza Strip. If people need to pay five to 10 times more for essential food items, such as flour and oil, we know that scarcity will affect the most vulnerable in catastrophic ways. The Security Council adopted resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023), which call for increased humanitarian access and aid, as well as urgent steps towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities. It is time that members of the Council use their influence to ensure that those provisions are implemented on the ground. When adopting resolution 2417 (2018) five years ago, the Council demonstrated its commitment to addressing conflict-induced food insecurity, including famine, while stressing the importance of full compliance with international humanitarian law by all parties. The resolution is clear in its condemnation of the unlawful denial of humanitarian access and of depriving civilians of objects indispensable to their survival. As the informal co-focal points, Switzerland and Brazil call on the members of the Council to give their full attention to the information provided by the United Nations on the risk of conflict-induced famine and to do their utmost to prevent it.

I will now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Brazil.

As we approach the conclusion of the Council's activities in 2023, we note with deep regret the continuation of the war in Gaza and the systematic worsening of the situation in the West Bank. Eighty-three days into the conflict, despite the incredible amount of energy and resources that the Council has put into debating and negotiating a solution, or at least some sort of ceasefire, the violence not only continues to rage unchecked across the occupied Palestinian territory but also grows more profound and more entrenched. It is causing a staggering loss of lives, an appalling number of wounded and forcibly displaced people, an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and the sad destruction of civil infrastructure and housing. The staggering and disproportionate figures speak volumes: approximately 21,000 Palestinian lives have been lost, predominantly women and children, with children alone accounting for more than 8,000 of those tragic deaths. The displacement crisis is equally alarming, with 1.9 million people — more than 85 per cent of the Gaza Strip's population — now looking for shelter. The deaths of more than 140 United Nations staff and humanitarian workers — a sad and unprecedented toll — further compound that calamity.

We join the absolute majority of the international community in reiterating our call for an immediate ceasefire and the continuous provision of essential humanitarian aid to Gaza through all viable channels. We also stand in solidarity with all those mourning their dead in both Israel and Palestine. The healing of a tragedy of such proportions will demand an enormous effort, which cannot be overlooked. Moreover, the ramifications of the conflict in Gaza extend well beyond its borders, stoking violence and extremism. That includes rising hostilities on the Lebanon-Israel border and in the Red Sea. Brazil continues to urge all relevant parties and Member States to prevent a further escalation of the conflict.

Brazil also observes with concern the continued disregard of the pertinent resolutions of the Council and the General Assembly on this ongoing tragic chapter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That, coupled with the Council's inability to effect tangible change, perpetuates a perception that might takes precedence over right in the Middle East and that international law can be violated there with impunity. This deeply worrisome state of affairs cannot be allowed to go

on. It can lead only to a reinforcement of the cycle of violence and resentment and a lack of trust in the international community. The international community remains incapable of effectively reacting after 75 years of a conflict that has proven to lead to consequences far beyond the region.

The situation in the West Bank exemplifies our concerns. As reported today, the region is teetering on the brink of an irreversible escalation. Tensions remain high, with continued settler violence, raids and drone attacks, including against refugee camps, such as the Nur Shams camp in Tulkarem. Exchanges of fire and the bulldozing and demolition of Palestinian houses and humanitarian structures have also been all too frequent. Besides all the disproportionate and unjustified violence and civilian casualties, particularly among women and children, it is appalling that settlement activities have continued and expanded throughout the occupied Palestinian territory and in defiance of the authority of the Council.

We again condemn the displacement of Palestinians from their homes, which has only worsened after the attacks 7 October. We are also concerned about the intensification of settler violence in the West Bank, in addition to demolitions, eviction orders and other attacks against Palestinians households, including in East Jerusalem. Let us state it again and again: those settlements are illegal under international law and must be stopped and reversed. That is a precondition for any agreement that will ensure peace and stability for both Israelis and Palestinians on a durable basis.

Our collective responsibility is to tirelessly pursue a lasting peace in the Middle East. The world cannot afford to continue to disregard the legitimate aspirations of Palestinians and Israelis to live in peace and security. We must all make every effort to speak with one voice and find a new political horizon. That includes adhering unconditionally to international law and international humanitarian law, protecting civilians, securing the immediate and unconditional release of hostages and ensuring the effective and unimpeded provision of humanitarian aid to the hundreds of thousands in dire need of it. Our commitment to ending hostilities and alleviating suffering must remain unyielding. In that regard, Brazil welcomes the appointment by the Secretary-General of Ms. Sigrid Kaag as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza pursuant to resolution 2720 (2023) and looks forward

to her contributions towards improving the lives of the most vulnerable.

Throughout Brazil's tenure on the Council, and particularly following the 7 October terrorist attacks against Israel, we have unwaveringly advocated for peace and a sustainable future for both Palestinians and Israelis. Brazil's efforts in the Council since the beginning of the crisis, guided by the humanitarian imperative, sought to promote effective action to prevent the escalation of violence and ensure the protection of civilians. Just as we have done in the Council, we shall continue elsewhere to reaffirm our resolute commitment to a two-State solution, with a viable State of Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security, within mutually agreed and internationally recognized borders.

Mr. Geng Shuang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank the briefers for their briefings.

More than 80 days have passed since the outbreak of this round of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and more than 2 million innocent people in Gaza have been plunged into an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. That is in spite of the fact that both the General Assembly and the Security Council have respectively adopted a number of resolutions strongly calling for a ceasefire, for an end to the collective punishment of the innocent people of Gaza and for compliance by the occupying Power with international law and international humanitarian law. Sadly, the blockade and siege of Gaza, the violence and the killing of civilians and the raids and arrests in the West Bank continue unabated.

As Mr. Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said, the Palestinian people are being subjected to dehumanization. The international community must pool all of its efforts to promote a ceasefire, mitigate the catastrophe and save lives.

First, the protraction of the war will only cause more casualties on both sides, exacerbate the obstacles to humanitarian assistance and undermine the prospects for a political settlement. There is no safe place in Gaza, and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who have been repeatedly forced to move have nowhere else to go. Secretary-General Guterres has repeatedly warned that Gaza, under bombing and shelling, does not offer the conditions for United Nations agencies to carry out humanitarian relief. We urge Israel to immediately cease its indiscriminate military attacks and collective

punishment of the people of Gaza and to provide the necessary conditions for humanitarian agencies to carry out their assistance work in Gaza.

Secondly, the current humanitarian situation in Gaza is extremely dire, with life-saving supplies nearly exhausted, the medical system paralysed and social order on the verge of collapse. Tens of thousands of pregnant women are facing the threat of extreme starvation, and newborns are being deprived of sustenance owing to their mothers' malnutrition. That is just part of the tragic, predictable and human-made catastrophe unfolding in Gaza.

We welcome the appointment by the Secretary-General of the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza. We call on all parties to effectively and fully implement resolution 2720 (2023) and look forward to the early establishment of a mechanism to ensure the safe and unimpeded entry of adequate humanitarian supplies into Gaza.

Thirdly, Israel's settlement activities in the West Bank and other occupied territories, as well as its continued escalation of raids, searches and settler violence, constitute a grave violation of resolution 2334 (2016) and erode the basis of the two-State solution. We urge Israel to uphold its responsibilities as the occupying Power, cease all settlement activities, curb the escalating settler violence and thoroughly investigate and hold perpetrators accountable for all relevant incidents.

Fourthly, the crux of the protracted Palestinian-Israeli issue lies in the failure to implement the two-State solution and the failure to guarantee the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people. We advocate for the convening of an international peace conference that is larger in scale, scope and effectiveness so as to expedite the formation of a timetable and a road map for the implementation of the two-State solution. We support Palestine's full membership in the United Nations and the early resumption of direct negotiations between Palestine and Israel.

Mrs. Ngyema Ndong (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I thank all of the briefers for their presentations.

A week after the adoption of the resolution aimed at increasing and monitoring humanitarian aid to Gaza (resolution 2720 (2023)), the situation remains particularly alarming, not only in the Gaza Strip but also in the West Bank, with a renewed intensity in

violence. The terrible toll of civilian deaths, destruction and forced displacement continues to grow.

Gabon remains very concerned by the most recent developments on the ground, which not only jeopardize the viability of the two-State solution by moving further away from any prospect of constructive dialogue between Israel and Palestine, but also pose the risk of a conflagration of violence throughout the region. The risk of the conflict spreading is very real, given the many reprisal attacks by Yemen's Houthis against commercial vessels. My country strongly condemns such acts and calls on the Houthis to immediately cease all attacks, which constitute a violation of international law.

Gabon has thus far supported every initiative aimed at restoring the hope of saving human lives and contributing to improving the fate of civilian populations and to de-escalation. Resolution 2720 (2023), on increasing and monitoring aid to Gaza, constitutes an opportunity for all parties, in particular to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, the establishment in the Gaza Strip of a mechanism for monitoring all humanitarian relief deliveries is an important step.

Gabon therefore welcomes the appointment by the Secretary-General of Ms. Sigrid Kaag as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza. We also call for the implementation of all relevant provisions of resolutions 2720 (2023) and 2712 (2023). Furthermore, Gabon demands the unconditional release of all hostages.

We will never stop repeating that the solution to the conflict must be political and diplomatic, through dialogue and negotiations undertaken in good faith and respect for the legitimate concerns of each party. We must intensify our efforts to find a just and lasting solution based on the two-State solution.

Mr. Yamazaki (Japan): First of all, I too thank Mr. Khiari, Mr. Muasher and Mr. Epshtain for their respective briefings.

Just one week ago, we adopted resolution 2720 (2023) in the hope that it would bring about substantial improvements in the humanitarian situation by expanding the delivery of humanitarian relief to the people of Gaza. However, it seems that there has been little impact on the ground so far, amid heavy fighting and air strikes resulting in the displacement of approximately 90 per cent of Gaza's population.

People in Gaza struggle for survival every single day, with barely any access to food and water. Hospitals in Gaza are operating far beyond their capacities in unimaginable conditions. The United Nations recently stated that 40 per cent of the population of Gaza is at risk of famine. What is happening in Gaza is nothing short of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Israel's troops have expanded their ground operations across most of the Gaza Strip, including in the central town of Deir Al-Balah. In the Al-Maghazi refugee camp, many people were reportedly killed by air strikes. Meanwhile, Hamas is continuing to launch indiscriminate rocket attacks against Israel, causing damage to innocent citizens, even today. That must be ceased, and all remaining hostages must be released immediately.

It is a fact that the United Nations and other humanitarian actors face various obstacles in facilitating aid delivery to and throughout Gaza. The Secretary-General has stated that effective aid operations in Gaza requires, first and foremost, security, staff and logistical capacity and the resumption of commercial activity. We therefore strongly urge all parties to act in good faith based on resolutions 2720 (2023) and 2712 (2023). In particular, Israel must do its utmost to remove those obstacles and constraints. The opening of the Kerem Shalom border crossing was a step forward, but the continued air strikes are one of the major impediments to humanitarian operations. In that regard, we welcome the appointment of Ms. Sigrid Kaag as the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, and we will support all her efforts to accelerate the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza.

A serious spillover of the conflict is already happening. There has been increased cross-border fighting between Israel and Hizbullah across the Blue Line, posing a grave risk to regional stability. The Houthis' continued attacks on merchant and commercial vessels pose a grave threat to maritime security. We strongly demand that the Houthis immediately cease such attacks and release the Japanese-operated *MV Galaxy Leader* cargo ship and its crew.

With regard to the situation in the occupied West Bank, we strongly condemn mass arbitrary arrests, settler violence and, especially, the unlawful killings, which have been widely reported. We urge the Israeli Government to take every measure to prevent such

acts, which would further undermine prospects for a just and lasting political solution. We also reaffirm the important role of the Hashemite custodianship over the holy sites in Jerusalem.

In conclusion, while we recognize all diplomatic efforts, including the proposal that has reportedly been made by Egypt, the Security Council also needs to unite to bring about an end to the ongoing tragedy. We must keep the spirit of a two-State solution alive and recall that that remains the only viable path for peace, security and prosperity in the region.

Dame Barbara Woodward (United Kingdom): Let me join others in thanking Assistant Secretary-General Khiari, Mr. Muasher and Mr. Epshtain for their briefings today.

Let me start with the humanitarian crisis. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification report for the Gaza Strip, issued on 21 December, has recorded that more people are in phase 5 famine in Gaza than in the rest of the world combined. Yesterday, I spoke to the Save the Children Country Director in the occupied Palestinian territories. He told me that 4 in 10 of those killed in Gaza so far have been children. That is close to 8,500 children dead. For those injured and surviving, nearly two thirds of homes and schools have been damaged or destroyed. Many more will die from attacks, disease and famine if we do not act to stop the humanitarian catastrophe.

Therefore, with the adoption of resolution 2720 (2023), the Security Council sent an important signal of commitment to support the United Nations to deliver desperately needed aid. We very much welcome the appointment of Sigrid Kaag as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza. Our own appointment of a United Kingdom representative for humanitarian affairs in the occupied Palestinian territories underscores our commitment to address the humanitarian crisis.

Secondly, with regard to security, we remain resolute in our commitment to Israel's security and the need to address the threat from Hamas. But too many civilians have been killed. Israel must comply with international humanitarian law and differentiate clearly between terrorists and civilians. The situation in the occupied West Bank underlines the urgent need to make progress towards peace. The United Kingdom is clear that Israel must stop settler violence immediately and hold perpetrators accountable. We also continue to

call on Israel to adhere to its commitments and cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories. Approving further settlement serves only to raise tensions in the West Bank. Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority should demonstrate, through their policies, a genuine commitment to the two-State solution. It is vital that we all work together to deliver peace, dignity and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike. In that regard, I very much welcome Mr. Muasher's thoughtful briefing earlier.

Thirdly, concerning the wider risk in the region, we are acutely aware of the conflict's potential to spill over to the wider region. We are engaging at the most senior levels to caution against further escalation along the Blue Line. A full-blown conflict between Israel and Hizbullah would be catastrophic for Lebanon and the region. We also condemn illegal and unjustified attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea by Houthi militants. The attacks are harming the global economy, threatening regional security and risking innocent lives.

In conclusion, in resolution 2720 (2023), we underscored the need for conditions that would allow for a sustainable cessation of hostilities. They include the immediate and unconditional release of hostages held by Hamas and an end to the threat posed to Israel by rocket attacks and other forms of terrorism. Sustainable peace and security for both the Israeli and Palestinian people requires that we then redouble our efforts to deliver a new political horizon towards the delivery of two States — a secure and stable Israel, with a viable and independent Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

Mr. Hauri (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I thank you, Sir, for convening this meeting and the briefers for their briefings.

As the Security Council convenes for one of its last meetings in its current composition, the need for a lasting political solution to end the hostilities, ensure the protection of the civilian population and free the hostages is imperative in the Middle East. We have the collective responsibility to ensure that that becomes a reality in the new year, which will begin in the cold, damp and under the rubble for far too many children, their parents and their loved ones. Against that backdrop, reports on the latest developments in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as on the northern border with Lebanon, continue to give us great cause for concern. United Nations-verified statistics

will make 2023 the deadliest year in almost 20 years both in Israel and Gaza, as well as in the West Bank. According to UNICEF, that dismal record will not have spared children's lives.

The increased intensity of violent acts committed by settlers, which Switzerland condemns, have led to the forced displacement of pastoralist communities and are likely to lead to even more violence. While reiterating that settlements are illegal under international law, Switzerland stresses that Israel is responsible for maintaining law and order in the West Bank and calls on it to hold the perpetrators of such acts accountable.

In the context of operations by Israeli security forces in the West Bank, the use of force must in particular meet the criteria of proportionality and respect for every individual's right to life and security. We will continue to underscore that respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians, must remain a priority for the Council. Switzerland recalls the obligations of all parties under international law, including the obligation to protect the civilian population.

As we have done since 7 October, Switzerland condemns the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas. In particular, we condemn the sexual and gender-based violence of which many women and girls have been victims in the context of these attacks. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages still being held in Gaza. Switzerland recognizes Israel's right to ensure its own security. At the same time, we have not ceased to call on the parties to protect civilians and to respect international humanitarian law. It is vital that all violations of international law committed in Israel and throughout the occupied Palestinian territory are investigated so that the perpetrators can be brought to justice.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip remains catastrophic. The population is deprived of access to medical services, health infrastructure, hygiene and drinking water. Ninety per cent of the population is in a situation of acute food insecurity. Here we would refer to the joint statement made by Brazil on behalf of both our delegations as informal focal points on conflict and hunger. Humanitarian aid must be delivered to civilian populations in need throughout the Gaza Strip in an unhindered manner and without preconditions.

We welcome the appointment of Ms. Sigrid Kaag as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, and we call for the full implementation of resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023). Despite the adoption of those resolutions, the aid delivered remains insufficient. A humanitarian truce and security guarantees are the urgent prerequisites for guaranteeing access to aid and enabling the staff of impartial humanitarian organizations to work effectively without risking their lives.

If the current spiral of violence is not put to an end, the risk of the conflict spreading throughout the region remains real and will undermine a lasting political solution to the conflict in the Middle East. The Council must take concrete steps towards a two-State solution, which is the only possible basis for peace and stability in the region. In that process, the full, equal and meaningful participation of Palestinian and Israeli women is essential. We must help to rebuild the foundation for two democratic States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side, in peace, within secure and recognized borders.

Mr. Hoxha (Albania): Let me join others in thanking all the briefers for their presentations. We will never run out of words to express our utter condemnation of the carefully planned and brutally executed terrorist attacks of 7 October which, let us not forget, triggered this acute crisis. We cannot express enough our firm rejection of taking civilians hostage and keeping them in horrible conditions when the entire world, including the Security Council, has repeatedly called for their immediate and unconditional release. We are horrified by the emerging hideous stories of sexual violence used by Hamas as a weapon of terror against Israeli civilians, women and girls. And it is unfortunate and incomprehensible that nearly three months after the unthinkable was savagely unleashed upon civilians in Israel, the Security Council has not been able to issue a condemnation of these terror acts.

Albania shares the international community's deep concerns regarding the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza. The relentless bombardments have claimed far too many innocent lives. The widespread destruction has made life impossible for many and extremely difficult for all in Gaza. Innocent civilians are punished twice — by the cowardice of Hamas, but also by the heavy-handed response of Israel. We reiterate our call for full compliance with international humanitarian law and exercise of the principles of

proportionality and distinction. Terrorists must be killed, but not the innocent civilians, United Nations workers or journalists, who must be protected. We welcome the appointment of the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, as called for in resolution 2720 (2023). The full and speedy implementation of resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023) must be seen as a matter of absolute priority by everyone.

The situation in the West Bank has further deteriorated since Hamas's attack in Israel. Increased army raids and acts of violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians are taking a mounting toll. More than 400 Palestinians have been killed so far in the West Bank, far more than last year, which was declared the deadliest since 2006. Our position remains that settlements and their expansion are illegal under international law and are an impediment to the peace process. They must be disbanded, not expanded.

The risk of spillover of the conflict is real. Everywhere around Israel there is one actor, one country, one hand that continues to pull the strings through its proxies, and this is Iran. Ignoring it is not a contribution to peace. In that respect, the continued attacks by the Houthis in the Red Sea, denying navigational rights and freedoms of all vessels cause a grave threat to international peace and security. We call on the Houthis to immediately cease those attacks and for the Security Council to take appropriate action.

The ongoing war in Gaza obscures everything, including prospects of how to get out of it, move ahead and revive the stalled peace process in the Middle East, which cannot continue to remain historic unfinished business. As soon as the Gaza war is over, work should start anew to seek a lasting and comprehensive solution. That has never been easy, and it will not be easier now, because it will require serious, sustained and credible efforts to ensure that terror and violence are no longer used to achieve political goals and that they are definitely and resolutely rejected by all. It will need Gaza and West Bank united under a single renewed Palestinian Authority that is fully committed to and ready for peace through negotiations with the help of the international community. It will require sustained and massive efforts of assistance for those internally displaced to return to normal life and a colossal reconstruction effort to make Gaza a living place again.

But more than anything, it will require a shared understanding that equality between Israelis and Palestinians is the glue for charting their shared destiny together. There has never been any alternative and there is no other credible and serious path to the future than the two-State solution, if we want a solution — peace, security and lasting stability. Only a genuine process that leads to an independent, sovereign and democratic Palestinian State alongside Israel will be able to guarantee security, stability and prosperity for the Palestinian and Israeli people alike. That is what we have been saying and defending always, especially during these two years in the Security Council, and we will continue to do so from outside the Council, because we remain profoundly convinced that both Palestinians and Israelis, who share that tiny land, have a right to statehood there and are bound by a shared destiny.

May this tragedy make wisdom prevail with lessons learned through successive failures and missed opportunities. May it make everyone understand and accept that violence will never bring peace, it will only breed more of the same — violence, pain, suffering, regrets and misery, when everyone there needs and deserves the contrary — hope, peace and stability.

Mr. Fernandes (Mozambique): Mozambique thanks the United Arab Emirates for calling this urgent meeting to address the dire humanitarian situation currently unfolding in Gaza. We are grateful to the briefers for their valuable insights and assessments. Their first-hand accounts reinforce the critical need for immediate Council action on this matter.

The military offensive in Gaza has brought intense suffering, with exponentially increasing casualties. The indiscriminate attacks by the Israeli Defence Forces demonstrate blatant disregard for human life and international law. As a matter of fact, no one is safe in Gaza. Mozambique has repeatedly voiced its grave concerns over the exacerbating tensions, including settlements, violence against civilians, provocative rhetoric and clashes between both parties. All those unlawful and vile activities, which are in flagrant violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, must cease immediately.

Furthermore, we are deeply troubled by the fact that this conflict could spread throughout the region. We call on all protagonists to exercise maximum restraint and to work towards de-escalation. The international community must continue to advocate

for a just and peaceful resolution to this long-standing conflict. Immediate action is imperative to prevent further human tragedy. Indeed, it is now becoming an existential threat to life itself. An immediate ceasefire is imperative to enable vital humanitarian access and protect innocent lives. All parties must respect their legal obligations to safeguard civilians and ensure that life-saving assistance reaches the affected innocent civilians in Gaza.

Precisely one week ago, the Council adopted the second resolution on scaling up and monitoring aid to Gaza (see S/PV.9520). Both the newly adopted resolution 2720 (2023) and the previous resolution 2712 (2023) call for urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors in Gaza to allow safe and unhindered access for United Nations agencies and partners. We urge the warring parties to urgently implement those measures given the morally untenable humanitarian emergency. Lives are at risk. Therefore, we have an obligation to act expeditiously to protect and save the vulnerable population of Gaza, especially women and children, through the delivery of life-saving assistance. We reiterate our firm support for the mediation efforts by Egypt and other actors to halt the bloodshed in the Gaza Strip.

We remain convinced that the only alternative for peace in the Gaza Strip is the immediate cessation of violence and the resumption of constructive dialogue. We believe in, and strongly support, the two-State solution as a pathway to a lasting peace between Palestine and Israel and harmony in the region. We believe that the existing Security Council and General Assembly resolutions provide a just framework for achieving that noble goal.

In conclusion, we cannot stand idle while the lives of innocent civilians are at risk. We must act with courage and moral clarity to alleviate the suffering and revitalize the peace process. The cost of inaction is too grave.

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

I would first like to thank this morning's briefers for the information they provided to the Security Council.

Just over one week ago (see PV.9513), the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Tor Wennesland, addressed the Council and said

that, while the prioritization of the situation in Gaza is understandable, we must not forget that during the first nine months of the year our attention was focused on a West Bank in crisis, with incessant settlement activities, increased settler violence and Palestinian armed attacks, intensified operations by Israeli security forces and a very difficult economic situation.

Ecuador unequivocally condemns the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October and once again demands the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. Since those terrorist attacks, the scale of violence in Gaza has pushed events elsewhere into the background. However, the negative trends present leading up to the beginning of October in the West Bank have intensified. Levels of violence have risen and, with them, so too have the statistics of deaths and arrests. It is essential that those responsible for all acts of violence be brought to justice and that the security forces always exercise maximum restraint. We also condemn all terrorist acts and attacks.

As stated in the presidential statement adopted by the Council in February (S/PRST/2023/1), we strongly oppose all unilateral measures that impede peace, including, inter alia, Israeli construction and expansion of settlements, confiscation of Palestinians' land and

the "legalization" of settlements outposts, demolition of Palestinians' homes and the displacement of Palestinian civilians. Such actions jeopardize the viability of the two-State solution, for which Ecuador and all Council members here present have expressed their support. We also believe that the increase in inflammatory rhetoric, the provocation, incitement and unacceptable glorification of the killing of civilians and terrorist acts removes the possibility of a negotiated solution. As I said on 19 December (see S/PV.9513), leaders must show responsibility and humanity.

We know that the road to a lasting peace will be difficult, and it is necessary to start walking it as soon as possible. We have taken some steps, but there are still more steps to take and implement. That is why Ecuador once again reiterates its conviction that the only way to end this conflict is through a peaceful, negotiated, lasting and just solution for the parties, with the existence of two States — Palestine and Israel — on the basis of the 1967 borders and the relevant resolutions.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

There are no more names on the list of speakers.

The meeting rose at 1.35 p.m.