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Illegal Israeli actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the
rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory

Security Council
Seventy-fifth year

Identical letters dated 2 April 2020 from the Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council

In follow-up to our recent letters on the critical situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, I must draw attention to the human rights violations and crimes that continue to be perpetrated by Israel, the occupying Power, against the Palestinian people. Even in these critical days, as the COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges across the international community, including in Palestine, the occupying Power has not for a minute ceased its illegal policies and practices.

Before proceeding, I wish, on behalf of the Palestinian Government and people, to extend our sincere solidarity to all afflicted and convey deepest condolences to all bereaved families and countries on the tragic loss of life caused by this virus.

As of this date, the State of Palestine has confirmed 155 cases of the COVID-19 virus, 12 of which are in the Gaza Strip, and one death caused by the virus. A state of emergency has been declared and the country is in lockdown with a view to stemming the virus' spread, protect our population and ensure their well-being. Despite limited resources and the hardships and restrictions already being borne under Israel's illegal occupation, our national institutions are exerting all possible efforts to respond to this health crisis and its immense humanitarian and socioeconomic impact.

Regrettably, however, in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Israel is exploiting the state of emergency and lockdown to accelerate its illegal settler-colonization plans, including through the continued demolition of Palestinian homes, destruction of crops and forcible transfer of Palestinian families. At the same time, military raids in Palestinian areas have continued, as have Israeli settler attacks on Palestinian civilians, in numerous instances undermining efforts to combat the pandemic.

As reaffirmed by the United Nations Special Coordinator in his 31 March briefing to the Security Council, and as detailed in our previous letters, Israeli settlement construction and expansion and annexation threats have continued



unabated. In blatant violation of international law and United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), Israel is pressing forth with the construction of thousands more settlements units, further fragmenting the contiguity of our land and destroying the viability of the two-State solution.

The seizure of Palestinian lands and destruction of properties also continues. On 25 March, Israeli forces razed Palestinian lands, several hundred metres from a high school serving the village of Jalud, in order to expand a nearby illegal Israeli settlement and build a road connecting it to other settlements. On 26 March, occupying forces stormed the Palestinian village of Ibziq in the Jordan Valley, seized equipment and demolished a residential structure, a water pump and an electricity generator. This included the confiscation of material meant to form eight tents for the construction of an emergency first-aid clinic to offer health services amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such cruel acts are not isolated incidents. Rather, they reflect the regular and constant abuse and harassment inflicted by the Israeli occupying forces on vulnerable Palestinian communities, including in the Jordan Valley, to drive them out of their homes and make way for illegal annexation. Moreover, these actions clearly violate basic human and humanitarian principles, especially during a health crisis, including article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which requires that the occupying power ensure that all necessary preventive means available to it are utilized to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics and ensure the well-being of the occupied population.

In addition to the destruction of a health clinic being constructed, other actions undermining Palestinian efforts to contain the virus have included, inter alia: the detention on 25 March of four Palestinians for disinfecting public facilities near the Lions' Gate in Occupied East Jerusalem and the seizure of their disinfection equipment; the obstruction of efforts by Palestinian volunteers in Al-Khalil (Hebron) to disinfect neighbourhoods and educate the local population on the pandemic; the assault on 30 March of Palestinians working in local emergency committees created to help detect coronavirus cases; and the intentional and repeated acts of spitting by dozens of Israeli soldiers at Palestinians' cars, walls and doorsteps to intimidate residents amid the COVID-19 outbreak on 27 March in Al-Khalil.

Simultaneously, the level of violence perpetrated by extremist Israeli settlers has risen, with a spike in attacks against Palestinian civilians and properties since the imposition of the lockdown in the West Bank, particularly in the villages of Madama, Burqa and Burin. Settlers have exploited the confinement of Palestinians in their homes to amplify attacks against them and destroy and pillage property. Also, on 1 April, settlers from the illegal "Ramot" settlement stood at the entrance of the village of Beit Ikhsa and spat at Palestinian cars entering or leaving the village in an attempt to spread fear of infection.

The systematic dehumanization and mistreatment faced by the Palestinian people by this illegal occupation, even in times of a global pandemic and when the rest of the world is joining in acts of humane solidarity, is further illustrated by Israel's treatment of Palestinian labourers in Israel, who are suspected of being infected with the COVID-19 virus. In a recent video circulated on social media, a Palestinian labourer is seen lying on the side of a road near an Israeli checkpoint on the outskirts of Beit Sira village in the West Bank, struggling to breathe. It was later discovered that his Israeli employer, after seeing him severely sick and suspecting he had the virus, called the Israeli police, who then picked him up and dumped him at the checkpoint. Another tragic example is the killing on 22 March of a Palestinian man, Sufian Khawaja, age 29, after Israeli soldiers opened fire at a car he was in along with his cousin, who was injured.

Such contempt for Palestinian lives is also starkly reflected in the treatment of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. Israel is refusing to heed calls for the release of the more than 5,000 Palestinians, including 180 children and 43 women, that it currently holds captive in its prisons and detention centres, despite four Palestinian prisoners having been exposed to an Israeli employee at an interrogation centre who tested positive for COVID-19. Here, we must recall that Israeli jails are overcrowded, lacking minimum health and safety standards, and that poor conditions, including the requirement that prisoners pay for their own medical treatment and blatant medical neglect, have led prisoners to launch several hunger strikes in recent years. Dozens of Palestinian prisoners also suffer from serious or chronic illnesses and are in need of urgent medical care. To make matters worse, Israel removed all doctors and nurses who had previously been tending to Palestinian prisoners, leaving only one nurse per prison, yet a further shocking act of medical negligence.

In this time of crisis, Palestinians also face another consequence of this decades-long occupation – a dilapidated and depleted health-care system that is marked by poor infrastructure and sanitation, a shortage of supplies and inadequate equipment. With just 1.23 beds per 1,000 people, 2,550 working doctors, fewer than 20 intensive care specialists and fewer than 120 ventilators in all public hospitals, the West Bank will face a public health disaster if the virus spreads further. And, while the health-care situation there is bleak, in the Gaza Strip it is catastrophic.

As noted by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on 26 March, “although the current number of detected cases remains relatively low, the capacity of the Palestinian health system to cope with an expected increase in COVID-19 cases is severely impaired by longstanding challenges and critical shortages ... the situation is particularly severe in the Gaza Strip.” For a population of nearly 2 million, half of whom are children, Gaza has only 56 breathing ventilators for adults, some of which are in disrepair or already in use, 60 intensive care unit hospital beds, and 700 units of personal protective equipment. The occupying Power has provided Gaza with only 200 testing kits, and the United Nations has supplied another 1,000.

Palestinians in Gaza already face dire humanitarian and socioeconomic conditions, with the 13-year Israeli blockade, compounded by Israel’s repeated military aggressions, having undermined all aspects of life for Gaza’s two million inhabitants. These conditions have led to extreme poverty, with more than half of the population living under the poverty threshold; an unemployment rate reaching near 70 per cent among young people; around 80 per cent of the population dependent on some form of humanitarian aid; widespread food insecurity, with 10 per cent of children having stunted growth due to malnutrition; the contamination of 97 per cent of Gaza’s water supply; the collapse of essential services, including a regular electricity supply; and the crippling of the health-care system, which has long faced acute shortages of medicine, equipment, cleaning materials, doctors and professional training.

This has been attested by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, who recently stated: “I am particularly worried about the potential impact of COVID-19 on Gaza. Its health-care system was collapsing even before the pandemic. Its stocks of essential drugs are chronically low. Its natural sources of drinkable water are largely contaminated. Its electrical system provides sporadic power. Deep poverty amid appalling socioeconomic conditions is prevalent throughout the Strip... A potential large-scale outbreak will also constitute another enormous strain on Gaza’s beleaguered health workers, who have had to respond, with inadequate resources, to three large-scale military offensives in just over a decade and have had to treat thousands of casualties from the ‘Great March of Return’ protests.”

The particular difficulties of containing COVID-19 in Gaza are compounded in Gaza's eight refugee camps. While Gaza has one of the highest population densities in the world, rendering social distancing nearly impossible, the density in the refugee camps is even higher, making them even more at risk for spread of the virus. Moreover, as most of Gaza's water supply is contaminated, basic sanitation and hygiene practices like washing hands and disinfecting shared surfaces are ineffective in the majority of cases. As stated on 23 March by a group of 11 special procedures mandate holders: "COVID-19 will not be stopped without providing safe water to people living in vulnerability." Also, as most of Gaza's population is unemployed, those who are employed feel that they cannot afford to stop working, as their families are dependent on their generally meagre incomes.

As stated by the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in reference to the situation of the health system in Gaza, "there is only so much you can stretch a system before it snaps", adding that "This could be a tipping point". According to the World Health Organization (WHO) representative in Gaza, Gaza is only prepared to handle the first hundred cases of the virus. "After that," he said, "it will need further support." If even developed countries are finding it extremely challenging to confront the virus, how then can Gaza be expected to cope? The conditions in Gaza could quickly turn life-threatening in a situation of pandemic, endangering millions of lives. Such a horrific outcome must be averted.

Averting such a frightening scenario requires international solidarity and support. It is urgent that the international community recognize that the Gaza Strip – which the United Nations long ago determined would be unliveable by 2020 under its current conditions – is even more endangered in this time of global health crisis. More than ever, States must step up to their responsibilities and finally bring an end to the Israeli blockade of Gaza, a man-made disaster that can and must be reversed, and ensure the necessary humanitarian support.

In the meantime, we are grateful for the assistance being extended to the Palestinian people from across the globe. This includes in particular the vital assistance being provided through United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, OCHA, the United Nations Children's Fund, WHO, the World Food Programme and other United Nations agencies and organizations on the ground. As called for by numerous Security Council members following the 31 March briefing by United Nations Special Coordinator, Nikolay Mladenov, we appeal to the international community to heed the calls for support by those agencies and others to meet the Palestinian people's urgent need for humanitarian aid. As emphasized by the Secretary-General in his report on the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, the global response to the pandemic "must be multilateral, with countries showing solidarity to the most vulnerable communities and nations."

The international community, including the Security Council, must join together to do everything possible to protect everyone in the world from this pandemic – and this must include the Palestinian people, who must not be left behind. Indeed, while it is important to recognize, encourage and support Israeli-Palestinian cooperation to confront this pandemic, it is even more imperative to remind Israel of its obligations as the occupying Power under international law and to demand its compliance. We must all act to uphold international law and the rules-based order and insist on respect without exceptions.

In this regard, in line with the call made by the Secretary-General on 23 March for a "global cease-fire", all must call for Israel to "silence the guns; stop the artillery; end the airstrikes" against the defenceless Palestinian civilian population, "help create the corridors for life-saving aid" and "end the sickness of war", including by ending

its colonization of Palestinian land and lifting the blockade it has inhumanely imposed on Gaza and releasing all Palestinian prisoners in its jails, starting with the most vulnerable.

It is time to bring this illegal occupation to an end. Should Israel continue rejecting the calls to respect the law, choosing instead to carry on with its illegal policies and measures in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, violating the human rights of the Palestinian people, including to self-determination, and undermining their efforts to protect themselves from the global pandemic, it must be held accountable to the full extent of the law. This is vital for salvaging the prospects for peace, but equally vital for saving human lives.

The present letter is in follow-up to our 683 letters regarding the ongoing crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, which constitutes the territory of the State of Palestine. These letters, dated from 29 September 2000 (A/55/432-S/2000/921) to 13 March 2020 (A/ES-10/836-S/2019/208) constitute a basic record of the crimes being committed by Israel, the occupying Power, against the Palestinian people since September 2000. For all of these war crimes, acts of State terrorism and systematic human rights violations being committed against the Palestinian people, Israel, the occupying Power, must be held accountable and the perpetrators must be brought to justice.

I should be grateful if you would arrange to have the text of the present letter distributed as a document of the tenth emergency special session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 5, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) **Riyad Mansour**
Minister
Permanent Observer
of the State of Palestine to the United Nations