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THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SECURITY COUNCIL
Twenty-ninth year

Letter dated 12 June 1974 from the Acting Permanent Representative
of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General.

On instructions of my Government I have the honour to request that this letter and the enclosed statement, made by the Minister of Defence of Israel, Mr. Shimon Peres, in the Knesset on 12 June 1974, be circulated as an official document of the General Assembly and the Security Council.

(Signed) Jacob DORON
Ambassador
Acting Permanent Representative of Israel
to the United Nations

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ANNEX

Statement made in the Knesset on 12 June 1974 by the
Israel Minister of Defence, Mr. Shimon Peres

The Geneva Convention a/ of which the Syrian Government is a signatory - defines in articles 12, 13, 17 and 109 the treatment to be accorded to prisoners of war and the philosophy behind this treatment.

Article 12 of the Geneva Convention stipulates:

"Prisoners of war are in the hands of the enemy Power, but not of the individuals or military units who have captured them. Irrespective of the individual responsibilities that may exist, the Detaining Power is responsible for the treatment given them."

Article 13 states:

"Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated. Any unlawful act or omission by the Detaining Power causing death or seriously endangering the health of a prisoner of war in its custody is prohibited, and will be regarded as a serious breach of the present Convention."

Article 17 states, inter alia, that:

"No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever."

Article 109 states:

"... Parties to the conflict are bound to send back to their own country, regardless of number or rank, seriously wounded and seriously sick prisoners of war, after having cared for them until they are fit to travel."

Syria has not only grossly violated the stipulations of this Convention - it has acted in a way that is beneath any human standards in peace or war.

In a number of cases, Syrian soldiers fired at point-blank range at our pilots while they were bailing out and at unarmed soldiers who had stopped fighting.

For over four months, the Syrian authorities refused to name the prisoners or even state their number. Only on 27 February 1974 did the Syrian Government

a/ United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 75, No. 972, p. 135.

hand over the list to the United States Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, and on 1 March Red Cross representatives were permitted for the first time to visit the prisoners. Prisoners' letters reached their families only at the end of March, and their families' letters were handed over only at the beginning of May 1974.

According to objective testimony received by us, the prisoners were held in prison under severely overcrowded conditions: 30 were held in one small, narrow cell with only 21 mattresses on the floor. They were kept without adequate ventilation, and without the provision of minimal sanitary facilities.

The food they received was poor, which applies even to some of the wounded prisoners, who were held together with their healthy comrades. Medical treatment was bad and irregular. They were given no reading matter or religious texts.

An especially grave matter is the interrogation of prisoners. The Syrians did not scruple to use every kind of pressure: electric shocks applied also to sensitive regions of the body, extraction of nails (in one case they drilled a hole in a nail, which was then extracted with an iron hook), blows at various parts of the body, beating and whipping, torture by blows on open wounds. At this stage we already know of at least five soldiers who were maimed as a result of these excesses following their capture. Two prisoners apparently died after torture.

The Chief Medical Officer of the Israel Defence Forces has transmitted to us his preliminary report (in order not to burden the prisoners more than necessary, their examination is being carried out in phases), which states:

"The over-all picture obtained is that the vast majority of prisoners were exposed during their imprisonment to severe physical and mental torture. The usual methods of torture were beatings aimed at various parts of the body, electric shocks, wounds deliberately inflicted on the ears, burns on the legs, suspension in painful positions and other methods."

As a result of these tortures, a number of the returning soldiers suffer from injuries in various parts of their bodies, including marks of beatings on the soles, the teeth, the head and the ears.

The Chief Medical Officer notes that "treatment at Syrian hospitals was minimal, and only a few of the prisoners requiring hospital treatment received it. Those who were fortunate enough to be hospitalized were discharged after the briefest period before having recovered - despite the fact that by all medical standards they should have been kept in hospital to receive the treatment required. The premature discharge of the wounded from hospital and their incarceration in jails lacking suitable facilities, where they were left without any medical treatment, has undoubtedly aggravated their condition."

It must be noted, therefore, that this cruelty was inflicted by all ranks - from soldiers and gaolers who fired at unarmed prisoners, through the ranks responsible for the terrible tortures, up to the leaders of the régime, who refused to accede to the accepted requirement of the provision of details to the families. All of them, together, have violated the law by their most inhuman behaviour. These acts were perpetrated by the Syrians - there is no proof that representatives of any foreign Power took any active part in such interrogations - and they are not without precedent. In the past too, our prisoners of war suffered a similar fate. At the end of 1973, the Government of Israel drew the attention of the International Red Cross Organization to grave violations of the Third Convention b/ by the Government of Syria, and informed the organization of the fact that after Israel Defence Forces had entered the area of the Golan Heights previously held by the Syrians, cases were discovered of atrocious murders of our men who were captured, including prisoners taken in Nafah and in the Hermon outpost.

These four crimes of Damascus cannot be overlooked by the civilized world, or indeed by anyone imbued with the spirit of humanity. Those responsible must be brought to trial. Such cases must not be allowed to recur. The Red Cross must be enabled to carry out its duties in accordance with the International Convention. The Government of Israel, which has always taken, and will continue to take, the greatest care to treat prisoners of war in accordance with the Geneva Convention and the obvious requirements of the humanitarian approach, will complete the full investigation of these acts of cruelty and the maltreatment of our prisoners, and will publish its findings fully and faithfully.

The attempts of the Syrian authorities to trump up entirely unfounded charges concerning the treatment of the Syrian prisoners of war in Israel will not weaken by an iota the power of truth or mitigate the appalling cruelty of the Syrian authorities.

Sixty-eight Israeli citizens, our sons - officers and soldiers, men of the air and land forces - who set out to defend their country after the surprise attack by the Syrian Army on Yom Kippur, have returned home, to their families, to their country. Despite all they have suffered, their spirit has not been broken. On the contrary, when we listened to their stories or saw them on television, we suddenly discovered new depths to the human spirit, a capacity to endure a destructive power, a touching candour, shown by men who knew how to fight, and knew how to withstand loneliness, torture and sickness.

We saw them on their return, and found them richer in feeling, knowledge and understanding, and when we discovered their wealth - we too were enriched. For the fathers and mothers, it is as if their sons had been reborn. For the wives, a new light of family life has been restored. For the children, father

b/ Ibid.

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has come home, and for the people, our sons have returned after fighting twice - once in the field of battle, with weapons, and once, in the dark prisons, armed only with the power of the spirit.

Their capture, their imprisonment and their return have renewed our feeling of being a united people, a people which can unite in times of hardship and anxiety.

Some of the former prisoners are here now in the Knesset building, which contains the organized expression of a free people. Upon their release the whole House, I am confident, extends to them a sincere and heartfelt welcome home.

We greet the men who, even in the hour of stress, displayed such courage, endurance and faith.

