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Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Barrot	(France)
<i>Members:</i>	Algeria.	Mr. Bendjama
	China	Mr. Fu Cong
	Denmark	Ms. Lassen
	Greece	Mr. Sekeris
	Guyana	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett
	Pakistan	Mr. Ahmad
	Panama	Mr. Moscoso
	Republic of Korea	Mr. Hwang
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sierra Leone	Mr. Kabba
	Slovenia	Ms. Žvokelj
	Somalia	Mr. Mohamed Yusuf
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Lord Collins
	United States of America.	Ms. Shea

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): I would like to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, the Ministers and the other high-level representatives present in the Chamber. Their presence today underscores the importance of the subject matter under discussion.

Before each member is a list of speakers who have requested to participate in accordance with rules 37 and 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, as well as the previous practice of the Council in this regard. We propose that they be invited to participate in this meeting.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

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

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres.

The Secretary-General (*spoke in French*): I thank the French presidency for convening this ministerial-level meeting on the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

The region is undergoing fundamental shifts, marked by violence and volatility but also opportunity and potential.

In Lebanon, the ceasefire and territorial integrity must be respected and all commitments implemented.

In Syria, we must keep working to support the country's path towards a political transition that is inclusive of all segments of the Syrian population — one that ensures accountability, fosters national healing and lays the foundation for Syria's long-term recovery and further integration into the international community. That includes the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan, which remains precarious with significant violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement, with the continued presence of the Israel Defense Forces into the area of separation and their several strikes targeting locations across the ceasefire line.

Across the Middle East, people demand and deserve a better future, not endless conflict and suffering. We must collectively work to ensure that this turbulent and transitional period meets those aspirations and delivers justice, dignity, rights, security and lasting peace. It starts by recognizing two fundamental facts: first, that the region is at a hinge-point in history; and, secondly, that truly sustainable Middle East peace hinges on one central question — a core issue that the Security Council has affirmed and reaffirmed decade after decade, year after year: a two-State solution, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

(spoke in English)

Today, the promise of a two-State solution is at risk of dwindling to the point of disappearance. The political commitment to that long-standing goal is farther than it has ever been. As a result, the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace and security have been undermined, and the legitimate national aspirations of the Palestinians have been denied while they endure Israel's continued presence which the International Court of Justice has found unlawful. And since the horrific 7 October 2023 terror attacks by Hamas, it has gotten worse on every front.

First, the unrelenting conflict and devastation in Gaza, including the utterly inhumane conditions of life imposed on its people who are repeatedly coming under attack, confined to smaller and smaller spaces and deprived of life-saving relief. In line with international law, the Security Council has rejected any attempt at demographic or territorial change in the Gaza Strip, including any actions that reduce its territory. Gaza is — and must remain — an integral part of a future Palestinian State.

Secondly, in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Israeli military operations and the use of heavy weaponry in residential areas, forcible displacement, demolitions, movement restrictions and settlement expansion are dramatically altering demographic and geographic realities. Palestinians are being contained and coerced — contained in areas that are subject to increasing military operations and where the Palestinian Authority is under growing pressure, and coerced out of areas where settlements are expanding.

Thirdly, settler violence continues at alarmingly high levels in a climate of impunity, with entire Palestinian communities facing repeated assaults and destruction, sometimes abetted by Israeli soldiers. Palestinian attacks against Israelis in both Israel and the occupied West Bank also continue.

The world cannot afford to watch the two-State solution disappear. Political leaders face clear choices — the choice to be silent, the choice to acquiesce or the choice to act.

In Gaza, there is no end in sight to the killing and misery. The ceasefire had brought a glimmer of hope — the long-sought release of hostages and the delivery of life-saving humanitarian relief. But those embers of opportunity were cruelly extinguished with the shattering of the ceasefire on 18 March. Since then, as a result of Israeli strikes and military operations, almost 2,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, including women, children, journalists and humanitarians. Hamas also continues to fire rockets towards Israel indiscriminately, while the hostages continue to be held in appalling conditions.

The humanitarian situation throughout the Gaza Strip has gone from bad to worse to beyond imagination. For nearly two full months, Israel has blocked food, fuel, medicine and commercial supplies, depriving more than 2 million people of life-saving relief — all while the world watches. I am alarmed by statements by Israeli Government officials about the use of humanitarian aid as a tool for military pressure. Aid is non-negotiable. Israel must protect civilians and must agree to relief schemes and facilitate them.

I salute the women and men of the United Nations and all other humanitarian workers, especially our Palestinian colleagues, who continue to work under fire and in incomprehensibly difficult conditions. And I mourn all of the women and men of the United Nations who were killed, some with their families. The entry of assistance must be restored immediately, the safety of United Nations personnel and humanitarian partners must be guaranteed, and United Nations agencies must be allowed to work in full respect of humanitarian principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. There must be no hindrance to humanitarian aid, including through the vital work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). We need the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, and we need a permanent ceasefire. It is time to stop the repeated displacement of the population of Gaza and any consideration of forced displacement outside of Gaza. And the trampling of international law must end.

I call on all Member States to use their leverage to ensure that international law is respected and impunity does not prevail. That applies to the 19 March incident,

for which Israel has now acknowledged responsibility, of firing on a United Nations guest house, killing one colleague and injuring six others, as well as the 23 March killing of paramedics and other rescue workers in Rafah and many other cases. There must be accountability across the board.

Advisory proceedings are ongoing at the International Court of Justice on the obligations of Israel, as an occupying Power and a Member of the United Nations, in relation to the presence and activities of the United Nations in and in relation to the occupied Palestinian territory.

In February, the United Nations Legal Counsel submitted a written statement to the Court, and yesterday she made an oral statement before the Court — both on my behalf. The statement to the Court includes points that I have made on a number of occasions, specifically, that all parties to conflict must comply with all their obligations under international law, including international human rights law and international humanitarian law; that Israel, as an occupying Power, is under the obligation to ensure the provision of food and medical supplies to the population; that Israel has an obligation to agree to and facilitate relief schemes in the occupied Palestinian territory; and that humanitarian, medical and United Nations personnel must be respected and protected.

And I emphasize the obligation under international law to respect the privileges and immunities of the United Nations and its personnel, including the absolute inviolability of United Nations premises, property and assets and the immunity from legal process of the United Nations. Such immunity applies to all United Nations entities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including UNRWA, a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly. I call on all Member States to fully support all of these efforts.

In this period of turmoil and transition for the region, Member States must spell out how they will realize the commitment and promise of a two-State solution. This is not a time for ritualistically expressing support, ticking a box and moving on. We are past the stage of ticking boxes; the clock is ticking. The two-State solution is near a point of no return. The international community has a responsibility to prevent perpetual occupation and violence.

My call to Member States is clear and urgent: take irreversible action towards implementing a two-State solution, and do not let extremists on any side undermine what remains of the peace process.

The High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, to be held in June, co-chaired by France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is an important opportunity to revitalize international support. I encourage Member States to go beyond affirmations, and to think creatively about the concrete steps they will take to support a viable two-State solution before it is too late.

At the same time, the Palestinian Authority needs stepped-up and sustained support — politically and financially. That is crucial to ensure the continued viability of Palestinian institutions, consolidate ongoing reforms and enable the Palestinian Authority to resume its full responsibilities in Gaza.

At this hinge point of history for the people of the Middle East — and on this issue on which so much hinges — leaders must stand and deliver. They must show the political courage and exercise the political will to make good on this central question for peace for Palestinians, Israelis, the region and humankind.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

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

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): Allow me at the outset to express our appreciation for your decision, Mr. President, to preside over this very important meeting at the ministerial level, and for the important role France plays on the Council and in support of efforts for peace in our region. I also wish to welcome all Ministers with us today. In addition, I thank the Secretary-General for not allowing the world to look away or forget Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territory, reminding them of their obligations, and for being a strong voice for humanity and peace. I also thank him for being with us today and for his statement, along with the statement delivered yesterday at The Hague by the head of the legal department, on his behalf, before we presented our own opinion. Allow me to also convey our utmost respect for the United Nations and its heroic personnel on the ground, who are risking their own lives to save the lives of others.

The Security Council has adopted binding resolutions with clear goals: stopping the bloodshed, ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches those who desperately need it, releasing hostages and detainees, preventing forcible displacement and any attempts at annexation and, finally, achieving the two-State solution. The world rallied behind those goals. And yet the reality today is a declared punitive siege by Israel on Gaza to deprive 2 million Palestinians — half of them children — of food, water, medicine, electricity and all other essentials of life, while they endure unbearable inhumane conditions. There is no shortage of bombs falling on Gaza, but there is an imposed shortage of everything else. Starvation is being used as a weapon of war against an entire civilian population, which is still being bombarded relentlessly. The families of the hostages and the detainees are growing more desperate every day. The plans for forcible displacement and annexation are well under way, and Israeli leaders no longer feel the need to disguise or hide their nefarious intentions.

We cannot surrender to this situation. We must bring it to an end. An immediate ceasefire must be resumed, and all its objectives must be achieved. President Trump, in his latest conversation with the Israeli Prime Minister, stressed what he called in his own words “the need to be good to Gaza”, given how people there are suffering, and signalled specifically that the United States is pushing to secure the entry of food and medicine into Gaza. We deeply hope that the United States, Egypt and Qatar, with the support of the international community as a whole, will be able to secure a return to the ceasefire so as to start bringing all this suffering to an end.

There is a way out of this nightmare to everyone’s benefit. President Abbas, in his address to the Central Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), made clear that we want peace, not only for ourselves but for all, that we are committed to the rule of international law and want to see it prevail, that we believe that the peaceful approach is the one that can deliver our people’s rights and that there is no justification for harming civilians, whether Palestinians or Israelis. At that same meeting, the PLO Central Council established the position of Vice-President of the PLO and the State of Palestine, which has been held since by Mr. Hussein El-Sheikh. I was supposed to attend the meeting of the Central Council in Ramallah. Instead, after holding me up for five hours, Israel denied me entry to my own country, which I proudly represent here. I am a Palestinian born in Palestine to Palestinian parents, and I am prohibited from entering my own country. That is a very small part of the collective punishment imposed on all Palestinians and of the denial of our existence and rights as a nation and as individuals.

On one side there is a Palestinian leadership committed to non-violence, and on the other is an Israeli leadership unleashing the worst forms of violence against an entire civilian population. There is a Palestinian leadership that is clearly and unequivocally committed to the two-State solution, and an Israeli leadership dedicated to its destruction. There is a Palestinian leadership that is showing restraint and acting responsibly, and an Israeli leadership whose actions are dictated by its populist and fanatical views. There is a Palestinian leadership committed

to international law and aligned with the international consensus, and an Israeli leadership that considers that the rules depend on the identity of the victims and the identity of the perpetrators, demanding impunity for its crimes and considering our very existence a crime. There is a Palestinian leadership that has been responsive to the demands for reform, and an Israeli leadership that has flatly rejected change. There is a Palestinian leadership committed to a simple and yet essential idea — live and let live — and an Israeli leadership that believes that the existence of one people requires the destruction of another. The international community determined, a long time ago, that there is not one people too many in the Middle East but that an independent State is missing — the independent State of Palestine.

There are solutions for those not searching for excuses to prolong the war and unbearable human suffering. There are solutions whereby Hamas would no longer rule Gaza and transitional governance arrangements would set the stage for the Palestinian Authority to fully assume its responsibilities in the Gaza Strip. There are solutions for reconstruction in the aftermath of the massive destruction Israel has caused in Gaza without displacing its population. There are solutions for ending the illegal occupation and the conflict and for ushering in an era of shared peace, security and prosperity.

In that regard, Arab countries have displayed leadership that has been commended worldwide: Egypt and Qatar mediating the ceasefire; Arab countries taking the lead when it comes to humanitarian aid, through Jordan and Egypt; the responsible roles played by Algeria and the United Arab Emirates in the Council over the course of the past two years; the Arab reconstruction plan, endorsed by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and supported by international partners; and the leading role of Saudi Arabia as Chair of the Arab Islamic Committee, as co-Chair of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution alongside Norway and the European Union and as co-Chair of the International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution with France in June.

International partners have welcomed, joined, contributed to and helped to advance those initiatives, all seeking a just and lasting peace. The international mobilization has never been stronger in confronting a reality that has never been darker. We see that mobilization here in the Council, in the General Assembly and at the International Court of Justice in which all were determined to uphold international law and to end this most painful and historic injustice.

As we approach the International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State solution in June, we call on all States to do their utmost to uphold international law, support our right to self-determination and salvage peace. We endorse the call of the Secretary-General when he said to all Council members and those outside the Chamber that this is the time for action, not for reiterating that to which we agreed. This is the time for action. We call on those that have yet to do so to recognize the State of Palestine without further delay, as a clear signal that they will not tolerate its destruction or the destruction of the two-State solution. We believe, Mr. President, that your country can play a pivotal role in that regard. We call on all States to take measures against settlement, colonization, annexation and forcible displacement and to end Israel's unlawful presence in the occupied Palestinian territory, in line with the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. We call on all States to support the Palestinian Government, which has shown a clear commitment to reform and peace; to support, politically and financially, the Arab reconstruction plan; and to continue supporting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

The Palestinian people are in a cage, killed and starved, day after day after day. As Pope Francis said, this is not war, this is cruelty. Our greatest fear is that the world is growing accustomed to such horrors, that while it condemns Israel's actions, it feels powerless to stop them. But we ask all countries not to surrender to that self-inflicted powerlessness. Those atrocities have no moral or legal justifications. The genocide has to end, and life must prevail.

The Palestinian people are entitled to international protection for as long as they are trapped under military occupation. A ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, which remains the top priority, should also be accompanied by an end to attacks and repression by Israeli occupation forces and settlers across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which are displacing entire communities.

Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered another delusional speech two days ago. He insisted once again that the two-State solution meant the destruction of Israel. He said,

“‘ Hamas says we will destroy Israel by terror and military conquest right away and the PA (Palestinian Authority) says, ‘No, you destroy it politically by driving it, through propaganda and lawfare, to the ‘67 boundaries.’ ”

Pursuing an independent State of Palestine, living side by side with Israel, in accordance with the resolutions of this very Council — and the very United Nations resolutions on which the State of Israel was established with the partition of Palestine — is somehow pursuing the destruction of Israel? Does that make sense? That is nonsense. Those who benefited from the privilege of resolutions of the General Assembly, including the partition plan, and were admitted as a Member State, are saying that the fact that we are seeking peaceful methods to accomplish the establishment of the independence of the State of Palestine amounts now to the destruction of the State of Israel. Who among the Council member would buy that nonsense?

He spoke of the attempts to annihilate Israel when in reality he is the one pursuing the annihilation of Palestine and its people. He spoke of how the Israeli army moves Palestinian civilians out of harm's way, when in reality it has shown total disregard for Palestinian lives, killing and maiming and detaining and torturing and starving Palestinians endlessly. He bragged about Israel's violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon and Syria which must be rejected by all. He again asserted that he would pursue peace with regional partners while sidelining the Palestine question as if nothing had happened these past 18 months. He spoke with the same arrogance, the same aversion to facts and the same disregard for the suffering of people, whether Palestinian or Israeli.

Fanatical delusions will destroy our region. We need a strong leadership for peace. The deployment of collective resolve at an unprecedented scale that will finally deliver freedom for the Palestinian people — two States living side by side in peace and security — and unleash the true potential of our region for the benefit of all. We totally agree with the Secretary-General, when he always says that there is no plan B for the two-State solution. We belong resolutely to this camp and count on your collective support to ensure it prevails.

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

Mr. Miller (Israel): It is symbolic that this session is taking place on the eve of Israel's Memorial Day, Yom Hazikaron. It is the day when we honour the soldiers who gave their lives defending our State and the innocent civilians whose lives were cut short by terror.

Israel welcomes what is hopefully to be a broader debate on the Middle East. Far too often, the Council confines its focus to a narrow segment of the region, missing the broader forces at play, both the forces of progress and the forces of destruction. Today we have a chance to widen that lens, and we must.

As we speak, the Middle East is in dynamic motion. Danger and opportunity walk side by side. There is much to be hopeful about — economic development, dialogue and collaboration. However, the threats loom imminent, more dangerous than ever. For all the momentum, there are forces seeking to reverse it and take advantage of the instability. And those forces are growing more violent and more entrenched. That is the reality of the Middle East, and we implore the Council and the international community not to ignore or minimize the forces of ruin. That is the reality of terrorism and extremism, of forces present in the Middle East that despise peace and will not rest until their sick version of destruction is fulfilled.

There is powerful opportunity in Lebanon today. Public voices, civil society leaders and elements within its new Government are calling for sovereignty, for an end to Hizbullah's tyranny over their country. The Lebanese people have made one thing unmistakably clear — they want peace, stability and a future free from terror. But Hizbullah, a murderous terrorist organization backed by Iran, continues to hold sway over stockpiles of weapons in civilian areas and is intent on dragging the Lebanese population towards another devastating war.

Hizbullah's murderous intent is vividly demonstrated by its ongoing activities. Just two days ago, the Israel Defense Forces struck a terrorist infrastructure site in Dahiyah, a Hizbullah stronghold in Beirut, which contained precision missiles intended for use against Israel. The storage of such weaponry within civilian areas constitutes a blatant violation of understandings between Israel and Lebanon and a clear violation of international law. Hizbullah's systematic embedding of missiles amid the Lebanese population is a cynical exploitation of civilians and another contemptible assault on basic human morality. Prior to the strike, Israel took significant steps to mitigate the risk to uninvolved civilians, including issuing advanced warnings and using precise munitions.

Israel will continue to act as necessary to remove threats to its people while taking every possible measure to uphold its obligations under international law. The Lebanese Government must have a monopoly on military force. That is the Israeli position. That is the Lebanese position. That is the position of our cessation of hostilities agreement, and it is, of course, the position of the Council per resolutions 1701 (2006) and 1559 (2004).

However, the international support for Lebanese sovereignty and Hizbullah's disarmament must be more than rhetorical. The implementation of the cessation of hostilities agreement on the Lebanese side remains partial, with many of the violations reported to the United States-led mechanisms remaining unaddressed. The international community must take tangible steps to assist the Lebanese Government and Armed Forces in reclaiming its sovereignty and dismantling Hizbullah's parallel army of terrorists. We cannot waste another decade standing by as Hizbullah regains its strength and further entrenches itself in Lebanon.

Syria today is a country no longer under the Al-Assad regime, but not yet under stable governance. The collapse of the Al-Assad regime created a volatile void. The armed military militias roam unchecked; Iranian backed forces operate with impunity; radical groups, some aligned with the most brutal global terror networks, control territory and populations. As is too often the case in times of collapse, Syria's most vulnerable — its minorities, its internally displaced, its religious and ethnic communities — are the ones left exposed. Christians, Druze, Kurds, Yazidis are all caught between a shattered State and roaming militias. Moreover, we cannot ignore the deeply troubling pattern emerging in Syria, where individuals with

jihadist backgrounds have been appointed to key positions within the provisional Government and its affiliated armed groups. Those individuals, many of whom were previously aligned with terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaida, Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham and Jabhat Al-Nusra, now hold command over military infrastructure that could be used to destabilize the region and threaten the security of neighbouring States, including Israel. Those groups' ideologies are clear and are cause for serious alarm. That threat was evident last month in the brutal massacre and abuse of Alawite civilians and other vulnerable populations. The Syrian people deserve better. They deserve a future not dominated by sectarianism and foreign interference. They deserve international support that empowers local stability, not the enabling of jihadism and chaos. The Council must recognize the urgency of the situation. Syria must not become a permanently fractured State governed by guns, but one governed by the rule of law. The region cannot afford it, and the Syrian people can no longer endure it.

As we look across the region, there is one thread connecting the instability. It is the same thread connected to the Houthi missiles, which are relentlessly fired at Israel's population centres. It is the same thread connected to Hamas' massacre of our people on 7 October 2023. Iran is not a lowly agitator — it is the engineer of our region's turmoil. Through Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, militias in Iraq and Syria and the Houthis in Yemen, Iran has constructed a deliberate network of violence to expand its reach and destabilize its enemies. That is active, ongoing and strategic. Above all, Iran continues to advance its nuclear ambitions. It issues existential threats openly and regularly. Israel will not allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons. We will not waver. We will not retreat on this issue, and we call on the international community to uphold that red line, because the consequences of a nuclear run would not be limited to Israel — they would extend across the region and beyond. The international community can no longer afford to abdicate its responsibility when it comes to Iran. The chaos that Tehran has released across the region is the result of years of hesitation and indulgence. Its accelerating nuclear programme now poses an even graver threat. It is time to confront the reality that unchecked Iranian aggression will not recede on its own. It must be confronted decisively and collectively.

Iran's fingerprints are, of course, on the situation in Gaza, and its proxy, Hamas, has brought only ruin to its people and terror to ours. I remind the Council that Israel did not seek this war. It was forced on us on 7 October 2023, when Hamas committed the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. More than 1,200 were murdered. Entire families — babies, children, mothers, grandparents — were wiped out. Overall, 251 hostages were taken into Gaza. Today 59 of those innocent people remain, with 24 believed to be alive and 35 more believed to be dead — their bodies still inhumanely held. Hamas has rejected every reasonable offer for their return home. Instead, it releases horrifying footage of hostages to deepen the agony of their families and to prolong their torment. That is sadism. It is psychological warfare of the vilest degree imaginable.

Israel has a duty to its people and the world to dismantle Hamas' military and governing infrastructure to ensure that Gaza can never again be used as a launchpad for atrocities and, first and foremost, to bring our hostages home. However, that duty has never come at the cost of our international obligations. Allow me to remind the Council that article 70 of the Protocol Additional I to the Geneva Conventions requires aid where the civilian population is not adequately supplied. During the 42-day ceasefire, more than 25,000 aid trucks entered Gaza, facilitated by Israel. Those trucks carried tens of thousands of tons of humanitarian aid, including food, fuel and medical supplies. Israel is closely monitoring the situation and coordinating with the relevant United Nations agencies and humanitarian organizations on the ground. Our assessments indicate that there is currently no evidence of a humanitarian crisis in

Gaza. Furthermore, under article 23 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, a party is not obliged to allow in aid that is likely to support the enemy's military effort. And yet, that is exactly what Hamas has done — stealing aid from the civilian population and selling supplies to rebuild the terror machine.

Still, some in the international community continue to draw dangerous false equivalences, ignoring that Hamas alone began this war, continuing to prolong it and still holding 59 hostages underground in inhumane conditions — 59 hostages who have never received an ounce of humanitarian aid. As Mr. Eli Sharabi recently testified before the Council (see S/PV.9882), he personally witnessed Hamas terrorists bringing United Nations humanitarian aid into their tunnels, where they consumed it themselves, denying the starving hostages even the smallest share. The war can end tomorrow, if Hamas releases the hostages and lays down its weapons. That is the only path to peace.

That is why the convening of the High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, in June, is — unfortunately — destined to fail. Such an initiative is disconnected from the current reality and risks doing more harm than good, particularly in the post-7 October 2023 environment. It creates false expectations, while ignoring the underlying dysfunction of the Palestinian Authority, its ongoing support for terrorism via the pay-for-slay programme, its refusal to implement long-overdue reforms, its promotion of incitement and its illegal warfare against Israel in international forums. The Conference provides fertile ground for yet another opportunity to politicize and polarize international forums, deepening the divide and moving all parties further from peace. Genuine progress will not come from internationalizing the conflict or one-sided measures decided by uninvolved parties. It will come from responsible leadership, the rejection of terrorism and embracing the moderate parties. Efforts to promote the Conference undermine the path to real regional progress. Instead of amplifying failed approaches, the international community should focus its energy where it is most needed — confronting the radical axis led by Iran and its terror proxies.

There is a danger in mistaking aspiration for reality. The Council must not fall into the trap of wishful thinking. We cannot speak of reconstruction without security. We cannot achieve Lebanese sovereignty while tolerating Hizbullah. We cannot promote regional cooperation while ignoring Iran's nuclear aspirations. And one cannot claim to stand for peace while legitimizing the forces that slaughtered families in their homes. There is tremendous opportunity in the Middle East today, but the greatest threats to that opportunity are terrorism, fanaticism and an apparent international blindness to them. If we are serious about building a better future for the region, then we must also be serious about naming the obstacles in the way. Israel is ready. We are ready to work with regional partners and deepen cooperation, but we will not compromise on the security of our people, and we will not accept the permanence of terror. The Council has a chance to support progress, back Governments that seek reform, empower voices that reject extremism and stand with those who value life and prosperity, not death and misery. It is not too late, but the window will not stay open forever. Through a realistic acceptance of the challenging reality in the Middle East, it might be possible to summon the resolve to harness the potential for an improved future for all.

The President (*spoke in French*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France.

I wanted to make the debate on the Near and Middle East a high point of the French presidency of the Security Council. The antisemitic massacres of 7 October 2023 and the military conflagration that followed have unsettled the region. As we speak, Gaza is devastated by the war, Lebanon is struggling to recover from it,

Syria is embarking on a fragile and uncertain transition and Iran is continuing its dangerous nuclear arms race. That spiral of destabilization must not lead us into irreparable damage. That is why we must work together on a path of peace and security for all.

Our first priority is to stop hostilities to put an end to the suffering of the civilian population. In Lebanon, in close collaboration with our American partners, we managed to reach a ceasefire agreement five months ago. Its implementation can still be improved, but it has made it possible to restore peace. It is essential and must be maintained. In Gaza, alas, the war continues. The breakdown of the ceasefire and the resumption of Israeli strikes should alarm us. They constitute a dramatic setback for the Palestinian civilian population, the Israeli hostages and their families and the security of the entire region. There is an urgent need for negotiations to resume and to lead to a lasting ceasefire. We support the mediators' efforts to that end. That ceasefire must bring about the unconditional and immediate release of all the hostages being held arbitrarily by Hamas. Allow me to take a moment before the Council to remember our fellow Frenchman, Ofer Kalderon, who was released after 484 days in captivity. I would also like to pay tribute to the memory of another fellow Frenchman, Ohad Yahalomi, taken hostage on 7 October, arbitrarily held and murdered in Gaza. He leaves behind a widow and three innocent orphans.

The ceasefire must also make possible a massive influx of humanitarian aid into Gaza. The situation in Gaza is catastrophic, as all humanitarian aid has been blocked for two months. I was able to see that for myself when I visited the Egyptian border, and I can attest before the Council that that situation is unacceptable. For, since the end of March, Israeli bombardment has killed more than 1,300 people, including many civilians, women and children, and those military strikes also killed humanitarian workers and United Nations staff members. The tremendous suffering of the civilian population in Gaza must end. I call on Israel to remove all obstacles so that a massive amount of humanitarian aid can finally be delivered to Gaza.

For its part, France is actively working to address that humanitarian emergency. Since 2023, we have contributed €250 million in humanitarian aid to civilian populations. Part of that aid was distributed via the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, whose action and committed reform efforts France supports. In close cooperation with our regional partners, including Egypt and Jordan, we have also directly provided healthcare, food and shelter for the inhabitants of Gaza who are victims of the war.

Our second priority is to assist with the recovery of territories ravaged by conflict. The International Conference in Support of Lebanon's People and Sovereignty, held in Paris on 24 October 2024, raised more than \$1 billion. That aid went to the population and security forces. The new authorities have begun reform and reconstruction efforts that we support. When the time is right, we will hold an international conference in Paris in support of Lebanon's economic recovery. The role of the United Nations throughout that process will be key.

Lebanon needs to recover its sovereignty — its full sovereignty. We call on Israeli forces that are still in Lebanon to fully withdraw from Lebanese territory so that the Lebanese Armed Forces can be redeployed there. It is up to them to ensure the security and sovereignty of the State, assisted by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and the monitoring mechanism, in which France is participating alongside the United States, and which includes the United Nations. France will continue its resolute effort to ensure the full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006).

In Syria, a historic transition process has been under way since Bashar Al-Assad's dictatorship was overthrown. France stands ready to provide support. With its European partners, it has started to lift the first sanctions under certain conditions. The transition process must respect and protect the rights of all Syrians, regardless

of their ethnic background, religion or gender. It must also ensure an effective and determined counter-terrorism effort. I will say it again before the General Assembly: the heinous crimes committed by Bashar Al-Assad's regime must not be forgotten. The United Nations has an important role to play in combating impunity and in Syria's reconstruction. In Gaza, we support our Arab partners' efforts to build a robust and credible framework for the day after. That framework should make possible the reconstruction, governance and security of the Strip. But those efforts can only produce their effects if carried out as part of a political approach.

That is why our third priority is to work towards political solutions that will ensure a just and lasting peace. There is only one solution to achieve a political settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely, the two-State solution, the only solution capable of guaranteeing peace and security over the long term for both Israelis and Palestinians. That solution is now being threatened by the ramping up of settlement expansion in the West Bank, the violence of extremist settlers, the desire to weaken the Palestinian Authority and the discourse calling for annexation and for the forced displacement of the population.

Faced with facts on the ground, the prospect of a Palestinian State must be protected. That is why France will organize, together with Saudi Arabia, an international conference on the implementation of the two-State solution here in New York in June. Our aim is clear: to advance the recognition of Palestine alongside the normalization of relations with Israel. That is how we will successfully ensure Israel's security and regional integration, while responding to the legitimate aspiration of Palestinians to a State of their own. That road map for the effective implementation of the two-State solution also involves disarming Hamas, defining credible governance from which Hamas will be excluded and reforming the Palestinian Authority. The United Nations and its agencies must have a central role in that process.

At the same time, we are sparing no effort to find a diplomatic solution to the challenge posed by Iran's headlong pursuit of its nuclear programme. International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi explained the situation clearly yesterday during our meeting on non-proliferation (see S/PV.9906). Faced with destabilizing interference, we must continue to work to consolidate the sovereignty of States in the region. Having just visited Iraq, I would like to stress how much headway that country is making. Torn apart not long ago by conflicts and power plays, it is now managing to avoid becoming involved in regional tensions. Iraq has once again assumed its role as a pole of equilibrium and stabilization. The third Baghdad Conference, which will be held at the end of 2025, attests to that. The Conference will provide an opportunity to work to promote regional cooperation and security, countering the fragmentation and confrontation approach that is prevalent today.

France is working for peace and sovereignty; without them, nothing is possible. We are deeply committed to the Near and Middle East by virtue of historical and geographical ties that bind. Today the security and stability of all depend on that region. We are therefore determined to build a path to peace there, for all and with all.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Kabba (Sierra Leone): I thank His Excellency Mr. Jean-Noël Barrot, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, for convening this important ministerial-level debate. I also thank the Secretary-General for his briefing and unwavering leadership in seeking peace in the Middle East under deeply challenging conditions.

This meeting comes at a moment of grave urgency. The prolonged Israel-Palestine conflict continues to inflict devastating humanitarian, security and political consequences, destabilizing the region and challenging the collective conscience of the international community. The recent and continued violations of ceasefire agreements have worsened an already catastrophic humanitarian situation. In the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, we are witnessing an alarming deterioration, characterized by mass civilian casualties, repeated displacement and the widespread destruction of infrastructure, in an affront to international humanitarian law and the rules-based international system.

Reports indicate that 1,890 people were killed between 18 March and 17 April, including 595 children. Indiscriminate air strikes on densely populated areas and internally displaced persons camps have resulted in appalling civilian casualties. The use of incendiary weapons in those attacks has left women and children burned alive in their shelters, deepening trauma and collective despair. Repeated evacuation orders have displaced more than 480,000 people within a matter of weeks. The total blockade of humanitarian aid and commercial goods since 2 March is a human-made catastrophe. Despite the presence of food convoys run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the World Food Programme (WFP), access remains blocked. WFP's recent warning of depleted food reserves and the possible suspension of operations is a dire signal. Medical facilities, already overburdened and underequipped, face collapse. Fuel, medicine, clean water and electricity are almost non-existent. Humanitarian personnel operate under immense risk, dozens have been killed, while UNRWA, a lifeline for millions of Palestinians, faces obstruction, politicization and underfunding.

The legal obligations of the occupying Power are clear. Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel, as the occupying Power, is bound to ensure the welfare of civilians in the occupied Palestinian territory, including access to food, water, shelter and medical care. Those obligations are not discretionary.

In that regard, Sierra Leone strongly supports the submission of the United Nations to the International Court of Justice, which reaffirmed Israel's continuing legal obligations towards the United Nations, UNRWA and the people under occupation. The United Nations legal position is unambiguous: Israel cannot derogate from its responsibilities under international law and must allow unhindered humanitarian access.

The situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is equally concerning. Settlement expansion, the demolition of homes and restrictions on Palestinian movement continue to intensify. Thousands remain displaced in Jenin, Tulkarm and other communities. Those actions risk undermining the path towards a two-State solution and must cease.

Sierra Leone underscores the urgent need for accountability and compliance with international humanitarian law. Despite the non-convening of a conference of High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention, with the aim of reaffirming legal protections, assessing compliance and advancing mechanisms for accountability, Sierra Leone continues to urge for compliance with international humanitarian law and a constant reaffirmation of its principles.

As a country that emerged from conflict through multilateral solidarity and principled diplomacy over two decades ago, Sierra Leone believes in peace through a lawful and negotiated settlement, not through violence or collective punishment. In that regard, we emphasize the following priorities.

First, the security situation must be improved. We unequivocally condemn the targeting of civilians, hostage-taking and all forms of attacks on non-combatants. We reiterate our call for the immediate and unconditional release of the remaining 59

Israeli hostages held by Hamas and urge all parties to commit to a renewed cessation of hostilities. Resolution 2735 (2024) provides a foundation for dialogue.

Secondly, humanitarian access must be ensured. Humanitarian assistance must not be politicized or weaponized. We call for safe, sustained and unimpeded access for aid agencies across all border entry points into Gaza, including the Rafah, Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings. We reject restrictions placed on UNRWA and other aid organizations and support full resumption of their work. The international community must urgently act to avert a famine and allow the continuation of critical health interventions, such as the forthcoming round of polio vaccinations.

Thirdly, a renewed peace process must be supported. The current cycle of violence once again proves that occupation, blockade and unilateral actions cannot form the basis for peace. We welcome the initiative by France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to co-chair an international conference on the Middle East peace process and call on all parties to approach the process in good faith. That effort must be anchored in international law, relevant United Nations resolutions and long-standing frameworks such as the Arab Peace Initiative and the Quartet principles.

Sierra Leone continues to support the internationally endorsed vision of two States — Israel and Palestine — living side by side in peace and security, with East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian State and a return to the 1967 borders. We reaffirm our call for the full implementation of all relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, and we encourage intensified diplomatic engagement by regional and international actors.

In conclusion, Sierra Leone joins others in renewing our collective call for peace, justice and accountability. The road to peace must be paved with respect for international law, humanitarian principles and the inherent dignity of every human being in the region, in particular the people of Israel and Palestine.

Ms. Žvokelj (Slovenia): I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Secretary-General on behalf of my Government for the service of each and every United Nations staff member on the ground.

The day 7 October 2023 was the deadliest day for Jewish people since the Holocaust. And what followed are the deadliest 570 days ever for Palestinians. We have never seen such a perpetuating trauma for people on the ground nor an obliteration of the system we had built to prevent it.

Never has humankind been more suffocated — from attacks on humanitarian, medical and media workers to attacks on civilians and the destruction of civilian objects and humanitarian facilities in Gaza; from the longest blockade of humanitarian aid since the start of the war, now passing 50 days, to plans for the militarization of aid; from the limiting of the access of humanitarian workers to downright attempts to dismantle a United Nations agency to legally prosecute it and discredit the entire Organization; from killing civilians just because they are of a certain ethnic background to taking others hostage for the same reason. The list of the unacceptable is long, and it prevents us from shielding civilians from a war for which they bear no responsibility. We again call for full respect of international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

Never has the future of the region seemed so profoundly uncertain. To use the words of Gazan photographer Fatima Hassouna, tragically killed earlier this month: every death will have an impact that will remain through time.

There is no military solution to the Palestinian question. War in Gaza does not bring more security to Israel. Operations in the West Bank and persistent illegal occupation and settlement expansion are shaking up the entire region. Attacks

across the region, including in the south of Syria, along with inflammatory political narratives, are stoking global instability.

As a diplomat, I fear what could come out of the ashes of the Gaza war if there is no united front by the international community to prevent more violence, more hatred and more radicalism.

As a mother, I wonder what kind of future awaits those children in Palestine who have lost their entire families or those children in Israel whose relatives are still held hostage or will never come home. The road to their recovery is long. It is our responsibility to pave it with peace.

Never have we needed more strength to prevent the evaporation of a political solution and to defend the system we have collectively built. Slovenia has long been a staunch supporter of the two-State solution. Last June, we recognized the State of Palestine. Since October 2023, we have been providing humanitarian aid to address the needs of the civilian population in Gaza. For almost 15 years, we have been carrying out the medical rehabilitation of wounded Palestinian children in Slovenia.

We will continue speaking in favour of Israel's security, as well as in support of the work of the Palestinian Authority, including of its reform path. We stand against any territorial or demographic change of Palestine. Slovenia supports the ongoing discussions around the comprehensive Gaza reconstruction plan, highlighting the crucial role of strong Arab and Palestinian ownership. We will continue to support political and legal processes. Everyone should play their part, including through tangible commitments and actions at the international conference that you just mentioned, Mr. President, on the two-State solution, to be held in June.

As we look to the future, our most immediate priority must be a lasting ceasefire, followed by reconstruction. But the future must also include an honest reflection on the failures — our failures — to uphold the security net that the international community should provide so as to prevent such devastation.

With the level of suffering we see, immense wisdom and courage are needed to ensure respect for international law, to overcome divisions and to safeguard the two-State solution. We said “never again” a long time ago. We must now make sure to keep our word.

Lord Collins (United Kingdom): The Secretary-General highlighted the appalling situation in Gaza. The human cost on 7 October 2023 was horrific. And since that day, hostages have endured unimaginable cruelty, and Palestinians have faced relentless death and destruction. We welcome the call from President Abbas for the hostages to be released, and we echo that call. We also need a return to the ceasefire in order to end the terrible bloodshed.

We are deeply concerned about the World Food Programme's announcement on Friday that its food stocks in Gaza have run out. It is unacceptable that Israel has blocked humanitarian support from entering Gaza for nearly two months, meaning that Palestinian civilians, including 1 million children, are facing starvation, disease and death. United Nations and other workers must be able to deliver life-saving assistance safely and in line with humanitarian principles.

We are outraged by recent attacks, including the killing of Palestinian Red Crescent workers and the hit on a United Nations compound on 19 March. Israel has admitted that this was caused by one of its tanks, despite the compound being known to the Israel Defense Forces as a United Nations humanitarian facility. That is inexcusable. We urge Israel to ensure accurate public statements on such grave incidents. It must conduct full and transparent investigations into those incidents, hold those responsible to account and reinstate an effective deconfliction system to prevent such tragedies.

The United Kingdom believes that lasting peace and security can be achieved only through a two-State solution. We thank France and Saudi Arabia for their leadership in preparing for the conference in June. We should build on the Arab plan for Gaza's future and develop credible security and governance plans acceptable to both Israel and Palestinians. Hamas must no longer govern Gaza or pose a threat to Israel, and we should build the capability of the Palestinian Authority, which will be central to a future State.

Finally, we must seize the opportunity to build lasting peace across the region. There has been important progress in Lebanon, where the Government has committed to crucial reforms, and in Syria, with moves towards an inclusive political transition. The United Kingdom will continue to support the Lebanese and Syrian people to build on that momentum, and we urge all parties to avoid destabilizing actions and abide by their international obligations.

A better future in the Middle East is possible. To realize it, we must return to a ceasefire in Gaza, reinvest in efforts to achieve a two-State solution and pursue wider normalization of relations for the benefit of Palestinians, Israelis and all those living in the region.

Ms. Shea (United States of America): I welcome Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot, and I thank Secretary-General Guterres for his briefing.

As we have consistently said, the future of the Middle East must look different. Fresh thinking is needed to bring about a durable peace and prosperity that provides opportunities for all the region's people.

With respect to the humanitarian needs in Gaza, no one wants to see Palestinian civilians in Gaza go hungry or thirsty. A ceasefire agreement would create the condition for the flow of humanitarian aid, but Hamas is preventing that agreement from being concluded. Just two weeks ago, Hamas rejected yet another proposal put forward by the United States, Qatar and Egypt that would release hostages who have been held for 570 days and bring calm to Gaza. Instead, Hamas, a brutal terrorist organization, continues to violently suppress organic protests against its barbaric rule and demonstrate its lack of regard for the Palestinian civilians it purports to represent. Hamas bears sole responsibility for the war it unleashed on 7 October 2023, when it committed the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust and abducted more than 250 hostages, as well as for the resumption of hostilities in March, following Hamas' rejection of multiple proposals.

The United States supports Israel and its fight to defend itself from groups who wish to destroy it. Fighting could end tomorrow if Hamas released hostages and laid down its arms. Their reckless decisions have caused enough bloodshed. Hamas must leave Gaza forever. The Council should apply pressure on Hamas — for the first time — to free Palestinians in Gaza from its tyranny. Shielding Hamas from accountability only undermines Israel's security and does nothing to improve the lives of Palestinians.

The Council has heard first-hand testimony from Noa Argamani and Eli Sharabi, who bravely detailed the depravity they experienced at the hands of their Hamas captors. We cannot remain silent about the horrors of their plight or the urgent need to press for the release of the 59 hostages who remain in Hamas' grip, including those brutally murdered in Hamas captivity.

President Trump has been clear: Hamas must immediately release all the hostages immediately. Five Americans still need to come home. Edan Alexander can still return to his parents' arms, but Hamas continues to hold the bodies of Itay Chen, Gaddi Hagai, Judi Weinstein Haggai, and Omer Neutra. We will not rest until every hostage has been returned from Gaza. They will not be left behind; they will never be forgotten. We recognize the ongoing efforts of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to

prevent civilian harm in Gaza, including its review of the tragic 23 March incident that claimed the lives of humanitarian workers. We take note that the IDF claims that six members of Hamas were among those killed in that incident, and we call on the United Nations and Member States to demand that Hamas stop its abhorrent practice of putting civilians in harm's way. Hamas continues to cynically use civilian infrastructure to shield its personnel and weaponry. We expect all parties to comply with international humanitarian law.

Turning to the wider region, we must also recognize the insidious violence, suffering and instability throughout the Middle East that Iran promotes through its malign actions, including its sponsorship of terrorism. Through Hamas, Hizbullah, the Houthis and countless other terrorist proxies it backs, Iran poses a threat to the millions of people who call the region home. Iran's nuclear programme — another cornerstone of its global campaign for destabilization — also threatens not only the safety of the international community but that of its own citizens.

President Trump has been clear — there are two paths for Iran to end its nuclear programme. The United States prefers a negotiated resolution. Time, however, is limited. If Iran refuses to abandon its nuclear weapons programme, we must hold it accountable. But real, meaningful diplomacy remains within reach. The United States will do its part to help to forge a new reality, alongside Israel and our Arab partners. The future must start in a Gaza without Hamas. Meetings or international conferences will not change that reality. Hamas must disarm and be removed from Gaza, and the hostages must be returned home.

Mr. Fu Cong (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank you, Mr. President, for coming to New York to preside over this meeting. I thank Secretary-General António Guterres for his briefing.

The Middle East is now deeply mired in turmoil, and the tensions on the ground are worrisome. Israel has reignited the war in Gaza. Its ongoing siege and relentless attacks on Gaza have resulted in new casualties among innocent civilians on a daily basis and an escalating humanitarian catastrophe. The illegal settlements in the West Bank keep expanding. Settler violence is intensifying. Israel's repeated attacks on Lebanon and Syria are violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both countries on an ongoing basis. Since last month, tensions have been on the rise in the Red Sea. The United States has been ramping up air strikes on Yemen, in violation of Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Gaza conflict is the trigger of the current round of regional volatility. Nineteenth months have passed since the outbreak of the conflict. Despite the unanimous and strong call from the international community for a ceasefire and an end to the war in Gaza, peace remains elusive. Amid the mayhem, more than 52,000 people have lost their lives, and 2 million people in Gaza are threatened with forced displacement. The current round of the Gaza conflict has lasted for so long, with so much devastation. A major reason for that is the wanton violation of the basic norms underpinning the international rule of law.

I wish to reiterate some self-evident principles. Security Council resolutions must be fully implemented. That is stipulated in the Charter of the United Nations. There is no room for distorted interpretations. Abiding by international humanitarian law is a non-negotiable obligation and must not be used as a bargaining chip. The principles of international law are universally applicable to all countries. Double standards and selective application entail serious consequences. We urge Israel to fulfil its obligations under international law in earnest and to observe the basic norms governing international relations. The United States — a country with major influence on the party concerned — should cast aside its geopolitical self-interests, uphold a fair and responsible attitude and work to restore peace and stability in the region.

Given the gravity of the situation, I wish to emphasize the following points.

First, a lasting ceasefire must be secured. Violence or force cannot bring about security. A lasting ceasefire in Gaza is the best way to save lives and bring hostages home. That must be an overriding priority. China urges Israel to relinquish its obsession with the delusion of winning by force and to immediately cease its military operations in Gaza and its attacks on Lebanon and Syria. We call on the United States to stop its air strikes on Yemen and to respect Yemen's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity. The Houthis should stop harassing merchant ships and should maintain the safety of shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

Secondly, humanitarian aid in Gaza must be restored. Humanitarian aid must not be weaponized. Israel must fulfil its obligations under international humanitarian law as the occupying Power by immediately lifting the blockade and fully restoring humanitarian access to Gaza. We strongly condemn any attacks against humanitarian workers and call for thorough investigations and accountability for all attacks. So-called professional failures must not be used as an excuse to kill humanitarian workers. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East — an institution authorized by General Assembly resolutions — enjoys privileges and immunities. Its dignity, safety, security and facilitation should be respected and guaranteed.

Thirdly, unilateral actions that violate international law must stop. Settlement activities in the West Bank violate Security Council resolutions and must cease immediately. Resolution 2735 (2024) made it clear that it rejects "any attempt at demographic or territorial change in the Gaza Strip" (*para. 5*). The recent expansion of the Israeli military presence in Gaza, carving out more than half of the territory into a buffer zone, is a cause for serious concern. The international community must firmly oppose any forcible displacement of the population of Gaza and any attempts to annex territory in Gaza or the West Bank. Israel should withdraw from the Lebanese and Syrian territories without delay.

Fourthly, the two-State solution must be revitalized. Implementing the two-State solution is the only viable way to resolve the question of Palestine. We support the Gaza recovery and reconstruction plan launched by Egypt and other Arab countries. We commend France and Saudi Arabia for convening the upcoming High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, in June, and hope that the Conference will inject new impetus into the implementation of the two-State solution. The international community should step up its efforts to promote the political process of the two-State solution and provide it with robust guarantees.

As the primary organ for maintaining international peace and security, the Security Council has the responsibility to take all necessary steps towards a lasting ceasefire in Gaza. China will continue to work with the international community in our unrelenting efforts to end the war in Gaza, restore peace in the Middle East and achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the Palestinian question.

Mr. Mohamed Yusuf (Somalia): I extend my gratitude to the French presidency for convening this meeting at such a critical juncture, as the Palestinian people and the broader region face unprecedented challenges. Our sincere appreciation also goes to Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, for his briefing, illuminating the devastating scale of suffering in Gaza.

We meet again amid a profound moral crisis, in which international resolve has diminished to mere expressions of sympathy about the catastrophe unfolding before our eyes. The statistics speak volumes: in 18 months, more than 50,000 Palestinians killed and more than 100,000 wounded in these relentless atrocities. The situation in the occupied Palestinian territory is rapidly deteriorating beyond our darkest

fears. The systematic deprivation of millions of Gazans is evident in the World Food Programme's depleted stocks and acute shortages of medicine, fuel and clean water. Most devastating of all is that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East — the sole lifeline sustaining Palestinian refugees for more than seven decades — has been systematically dismantled, leaving an unprecedented void in humanitarian assistance. For more than 50 days, Gaza has been transformed into an open-air prison, where survival itself has become a daily struggle. The deliberate targeting of medical facilities, obstruction of aid and forced starvation of civilians constitute crimes against humanity that demand immediate action. More alarming still is the forced displacement of 1.9 million Palestinians — 90 per cent of Gaza's population — while 20,000 new settlement units rise in the occupied West Bank, revealing a calculated strategy to permanently alter Palestinian demographics.

In response to those developments, my delegation proposes that immediate attention be paid to the following points.

An immediate and permanent ceasefire must take effect. While we acknowledge the promising negotiations in Cairo, we emphasize that dialogue must yield tangible results.

Humanitarian access to Gaza must flow without restriction. We cannot observe passively as basic survival becomes a luxury for an entire population.

Protection mechanisms for civilian infrastructure — particularly hospitals, schools and religious sites — must be established and enforced.

The International Court of Justice's rulings must be implemented, ensuring accountability through international justice mechanisms.

Somalia stands firmly behind the Arab-Islamic plan for Gaza's early recovery and reconstruction. We view the upcoming High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, co-chaired by France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as vital to implementing a viable two-State solution. We advocate for Palestine's full membership in the United Nations as recognition of a long-denied fundamental right and the only path aligned with international law and United Nations resolutions. Yet this solution grows more distant with each day of occupation, each new settlement, each demolished home.

Beyond Palestine, we are concerned about Israel's continued aggression in Lebanon and its violation of its sovereignty, including air strikes and unauthorized presence in buffer zones. We call for the immediate Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory and for Israel to uphold its obligations under resolution 1701 (2006).

In Syria, we denounce the repeated Israeli air strikes on civilian infrastructure, airports and airstrips. Those actions not only violate international law but breach the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement between Israel and Syria, threatening regional stability.

In conclusion, our delegation reiterates its unwavering position. We must revitalize the political track towards a comprehensive peace, recognizing the State of Palestine, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, as the only viable path forward.

The choice before the Council is stark. We can either perpetuate a cycle of crisis management, or we can summon the political courage to pursue a lasting and just solution. The stability of our region and the credibility of the Council depend on it. Somalia stands ready to support all genuine efforts towards that end.

Mr. Sekeris (Greece) (*spoke in French*): I welcome the presence of His Excellency Minister Barrot, who is presiding over this very important debate.

(spoke in English)

Peace cannot be achieved through violence. It can only be attained through understanding and negotiations. Yet a political understanding on the Palestinian question remains elusive, as we are only one month away from the upcoming High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, in June, and the prospects of a ceasefire deal are still unclear. The June Conference presents a unique opportunity to revitalize the political process and pave the way towards the implementation of the two-State solution, in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions, while recognizing the right of Israel to exist, side by side with the Palestinians, in peace.

We support the efforts by France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and sincerely thank them for their work and their leadership in promoting a sustainable day after for the region. Having said that, we cannot but stress the importance of a successful outcome of the negotiations, with the aim of achieving a permanent and sustainable ceasefire, while securing the release of all hostages. We commend the mediators, Egypt and Qatar and the United States, for their tireless efforts.

Undoubtedly, a peaceful future in the Middle East cannot be established through violence and the forced displacement of people. It is also clear that Hamas cannot have any future in Gaza. The way towards peace should be based on international law, while ensuring the leading role of a reformed Palestinian Authority (PA), being the only credible and moderate alternative, with the assistance of the international community. The European Union has exercised critical leadership in that regard by announcing a \$1.8 billion support package for the Palestinians. We also commend the PA's readiness to continue its ambitious reform agenda.

Likewise, the Arab plan for Gaza, as presented by Egypt, is a constructive proposal. Greece supports that initiative as a good starting point towards planning reconstruction, and we reiterate that Hamas should have no role in the day after, as it continues to be a serious obstacle to sustainable peace.

On the humanitarian front, the ongoing hostilities in the Gaza Strip have led to a significant increase in the death toll, leaving behind hundreds of Palestinians dead. Thousands are wounded and internally displaced, all in acute need of food, water, medical supplies and shelter. At the same time, the hostages and their families continue to live in daily agony and uncertainty.

Greece has repeatedly condemned the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas and the cruel treatment of the hostages who remain in its captivity. All hostages must be treated humanely and be immediately and unconditionally released.

It is evident that the humanitarian blockade further deprives people of the means for survival. The unhindered and continuous flow of aid at scale into all parts of Gaza, combined with the restoration of the water and electricity systems, is a priority. At the same time, humanitarian workers, medical staff and patients must be protected at all times in accordance with international humanitarian law.

The humanitarian and security landscape in the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories remains alarming. We are deeply concerned by the closure orders issued by the Israeli authorities against schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in East Jerusalem, a decision that threatens the fundamental right to education of hundreds of pupils. UNRWA's role remains pivotal and indispensable.

Turning to the West Bank, Greece expresses concern about the increase in settlement activity, the displacement of people from refugee camps, attacks on

civilians and civilian infrastructure, the demolition and seizure of Palestinian-owned properties and restrictions on access for aid groups to refugee camps.

The special status quo of Jerusalem and its Old City is of particular importance. It must be protected and respected by all and at all times. Its sacred spaces should remain inviolable. All of its communities should enjoy viability. And last but not least, Jordan's special role as the custodian of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem must be preserved, as it actively and beneficially contributes to preserving multiculturalism and religious tolerance in the region.

In Lebanon, the formation of a new Government presents a unique opportunity to restore stability. The new Government has demonstrated its readiness to promote essential reforms and finally turn the page so that the Lebanese people can have a new opportunity for peace and prosperity to the benefit of the whole region. That was clearly demonstrated in the recent quadrilateral meeting of the leaders of Greece, France, Cyprus and Lebanon this past month.

Forging strong State institutions, including the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which play a crucial role in the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, is very important. We stand ready to assist the LAF, as the Greek Minister of Defence underscored during his recent visit to Beirut earlier this month.

We strongly reaffirm our support for the relevant resolutions and for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon, as mentioned in the presidential statement of 16 January (S/PRST/2025/1). The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon is key to the restoration of peace and security, and Greece will, therefore, be actively engaged in the discussions for the renewal of its mandate this summer.

It has only been a few days since our most recent meeting in this Chamber on the situation in Syria (see S/PV.9904), in the presence of the Syrian interim Foreign Minister. As Special Envoy Pedersen noted, the political transition in Syria is now at a truly critical juncture. That transition needs to be fully inclusive and Syrian-led and -owned, in accordance with the principles of resolution 2254 (2015), as justice, accountability and respect for international law, including the law of the sea, remain critical. A stable and prosperous Syria is key to the future of the Middle East.

In conclusion, hope should prevail over violence. The cycle of violence that started on 7 October 2023 must finally come to an end, so as to open the path for a vision of regional integration and prosperity that would bring concrete benefits to all peoples in the region.

Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett (Guyana): I thank His Excellency Mr. Jean-Noël Barrot, Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, for convening this high-level open debate. I also thank Secretary-General Guterres for his sobering briefing.

The situation in the occupied Palestinian territory remains at the centre of the conflagrations we are witnessing in various parts of the Middle East region. Unless we are able to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, peace in the region will remain elusive.

Guyana continues to follow the alarming developments in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The combination of military operations by air, land and sea in Gaza and the blockade of aid for more than 50 days continues to engender death, malnutrition and severe hardships for the population in Gaza. In the West Bank, Israel's ongoing military operations continue to fuel large-scale displacement, the destruction of property, death and insecurity for civilians. Israel must bring its war in Gaza to an end and must cease its military operations in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The protection of civilians must be the foremost priority.

We listened with great concern to the Secretary-General's account of the situation in Gaza today. Gaza is extremely dangerous for humanitarians carrying out life-saving work and for civilians who are trying to eke out an existence amid the misery that completely encompasses them. Movement is dangerous for aid workers since deconfliction and coordination mechanisms are non-functional, and access restrictions impede their operations. Furthermore, with the aid blockade in effect since 2 March, vital supplies are running out. We noted with concern, for example, the announcement by the World Food Programme last Friday that it had run out of food stocks in Gaza. Moreover, we noted that hot-meal kitchens in Gaza may soon run out of food. We are, in effect, watching as more and more Palestinians are condemned to die of starvation, by bomb or bullet, or of disease — all in violation of unambiguous tenets of international law that prohibit such treatment of civilians. The Council must demand accountability for those egregious assaults on civilians in Gaza.

The statistics coming out of the Gaza Strip should compel the Council to take urgent action. Since 7 October 2023, more than 51,000 Palestinians have been killed, and more than 116,000 have been injured; 418 aid workers, including 295 United Nations staff, have been killed in Gaza; and 210 Palestinian journalists and media workers have been killed. At least 1.9 million people — or approximately 90 per cent of the population — across Gaza have been displaced, some of them on 10 or more occasions. Indeed, since 18 March, at least 20 displacement orders have been issued by the Israeli military, and more than two thirds of the Gaza Strip is considered no-go areas. Those statistics paint a horrific picture of the circumstances to which Palestinians have been deliberately subjected, and one is compelled to draw the same conclusion that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs did, namely, that it is “deprivation by design”.

In the occupied West Bank, displacement is also on the rise; civilians, including children, continue to be killed; and the demolition of Palestinian-owned structures continues unabated, as do attacks by Israeli settlers on Palestinians.

Guyana therefore reiterates the following four appeals.

First, we call for an immediate return to the ceasefire, for the release of all remaining hostages from Gaza and for urgent, unimpeded humanitarian access into Gaza. We also call for the United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, operating in the occupied Palestinian territory, to be given full facility to carry out their mandates. We have taken note of ongoing efforts to have the parties agree to return to the implementation of the ceasefire deal, and we call on Hamas and Israel to cooperate fully, in line with resolution 2735 (2024).

Secondly, we call for the protection of civilians to be prioritized, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Thirdly, Guyana also calls for the protection of United Nations personnel, aid workers and journalists operating in Gaza. Too many of those workers have been killed or injured while attempting to bring relief to Palestinians or to draw attention to their plight.

Fourthly and finally, Guyana appeals for a return to negotiations towards the achievement of the two-State solution, in keeping with the relevant United Nations resolutions. We look forward to the High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, to be held in June, and hope that there will be some concrete outcomes that can take us closer to that goal.

Ms. Lassen (Denmark): The Middle East continues to face a series of complex and interconnected challenges. It is a region marked by striking dualities — of

perseverance amid instability, but also of progress too often tempered by regression. In recent months, we welcomed a new President and Government in Lebanon and underlined the need to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces in order to help secure a permanent ceasefire and promote the State's authority in the country.

We celebrated the collapse of the brutal Al-Assad regime in Syria. While Syria still faces many challenges, the appointment of a transitional Government is commendable. Denmark continues to support the Syrian people and calls for an inclusive and Syrian-led political transition process, in line with the principles of resolution 2254 (2015). And we have seen a significant weakening of Hamas and Hizbullah throughout the region. Those developments offer hope for a more stable and peaceful Middle East.

In contrast, we are also observing a series of deeply concerning developments. In Gaza, the humanitarian situation is ever deteriorating, and the ceasefire has collapsed. No humanitarian aid has been allowed into Gaza for almost two months, owing to the complete humanitarian blockade imposed by Israel, cutting 2 million people off from basic assistance. Water, electricity and medical supplies are lacking. We are further alarmed about the recent reports that the World Food Programme has depleted all its food stocks in Gaza. Families in Gaza are reporting utter exhaustion from moving numerous times as a result of Israeli-issued evacuation orders.

Israel has experienced extreme trauma following Hamas' terrorist attack on 7 October 2023 and has the right to defend itself. We will continue to condemn the brutal terrorist attacks and the ruthless hostage-taking by Hamas. We will also continue to remind Israel that it must defend itself within the parameters of international law, including international humanitarian law. We condemn any attacks against humanitarian workers, medical staff and healthcare facilities. They must be protected, in accordance with the parties' obligations under international law.

We are watching the developments in the West Bank with deep concern, and we urge Israel immediately to halt all settlement expansion on Palestinian land, address the settler violence and stop the major displacement of civilians. Those actions will not lead to more security and stability. They will only fuel the flames of resentment and violence, as they undermine the prospects for a two-State solution, which remains the only viable road to a lasting and just peace.

The people of the Middle East long for peace. They deserve to enjoy the fruits of stability. They deserve to coexist peacefully with their neighbours. And they deserve the direction of the Security Council on how that can be achieved.

We view the following actions as some of the very first steps on a long road to lasting peace.

First, the violence in Gaza must cease. We need an immediate ceasefire, the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and an end to Israel's blockade on humanitarian aid going into Gaza. We further call on Israel to ensure that any arrangement for the delivery of humanitarian aid be made in full respect of the humanitarian principles.

In Lebanon and Syria, we must safeguard the operational space of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force to allow them to fulfil their mandates. While we acknowledge Israel's legitimate security concerns, we remain concerned by the recent Israeli attacks in Syria, with reported civilian casualties. Israel must withdraw from the areas of limitation and separation, and equally, Israel must withdraw from southern Lebanon and dismantle any physical obstacles to UNIFIL's fulfilment of its mandate.

We need to work together to support reconstruction, recovery and reform throughout the region. Denmark supports the Arab plan for the reconstruction of

Gaza as a good basis, and it commends the initiative of France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to organize the upcoming conference on the implementation of a two-State solution.

In conclusion, Denmark maintains its firm commitment to permanent peace in the Middle East through a two-State solution. Regional leadership, coupled with and supported by sustained international engagement, including through the Council, can make progress. Denmark will continue to engage with all parties to achieve that aim.

Mr. Hwang (Republic of Korea): I thank you, Mr. President, for convening this important meeting. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General for his comprehensive briefing.

Last week's announcement by the World Food Programme that existing food stocks had been depleted reminds us that the current eight-week blockade of Gaza by Israel cannot be justified. Humanitarian aid should never be wielded as a political tool. Yet famine is once again looming for Palestinians in Gaza. We underscore the obligation to respect international humanitarian law. That includes the responsibility of the occupying Power to ensure requisite food and medical supplies and to grant the free passage of humanitarian relief into and throughout the occupied territory. We urge Israel to immediately allow and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza by all relevant agencies, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, fully respecting the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. The continued taking of hostages by Hamas is unacceptable. However, that does not lay the ground for Israel's non-compliance with international law.

History will remember the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Gaza, which is particularly acute for its 1 million children. We call on all parties to comply with their obligations to protect civilians and humanitarian workers. We take serious note of the belated admission by the Israel Defense Forces of its role in the deadly attacks in March, killing Palestinian emergency relief workers and a United Nations staff member. Credible investigations are still needed, all those responsible must be punished and concrete measures to prevent recurrence should be established. In addition, we remain deeply concerned about the apocalyptic living conditions in Gaza owing to massive destruction, expanding no-go zones and a critically strained health system and shortages of basic services, to name just a few factors. Israel's military strikes on heavy equipment vehicles provided by mediating countries for reconstruction deprives Palestinian civilians of their desperate hope for early recovery.

We all know that the best way to ensure compliance with international norms in Gaza is a ceasefire. The efforts by mediating countries are still ongoing. We therefore strongly urge the parties to the conflict to reinvigorate sincere engagement to secure a renewed ceasefire. In that regard, we highlight the impassioned remarks by President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority (PA), demanding that Hamas release all Israeli hostages and criticizing their actions as inflicting damage on the Palestinian cause. We hope that, by drawing a clear line between the PA and Hamas, his rare comments will be a starting point for both Israel and Palestine to move in the right direction towards advancing the two-State solution.

We also need urgent de-escalation and compliance with international law in the West Bank. Ongoing evacuation orders, the demolition of homes and movement restrictions, combined with the expansion of settlements and settler violence, are driving Palestinian families from their land. We are deeply concerned that, in 2025 alone, Israeli authorities have advanced plans for more than 15,000 settlement housing units. We reiterate that Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory constitute a flagrant violation under international law, as provided for in resolution 2334 (2016). We call on Israel to engage with regional players, including

the Palestinian Authority, to enhance coexistence and peace. In that regard, we welcome the holding, in June, of the High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, to be co-chaired by France and Saudi Arabia.

Since the horrific terrorist attacks by Hamas on 7 October 2023, we have witnessed multiple significant developments in the region, notably in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. While some of them are driving the region into deeper instability, we also witnessed a historic transition in Syria. Its Government's will to cooperate with the international community is a beacon for a better future for the region. We fully understand the central importance of a just and durable solution to the Palestinian question in the context of peace and stability in the wider region. We therefore hope that the ceasefire in Gaza can be swiftly renewed and the reconstruction process followed, on the basis of international law and free from demographic or territorial changes.

In conclusion, we reiterate our strong condemnation and rejection of all forms of hatred, including antisemitism. Last week, Jews around the world marked Holocaust Remembrance Day. We hope that all peoples can learn from that unprecedented crime and redouble their efforts for tolerance, harmony and respect.

Mr. Ahmad (Pakistan): I would like to thank the French presidency for convening this timely and critical debate. We are also grateful to the Secretary-General for his sobering and candid briefing and for his clear and urgent recommendations. We commend and salute the United Nations staff and humanitarian workers engaged in Gaza under difficult circumstances.

The tragedy unfolding in Gaza is without precedent, in both scale and inhumanity. It is not merely a humanitarian crisis — it is the systematic destruction of a people and the erasure of a nation's right to exist. Israel's attack earlier this month on Al-Ahli Hospital — the last major hospital providing critical healthcare — was a horrific massacre. The deliberate targeting of civilians and essential infrastructure, the use of starvation as a weapon and the incineration of displaced families in tents are not examples of the collateral damage of war — they are methods of war. The occupying Power's intent is unmistakable: to leave no space safe for Palestinians. They are acts of war and ethnic cleansing.

Israel's unilateral breach of the ceasefire agreement brokered by Egypt, Qatar and the United States was a deliberate choice to return to war over diplomacy. The assault on Gaza is killing civilians at four times the rate of previous conflicts. Since the hostilities resumed, nearly 2,000 more Palestinians have been killed, adding to the staggering death toll of more than 52,000 — among them, more than 17,000 children. For more than seven weeks, Gaza has been under total siege. Food, water and medicine have been blocked, plunging more than 2 million people into famine. The World Food Programme has warned that supplies are exhausted. The United Nations now states plainly that Gaza is not at risk of famine — it is experiencing one. Even humanitarian convoys are being attacked, with impunity. There must be accountability for those crimes and blatant violations of international law, including international humanitarian law.

In the West Bank, we are witnessing a parallel crisis: forced displacement, relentless settlement expansion and daily violence. More than 40,000 Palestinians have been uprooted — the largest such displacement since 1967. Meanwhile, Israel continues its illegal annexation and occupation, in blatant defiance of international law. Equally alarming and illegal is Israel's deliberate carving up of Gaza, in which the Israeli army has turned over 30 per cent of Gaza into a so-called security buffer zone, which is the unlawful usurpation of Palestinian land under the barrel of a gun.

The scope of impunity does not stop at Gaza or the West Bank. Israel's pattern of illegal actions extends into Lebanon and Syria, violating ceasefires and Security Council resolutions alike. The pattern is clear: as long as the root cause — the illegal occupation of Palestinian and Arab lands — is ignored and not addressed, peace will remain an illusion.

In the face of the gloom and devastation, the world must act. The status quo is untenable. What we need is not mere expressions of concern — not just ticking a box, as the Secretary-General noted this morning — but decisive and collective action — focused on three essential objectives.

First, there must be an immediate and permanent ceasefire. Without a ceasefire, there can be no protection of civilians, no humanitarian relief, no political process. Resolution 2735 (2024) must be fully and swiftly implemented. The ceasefire must extend to the West Bank, where violence is escalating. Every day of delay costs innocent lives. And the ceasefire must be permanent, because civilian lives on both sides cannot be negotiated in cycles of violence and destruction.

Secondly, there must be full and unhindered humanitarian access. The blockade of Gaza must be lifted now. Humanitarian access is not a concession to be granted, but a legal obligation. Aid workers, convoys and medical teams must operate freely and safely. Starvation cannot be normalized as a weapon of war. Aid is not negotiable. Collective punishment must end. The international community must mobilize massive and sustained assistance to prevent total famine and begin the process of recovery and rebuilding shattered lives. The Gaza reconstruction plan must be fully and actively supported, and there must be no forced displacement of Gazans from their land.

Thirdly, there must be a clear political horizon grounded in Palestinian statehood. Humanitarian relief addresses the symptom; only justice can cure the disease, which is the occupation. History has shown us that ending the violence without ending the occupation will only invite future cycles of conflict. The Palestinian people deserve a credible and irreversible political path forward towards a sovereign, independent, contiguous and viable State of Palestine, based on the 1967 borders, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital.

In that context, the upcoming June conference on the realization of the two-State solution, co-chaired by France and Saudi Arabia, is a vital opportunity. It must deliver tangible outcomes: a timeline for Palestinian statehood, a freeze and reversal of settlement expansion, concrete measures to protect civilians and holy sites, and the full, equal and rightful membership of Palestine in the United Nations. Pakistan calls on the international community to ensure the success of the conference. Let us make it a turning point — not another missed opportunity.

Pakistan firmly believes that sustainable peace in the Middle East cannot be built on the normalization of occupation. The world must come to terms with that reality. Seventy-five years of failure have shown one immutable truth: peace cannot coexist with occupation; justice cannot thrive under apartheid and stability cannot take root where millions remain stateless. The world knows what must be done. And I believe the Council itself knows what the ultimate path to peace is, having endorsed the framework for pacific settlement of the Palestinian question in its various resolutions over the years. The only question that remains is whether there is the necessary will to do so.

As echoed during yesterday's debate on refugees, there is an urgent imperative to address the root causes of conflict (see S/PV.9905). Around this table, there was a unanimous call yesterday for the Council to do more — not only to respond to crises, but to prevent them, and to promote peaceful, just and lasting settlements of ongoing and protracted conflicts, particularly those involving foreign occupation. Let us

work together to realize that objective and to uphold the promise of the Charter of the United Nations for all peoples.

Mr. Bendjama (Algeria) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank the French presidency for organizing this high-level meeting, which allows us to break the deafening silence in the Security Council surrounding the Palestinian question, as if it were a foregone conclusion. Perhaps this meeting will be a welcome break from the Council's oppressive silence — the unacceptable inertia of the Security Council for more than a year in the face of the Palestinian tragedy.

I will cite just two figures. In the past two months, we have seen 2,273 Palestinians killed and nearly 6,000 injured.

(*spoke in English*)

I would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Secretary-General for his briefing and for his tireless efforts to ease the suffering of the Palestinian people and to bring an end to the relentless Israeli aggression against a defenceless civilian population.

Those efforts — while deeply appreciated — have regrettably not shaken the intransigence of the Israeli occupying Power, which remains determined to pursue its ongoing deadly campaign of genocide, ethnic cleansing, collective punishment and systematic destruction of Palestinian life and livelihood. Worse still, the international community and the Security Council have failed to extend the level of support required to make that effort impactful. The absence of collective action, the lack of accountability and the double standards have emboldened the Israeli occupier to act with total impunity and total immunity.

Today we find ourselves at a critical juncture. And we must ask ourselves: when will our words be translated into action? When will the resolutions of the Security Council finally be enforced? When will international law cease to be a tool selectively applied? When will the dignity, rights and humanity of the Palestinian people finally be respected?

For over 18 months, the people of Palestine, particularly in Gaza, have endured unspeakable horrors: mass killings, mass starvation, mass displacement and mass destruction. Abandoned and defenceless, the Palestinian people face one of the most ruthless occupying forces in the world. The international community's failure to uphold its moral and legal responsibilities have emboldened Israel to normalize and even promote the crime of mass deportation as a strategy.

Let us be clear: this is not a war. This is organized, systematic annihilation. Despite the horrific figures — well known to everyone — some still refuse to see the reality and to condemn the indiscriminate attacks on the Palestinian people. The reality is blatantly reflected in reports from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which confirm that in 36 recent Israeli attacks, all those killed were women and children. That pattern points to either indiscriminate bombing or the deliberate targeting of civilians. What justification can possibly explain those atrocities? What new narrative will the Israeli occupying Power spin — that every tent bombed was a Hamas command centre, that every child buried alive was a threat? The deliberate targeting of Palestinian civilians, under the direction of the highest political and military Israeli authorities, is evident and well-documented. This is not collateral damage, it is policy. These are war crimes; they are crimes against humanity, and they necessitate accountability and justice.

International humanitarian organizations confirm that Gaza is now experiencing the worst humanitarian catastrophe since October 2023. This is one of the worst humanitarian failures for the international community of our generation. Every single person in Gaza is now relying on humanitarian aid to survive, and that lifeline

has been completely cut off since a blockade on all aid supplies was imposed by the Israeli authorities almost two months ago. The World Food Programme has declared that its food stocks in Gaza are now fully depleted. Israel's Minister of Defense shamelessly declared that "blocking humanitarian aid is an intentional tactic — one of Israel's pressure tools against Hamas". What kind of world are we living in when the use of starvation as a weapon of war is publicly assumed and promoted, with no consequences? Israeli occupying forces are not fighting a war. They are trying to erase a people. We, in the Security Council, should impose an immediate ceasefire before it is too late.

The situation in West Bank is no less alarming: Settlement expansion continues at a record pace, with entire communities uprooted. Armed settler militias, protected and empowered by the Israeli authorities, roam freely, attacking Palestinian families, burning homes, destroying fields and places of worship, and Palestinian are being forcibly displaced in broad daylight. Sacred sites, including Al-Aqsa Mosque, are regularly stormed by extremist settlers, accompanied and protected by Israeli police. Entire neighbourhoods are now being turned into military zones. Arbitrary arrests, home demolitions and daily raids have become a grim routine in the West Bank.

In Jenin, Nablus, Al-Khalil and Tulkarm, Palestinian lives are under constant threat. This is a strategy of domination, fragmentation and humiliation. The Israeli occupation is trying to suffocate the Palestinian prisons, to diminish their dignity, to erase their identity and, ultimately, to rewrite the history of Palestine. Today, the notion of a Palestinian State feels more like a fading illusion.

However, despite decades of occupation, waves of dispossession and the immense suffering they endure, the Palestinian people have never surrendered. They continue to cling to their homeland, their culture and their legitimate aspirations. They have learned from history that exile is not a solution, that justice denied is not justice lost and that liberation may be delayed but is inevitable. With the support of the international community and through steadfast resilience, the Palestinian people will achieve their inalienable right to self-determination. They will establish their independent and sovereign State, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its eternal capital.

Mr. Moscoso (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Panama, allow me to express our appreciation to France for its stewardship of the work of the Security Council this month and for convening this quarterly open debate on the situation in the Middle East. We welcome and thank His Excellency Secretary-General António Guterres for his valuable briefing and his unwavering commitment to promoting international peace and security. We also welcome the participation of all those delegations that, by sharing their views today, are helping to strengthen multilateral dialogue on this matter.

Panama remains convinced that it is possible to build a Middle East based on mutual respect, tolerance and human dignity. However, today that potential is conditioned by a reality affected by multiple overlapping crises — protracted conflicts without a political solution, persistent humanitarian emergencies, collapsed essential services and fragile security environments. There are also cross-cutting threats, such as terrorism and violent extremism. That complex convergence of factors has left little room for understanding and makes a coherent, preventive and sustained international response even more urgent.

The war in Gaza — triggered by the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and firmly condemned by Panama — has resulted in one of the most serious humanitarian crises in recent history in the region. More than 51,000 dead, 116,000 injured, the destruction of critical infrastructure, the massive displacement of the population and the extremely precarious conditions in which thousands of Palestinian families are surviving reflect an alarming level of suffering. Panama reiterates its call for an immediate and sustained ceasefire to alleviate the humanitarian tragedy and for

full, safe and unhindered access for humanitarian aid in Gaza to be guaranteed. That measure can create the conditions conducive to a lasting political solution. An indispensable measure is the immediate, unconditional and safe release of the 59 people who are still being held hostage. Panama reiterates its solidarity with their families, who live marked by pain and uncertainty.

To be legitimate and sustainable, a future political solution must include a transitional process that excludes extremist actors, such as Hamas, and allows for the rebuilding of governance in Gaza focused on the protection of civilians and the full exercise of their rights. Similarly, the protection of humanitarian workers, who risk their lives to protect others, must be guaranteed by everyone and at all times. Panama pays tribute to the hundreds of humanitarian workers who have lost their lives in the conflict and expresses its appreciation for the commitment of the personnel of United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations operating in extreme conditions to save lives. Their work and the integrity of humanitarian facilities must be respected and protected by all parties.

In the West Bank, too, the situation continues to deteriorate. Recent reports warn of an environment marked by forced displacement, house demolitions, mobility restrictions and an increase in violence. Panama reiterates that any action on the ground must respect international law, including international humanitarian law and the relevant resolutions of the Council. We recognize the diplomatic efforts aimed at facilitating effective mediation between the parties, and we call for them to be strengthened, with the support of the United Nations, in order to ensure that both Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and security, within internationally recognized borders.

The repercussions of the conflict in Gaza and the West Bank have intensified the level of confrontation on different fronts in the Middle East. In southern Lebanon, clashes have led to casualties, mass displacements and damage to essential infrastructure. Despite the ceasefire agreed in November 2024, there have been constant violations of the truce. Panama takes note of the recent efforts of the Lebanese Government to curb irregular activities in its territory, including the arrest of persons allegedly linked to the firing of rockets into Israel.

In Syria, the situation in the buffer zone remains fragile. Skirmishes and violations of the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces threaten the security of local populations and deployed international personnel. The formation of the new Syrian Government in March opens a window of opportunity to move towards an inclusive and Syrian-led process, in accordance with the spirit of resolution 2254 (2015). We value the agreement reached with Kurdish representatives on the institutional integration of the north-east of the country and the first steps towards a new constitution. We call for that progress to be consolidated with the support of the United Nations and for a firm commitment to diversity, justice and the human rights of the entire population. Panama reaffirms its support for the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of both Lebanon and Syria — fundamental principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. We also reiterate our steadfast support for the work of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force — missions that are essential to preserving stability, preventing further escalation and facilitating the conditions for dialogue. Their freedom of movement and security must be guaranteed, in strict compliance with their respective mandates.

Meanwhile, Yemen is at a critical point, with regional tensions rising. In 2024, attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea increased hostilities and resulted in devastating collateral damage to the civilian population, leaving more than two-thirds of the Yemeni people in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. We reiterate our appeal for the immediate release of humanitarian personnel detained by the

Houthis and call for the immediate resumption of diplomatic efforts to achieve a cessation of hostilities and a sustainable political solution. Panama reiterates, therefore, its condemnation of the attacks against civilian vessels, which affect international maritime security, interrupt supply chains and hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

In the current context, terrorism, religious fundamentalism and the presence of foreign fighters have taken on a more dynamic and complex transnational character. Panama believes that those threats require a comprehensive response, combining prevention, social cohesion and stronger institutions.

The Security Council must strengthen its capacity to anticipate and understand new forms of violence which, though they may be different in form, erode international peace and security just as seriously.

Of further concern is the lack of concrete progress towards the establishment of a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, as agreed at the 1995 Review and Extension Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

At times of growing mistrust and structural tensions, a renewed commitment to multilateral non-proliferation mechanisms is urgently needed. Panama calls for diplomatic negotiations on arms control to restart, guided by the principles of international law and multilateralism and a common interest in the maintenance of peace, and imbued with seriousness and political will.

The suffering endured for decades by entire communities in the Middle East is not only the result of the harsh nature of conflict, but also of a prolonged lack of political will to address their root causes. Resolutions have been adopted by the Council but, in many cases, constructive political will, in the form of actions taken to implement and respect agreements and achieve real solutions, has been lacking. Inaction leaves dangerous gaps in which extremism, hatred and the prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence, which disproportionately affects women and girls, proliferate.

Faced with that reality, Panama reiterates that multilateralism is the path towards restoring confidence, protecting civilian populations and moving towards sustainable solutions, guided by international law and shared responsibility. Panama considers it essential, therefore, to promote initiatives that strengthen the collective capacity for prevention and response. In particular, the following actions are required.

Support must be given to the strengthening of the capacities of the United Nations and its specialized agencies to document, prevent and respond to humanitarian emergencies, applying the principles of impartiality, transparency and respect for the rules of international law, including international humanitarian law.

There must also be support for national reconciliation processes led by local actors, with international technical backing, that recognize the diversity of societies and ensure the full, effective, safe and meaningful participation of women as a foundation for peacebuilding.

There must be stronger cooperation among United Nations system agencies and regional mechanisms, such as the League of Arab States, with a view to improving humanitarian coordination and promoting inclusive political solutions.

Behind every conflict we address in the Council there are silenced lives crying out for recognition. There are mothers waiting for their children buried under rubble or trapped in dark tunnels, not knowing if they will ever embrace them again. There are children who, if they ever return to their schools, will no longer find their classmates and playmates, because they were victims of violence for speaking a different language, professing a different faith or belonging to an ethnic minority.

Panama reaffirms its belief that lasting peace in the Middle East will not be achieved through military force or extremism, but through a commitment to legitimate, inclusive and sustainable political processes.

The peoples of the Middle East deserve more than mere truces. They deserve lasting peace, and it is our duty to make it happen.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We would like to thank the Secretary-General for his briefing on the situation in the region.

The collective punishment of the entire Palestinian people, in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, has been continuing for a year and half now. With the resumption on 2 March of massive hostilities in the Strip by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the daily toll of Palestinians killed and wounded has once again reached the thousands. About half a million Gazans have become internally displaced over the past month. The overall number of those who have died since the beginning of the escalation in the area of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has exceeded 52,000, and almost 118,000 people have been injured. Most of those killed in Gaza are women and children, and there are regular attacks on schools and medical and civilian facilities.

Particularly egregious was the cold-blooded murder by IDF soldiers in late March of 15 aid workers, including a United Nations staff member and eight medics of the Palestine Red Crescent Society. The Israeli investigation revealed that it was allegedly a matter of operational misunderstanding among the soldiers. Attempting to justify their actions, the Israeli leadership initially assured the international community that the flashing lights of the ambulances had been turned off. That turned out to be false, as was proved by a video recording from the phone of one of the doctors killed.

The lives of those 15 humanitarians cost the dismissal of the deputy unit commander and disciplinary measures for the other officer. It is hardly surprising that with such lenient punishments and, indeed, lack of proper accountability, Gaza has long broken all the worst records in terms of the number of children, humanitarian workers, United Nations staff—including those of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)—and journalists who have been killed. We would like to recall that the protection of humanitarian personnel is an unconditional imperative and an obligation under international humanitarian law.

The catastrophic situation in the Gaza Strip has been exacerbated by the nearly 60-day blockade of food and medical supplies, which has exhausted stockpiles, despite the fact that 3,000 UNRWA trucks carrying humanitarian supplies are ready to enter the Strip. Humanitarian organizations are sounding the alarm about an impending famine, especially among children. We should also bear in mind that those actions by Israel have a direct impact on the conditions of the Israeli hostages remaining in the enclave. It is totally unacceptable to use humanitarian aid as a bargaining chip in negotiations.

The situation is artificially aggravated by Israel's ban on the work of UNRWA. The Agency plays a key and irreplaceable role, carrying out humanitarian operations on the ground and providing comprehensive assistance to the Palestinians. Disrupting UNRWA's work will only exacerbate the already dire situation of the residents of Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. We urge Israel to reconsider its decision to cease cooperation with UNRWA. We would also like to remind Council members that the Agency's mission is to assist the Palestinians until a Palestinian State is established.

Israel's attempts to annex part of the Strip, which it justifies and blames on Hamas' refusal to unconditionally release hostages, have no legitimate basis. Similarly baseless is the recent statement by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu, in which he declared his intention to maintain military control over Gaza and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian administration there. Basically, this amounts to a de facto rejection of the two-State model for the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the dismantling of the international legal basis for the settlement of the situation in the Middle East, something the Secretary-General pointed out today.

The ongoing military operation in the West Bank, known as Iron Wall, which has engulfed Jenin, Tulkarm and a number of other communities, has followed the same logic. Since 7 October 2023, approximately 16,000 Palestinians have been detained there. The number of Palestinians who fled their homes in the West Bank is the highest since 1967. The construction of settlements is proceeding at a record pace. Between December 2024 and mid-March 2025, 10,600 housing units were erected or approved in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, 13 blocks were retroactively authorized and 850 new checkpoints were set up. That effectively spells the death of the possibility of establishing a viable and territorially contiguous Palestinian State.

Against the backdrop of that extremely pessimistic picture, there is a glimmer of hope in the words of Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani regarding a degree of progress made in negotiations between Israel and Hamas on a new ceasefire. A renewed agreement would pave the way for stabilizing the humanitarian situation in Gaza, returning internally displaced persons, who now number in the millions, and rebuilding the Strip. It is the only chance to reunite the Israeli hostages who remain in the Strip with their families. Let us recall that a large number of them were released precisely during the ceasefire, not during military operations.

I would like to reaffirm our fundamental and unwavering support for a swift and unconditional ceasefire, the release of all forcibly detained persons, the provision of safe and unhindered humanitarian access and the relaunch of the peace process on the basis of the two-State solution that would ensure the realization of the legitimate aspirations and rights of the Palestinian people. The ultimate goal is to establish an independent Palestinian State within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, coexisting in peace and security with Israel.

A solution to the Palestinian problem is the key to stabilizing the entire Middle East. Banking on force and establishing “buffer zones” — which we have seen not only in the occupied Palestinian territory but also in the south of Lebanon and in Syria — will not bring about a long-term and lasting peace in the region. Instead, it will freeze the conflict potential for decades to come, guaranteeing outbreak of conflicts in the future. Properly taking into consideration and respecting the interests of countries in the region and promoting diplomacy and negotiations constitute the only way to reverse that dangerous trend and break the vicious cycle of violence.

For our part, we stand ready to support any efforts by the Security Council to return to a peaceful settlement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict zone. A particular role should be played in that regard by the Group of Arab States, whose position regarding possible practical steps by the Council is one that we are unfailingly guided by. We are prepared to work with all parties that share our desire to achieve a just, lasting and sustainable peace in the entire Middle East.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Al-Shaibani (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Syria is not an island isolated from its surroundings, but rather an integral part of the fabric of the region. Our security and stability cannot be separated from the security, stability and prosperity of our neighbours. Violence and unrest in any country does not remain confined to its borders, but goes beyond them, sowing instability and resulting in

waves of displacement and extremism everywhere. We reject any force or policy that threatens peace or puts people's lives and livelihoods at risk in our region.

Since the day of our liberation, on 8 December 2024, the Syrian people have proven what national will and popular unity can achieve when the doors of international justice are closed. For 14 years, we have faced a systematic killing machine, systematic torture and repression that persisted for more than half a century. When the Council was unable to act, and repeated vetoes prevented the delivery of life-saving aid, Syrians decided to take their fate into their own hands. We formed a transitional Government comprising the best national talents and representatives of the different groups that make up Syrian society. That Government was recently unanimously endorsed by the Human Rights Council.

We have succeeded in uniting the military factions, despite serious challenges, under a common constitutional framework and a genuine reform programme. In the first comprehensive national dialogue of its kind, nearly 1,000 Syrians gathered in the Presidential Palace to discuss the most important issues affecting the future of the country.

We are about to launch a transitional justice commission and an independent commission on the fate of the missing, in addition to our partnership with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to identify and destroy what remains of the former regime's arsenal. We are also collaborating with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 and other justice entities to document crimes and explore how best to achieve justice and accountability and prevent the recurrence of violations.

Just half a year ago, those steps would have been considered impossible. Today they are a tangible reality. However, our national action is under real threat by the repeated Israeli air strikes, which violate our airspace and sovereignty. The pretexts previously used to justify those strikes — the presence of foreign-backed armed groups — are no longer valid. Those strikes are not only a blatant violation of Security Council resolutions, especially resolutions 242 (1967) and 497 (1981); they are also destroying our civilian infrastructure and opening the door to chaos and to the return of the militias that Syrians fought against for 14 years.

All the misleading narratives from the Israeli side have been discredited. Today the Syrian people feel anxious and threatened by the Israeli side as a result of the continuous strikes, the indiscriminate shelling and the unjust incursions. All of that is driving people to be displaced and migrate from villages and towns located near the border in southern Syria. A number of people have been killed or injured as a result of that aggression.

Israel's expansionist approach, exaggeration of threats and lack of respect for the security and sovereignty of its neighbours will lead to further violence, conflict and instability throughout the entire region. It is Israel's actions towards Syria that will encourage and create the right environment for groups with ties to Iran to destabilize Syria. Failure to take decisive decisions to deploy separation forces in the area of separation will undermine those international endeavours, weaken their potential and lead to a further loss of confidence. We have met on several occasions with United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) forces, who feel hopeless, frustrated and helpless as a result of the Israeli side's obstruction of its mandate from the Council.

Christians, Kurds, Alawites, Druze and Arabs are in full agreement that they do not accept foreign interference in their country. They reject Israeli practices and do not agree to being used in the language of Israeli media, which seeks to divide Syria

and leave it fragile and riddled with chaos and instability. Even Syrian Jews, with whom we have met repeatedly, reject those plans and policies.

If we can provide convincing and honest answers to those questions, we will be able to understand who it is that is destabilizing Syria, and who is building peace; who removed the Al-Assad regime and its associated militias, and who is violating our airspace, bombing our sites and conducting incursions into our territory; who recognizes Syria's diversity and includes the entire spectrum of that diversity in the Government, and who uses that diversity in their rhetoric to promote sectarian division; who is facilitating the missions of the UNDOF forces, and who disrupts and prevents those missions; and who is facilitating OPCW missions to examine potential chemical weapons sites, and who is bombing them.

We remind the Council that, nearly 50 years after their illegal annexation, the Golan Heights remain under occupation, in flagrant defiance of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. We once again call for the full implementation of resolution 497 (1981) and for the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force forces to be allowed to restore the pre-4 June 1967 lines.

We stand today with the brotherly Palestinian people in Gaza, who continue to bear the burden of a brutal war, with air strikes, a stifling blockade, deliberate starvation, the targeting of medics and journalists, the demolition of homes and repeated violations of fragile truces. Those violations are not only causing a humanitarian tragedy but are also fuelling the cycle of instability in the entire region. From this platform, we call for an immediate ceasefire to protect civilians and ensure unimpeded humanitarian access.

Within our borders, we have worked hard to dismantle the Captagon networks that threatened communities in neighbouring countries. We have started rebuilding road, port and railway networks to enable trade and regional integration. Our goal is clear — to transform war-stricken areas into economic corridors that benefit all countries in our region. The return of refugees is also at the centre of our recovery efforts. Above all, Syria will be built by its people, but Syrians will not return to rubble or an environment stifled by sanctions. The restrictions on Syria, originally imposed in response to the violence of the previous regime, are now penalizing the victims of that regime, preventing them from accessing the materials, funding and services necessary for reconstruction. We therefore call on the Council and the international community as a whole to lift those sanctions and enable Syrians abroad to return voluntarily, in dignity and safety.

Genuine peace cannot be built behind walls or protected within closed borders. Our security is not separate from that of our neighbours, and no country can guarantee the safety of its people while threatening the sovereignty of others. The Council has a historic responsibility and a real opportunity to support the recovery of Syria and the stability of the region as a whole. We call on the Council to support mechanisms that achieve and realize justice for all victims, and we call on its members to develop a clear, coordinated and joint vision for reconstruction and opening trade corridors and to guarantee a safe and dignified return for refugees. Let us replace vetoes with wisdom, strikes with dialogue and meetings and sanctions with joint support and solidarity. Only then will every citizen in Damascus, Ramallah, Quneitra and Gaza live in safety, dignity and hope.

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

Mr. Sampaio (Portugal): Let me start by wholeheartedly welcoming France's decision to elevate this open debate to the ministerial level. The situation in Gaza continues to deserve our full attention and our best endeavours to put an end to the

war, stop civilian casualties, see the unconditional release of all hostages and resume full and unimpeded humanitarian access and deliveries.

Regarding Lebanon, we must continue to support the new Government in its aim to strengthen State institutions. In that vein, it is critical to fully implement the terms of the 27 November 2024 ceasefire agreement and resolution 1701 (2006).

Regarding Syria, we stress the importance of a peaceful and inclusive political transition, protecting all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious background, in line with the principles of resolution 2254 (2015) and free from harmful foreign interference. The challenges are massive, specifically on the humanitarian and economic fronts. Therefore, Portugal recently announced another financial contribution to Syria during the ninth Brussels donors' conference. Both the Lebanese and the Syrian peoples deserve peace and full respect for their countries' territorial integrity, unity and sovereignty.

Concerning Gaza, a return to the ceasefire is the most urgent priority, hand in hand with the resumption of humanitarian aid without impediments. The current situation in Gaza and the West Bank has a spillover effect on the entire Middle East. Ending the war in Gaza is our pressing priority. We underline the terrible humanitarian conditions people are facing in the Gaza Strip, which are worse than ever and increasingly desperate. We strongly regret the failure to secure the necessary transition to the second phase of the ceasefire, as agreed on by the parties. Portugal calls for the immediate halt of all hostilities and the resumption of negotiations to implement the second phase of the agreed ceasefire. We greatly value and fully support the efforts of the mediators — namely, Qatar, Egypt and the United States — in facilitating negotiations. The mediators' role is crucial when tensions and radicalization threaten to hijack a political and peaceful solution to the conflict.

The collective political commitment to resolving the Palestinian question based on the two-State solution is yet to materialize. The right to self-determination of the Palestinian people remains an urgent common goal. We commend France and Saudi Arabia for organizing the High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, which will be held in June. The Conference will allow us a valuable window of opportunity and merits our full commitment to its success. Portugal stands ready to work with the co-sponsors and contribute to the two-State solution, which we fully support, as the only viable long-term solution for peace in the region and ending the conflict. There is no plan B. To enable a serious discussion on the two-State solution, we must have a ceasefire and a duly empowered Palestinian Authority, allowing for its further political contribution to a peaceful political solution to the conflict, namely, through its role on the ground, as a factor of stabilization.

Furthermore, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) remains irreplaceable, with a key role in ensuring stability on the ground. We welcome the recent appointment of Mr. Ian Martin as Head of the strategic assessment of the Agency. The international community must continue its efforts to safeguard actors, such as UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority, which remain firm in their commitment to finding a peaceful solution to end the conflict.

In conclusion, without a political process, there will be no peace in the region. We therefore reiterate our call to all parties to step up their efforts to reach an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Portugal remains committed to the rule of law and an international order based on rules, with the United Nations at its core. We will maintain the consistency of our positions on every front and will continue to strive for a just and peaceful solution to the Palestinian question, anchored in the relevant resolutions of the United Nations.

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

Mr. Jose (Philippines): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, and the Republic of France for convening today's open debate. I also extend our appreciation to the Secretary-General for his valuable briefing to the Council. We are deeply concerned that, despite the recent ceasefire agreement reached in January, we find ourselves once again facing escalating violence in the region. The situation in the Middle East, particularly the Israel-Palestine conflict, continues to cause immense suffering and instability. The Philippines remains deeply concerned about the ongoing violence and the tragic loss of civilian lives.

We call for the immediate restoration of the ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages and the facilitation of full humanitarian access to those in need. It is essential that international humanitarian law be fully respected, ensuring the protection of civilians and humanitarian personnel.

Humanitarian and aid workers, working under increasingly dangerous circumstances, must be afforded the protection they are entitled to under international law. It is time to end the cycle of violence, to protect civilians, ensure the flow of life-saving aid and restore the ceasefire.

The Philippines continues to emphasize its firm support for a two-State solution, with a safe and independent Palestine and a secure Israel living in peace and harmony. We firmly believe that this solution remains the most viable and sustainable pathway to resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict, essential to the realization of a lasting peace.

In that regard, we look forward to the upcoming High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, to be held in June. We also support the ongoing work of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. We see the Conference and the Global Alliance as complementary and important opportunities to reinvigorate the international community's commitment to the two-State solution, particularly at a time when the political landscape requires renewed support and constructive dialogue.

In his speech at the General Assembly in September 2024, Philippine Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique A. Manalo said the United Nations has had itself as the platform and pathway to address international peace and security. It serves as the ground for States to find convergence amid crises and conflict. It offers response and relief, hope and humanity. It is through this very platform, here in the Security Council, that we must strengthen our collective response to the crises, offering not only relief but also hope and humanity to the people of the Middle East. The time to act is now. The only path to peace in the Middle East is through dialogue, respect for international law and a commitment to human dignity for all.

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

Ms. Håheim (Norway): The situation in Palestine is catastrophic. Civilians in Gaza face an acute risk of starvation, disease and death. Eighteen thousand children have reportedly been killed. We are extremely concerned about the lack of access to critical aid and basic goods in Gaza. It is unacceptable that Israel has fully blocked humanitarian assistance to the area for more than eight weeks.

Israel has an obligation under international law to provide or otherwise allow access to life-saving assistance for the civilian population and ensure that humanitarian principles are upheld. Later this week, Norway will participate in a hearing in the advisory proceedings before the International Court of Justice on this

very topic. There we will set out our view on these fundamental legal obligations incumbent upon Israel.

We condemn all attacks on humanitarian workers. It is crucial that those who risk their lives to save others and to carry out humanitarian work be protected. Those responsible must be held to account. We extend our deepest condolences and express our strong support to the bereaved and the organizations affected.

We repeat our clear message: fighting must stop immediately; the ceasefire must be resumed. The population must immediately have access to the emergency aid to which they are entitled. The hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally. We mourn with all the victims and all the bereaved families. The future of Gaza must be shaped by Palestinians and serve the interests of its people. We welcome the Arab reconstruction plan.

Until a two-State solution is achieved, we, the international community, have a responsibility to secure the rights of the Palestinian refugees. We, the Member States, have equipped the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) with a United Nations mandate to do so. The Agency is doing its best under extreme circumstances. If UNRWA is prevented from implementing its mandate, it will have serious ramifications, including beyond the Middle East.

We continue to be deeply concerned about increased tensions elsewhere in Palestine. Military operations in refugee camps, forced displacements and movement restrictions are worsening an already volatile situation in the West Bank. Settler violence continues. Between 15 and 21 April, the United Nations documented at least 23 attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians. That must stop.

As has been underscored in the Council again and again: reaching a sustainable two-State solution is a prerequisite for peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis alike. Norway remains committed.

Let us use the upcoming United Nations conference in June, as well as the work of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution and the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of the International Assistance to Palestinians, to intensify our efforts towards that end.

It is critical that the transition in Syria succeed for the Syrian people and for the stability and security of the Middle East and beyond. We must now give the transitional authorities the opportunity to ensure an inclusive Government for all Syrians. Sanctions must be lifted to allow economic recovery and development.

The Syrian population has endured hardship for decades, and the humanitarian needs are still high. Norway will continue to support the country's most vulnerable and assist in finding solutions that will promote self-reliance.

Syrians must be allowed to determine their own future. The unity and territorial integrity of Syria must be respected. For that, the international community should act in concert.

The President (*spoke in French*): There are still a large number of speakers remaining on my list for this meeting.

I intend, with the concurrence of the members of the Council, to suspend the meeting until 3 p.m.

The meeting was suspended at 1.10 p.m.