

Mr. Pressman (United States of America):

I would like to begin by thanking the Secretary-General for his briefing.

The commitment of the United States to peace in the Middle East and to advancing the vision of two States, living by side by side in peace, is unwavering. Many are rightly frustrated with the lack of progress, and we are too. We will continue to be steadfast in our support of efforts that will advance dialogue, peace and progress, and to oppose those that do not. Progress will be born out of hard choices made by both leaders with the aim of advancing the cause of peace over parochial politics. As such, we remain very concerned about the recent wave of terrorism and violence and about the utter lack of progress the parties have made towards a two-State solution. It is important that both sides demonstrate, through concrete policies and action, a genuine commitment to achieving a two-State solution in order to reduce tensions and restore hope in the possibility of peace.

What we have seen on the ground, and what people such as the Meir family present here today have experienced first-hand, is absolutely unconscionable. The recent spate of violence that has been going on for more than six months has included stabbings, shootings and vehicular attacks, including, as the Israeli Ambassador just noted, reports of a bus exploding in Jerusalem. Acts of terrorism have taken too many lives, including those of Americans. The victims have included soldiers and civilians, pregnant women and mothers, Israelis and Palestinians. That must come to an end. Let us be clear and unequivocal. There is no justification or rationalization for terrorism. Terrorism is terrorism. It is wrong, it is bloody and it must stop. Anyone who aspires to achieve a viable and independent Palestinian State must understand that engaging in incitement to violence serves only to undermine that goal. Only a political outcome, without violence, will enable that goal to be realized.

The United States continues to call on the Palestinian leadership, publicly and privately, to do everything possible to combat all forms of incitement and to explicitly condemn terrorist attacks. All perpetrators of violence should be brought to justice, and justice should be blind, fair and equal. We remain deeply concerned about the shooting on 24 March in Hebron of a Palestinian assailant by a member of the Israeli security forces, and we are closely following the legal proceedings against the accused perpetrator. We note that just today charges of manslaughter were brought against the soldier. It is critical that every possible effort be made to show restraint, guard against the unnecessary loss of life and de-escalate tensions. In cases where anyone from either side acts outside of the law, they must be held accountable.

As we have stated repeatedly, the United States strongly opposes settlement activity. It is incompatible with, and calls into question the Israeli Government's commitment to, two States. That is why we are deeply troubled that, since 1 January, there have been a number of Israeli declarations of State land in the West Bank, including expropriating approximately 600 acres south of Jericho and 250 acres south of Bethlehem. Just last week, the Government of Israel advanced the construction of hundreds of housing units in West Bank settlements in various stages of the planning process. Many of those units are located beyond the separation barrier deep within the West Bank. Those actions — the process of land expropriations, settlement expansions and the legalization of outposts — are wrong and fundamentally undermine the prospects for a two-State solution. Similarly, we are deeply troubled by the demolitions and evictions undertaken by the Israeli authorities in several locations throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As we have repeatedly made clear, we continue to look to both sides to demonstrate with actions and policies a genuine commitment to a two-State solution.

Nowhere are Palestinians suffering more than in Gaza, where the slow pace of reconstruction remains concerning. The stranglehold that Hamas wields over the population in Gaza forces the pace of reconstruction to stall further, as the taxes it levies and its diversion of construction materials leave Palestinians in Gaza with much less than they would otherwise have to rebuild their homes, communities and infrastructure. It was announced just today that the Israeli military discovered a tunnel extending into Israeli territory from Gaza 10 days ago. We all have an obligation to ensure that reconstruction materials are used for their intended purpose. We remain deeply concerned by the humanitarian conditions in Gaza. The United States provided an initial contribution of \$43.4 million to the \$403 million emergency appeal of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, for its operations in the West Bank and Gaza, and we thank those in the Council and within the international community who have made contributions. But far too few have stepped up with resources. We ask others to join the United States in meeting those vast needs. We note that the Government of Israel has expanded the Palestinian fishing zone off of Gaza's coast from six to nine nautical miles, which we hope will somewhat improve the livelihoods of Palestinian fishermen in Gaza.

Turning briefly to the political process, as the Quartet principals jointly stated in Munich in February, the status quo is unsustainable, and significant steps are urgently needed to stabilize the situation and reverse negative trends on the ground. Both sides must demonstrate through policies and actions a genuine commitment to a two-State solution in order to rebuild trust and avoid a cycle of escalation. We believe that the Quartet's upcoming report will help to inform international discussions on the best way to advance a two-State solution.

Turning now to the ongoing horrific situation in Syria, we welcome the third round of intra-Syrian talks, which resumed in Geneva last week, and thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his efforts. As resolution 2254 (2015) states, the only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, including through the establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers, which shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent while ensuring continuity of governmental institutions.

That is the heart of the effort undertaken by the International Syria Support Group and the process that Special Envoy De Mistura aims to move forward in Geneva. We are acutely aware that the Geneva talks and the situation on the ground in Syria are deeply interwoven. Success or failure in one area intimately affects the others. The stakes are enormous. And certainly with regard to both the cessation of hostilities and improving humanitarian access, more can and must be done. The cessation of hostilities is holding in parts of the country and has improved the day-to-day reality of numerous Syrians' lives in those areas, but violations continue. We remain particularly disturbed by the regime's ongoing attacks on parties to the cessation of hostilities. Those violations not only harm and kill Syrian civilians, but also place great strain on other parties to the cessation of hostilities, many of whom have made great efforts to show restraint. The regime's behaviour will only strengthen the position of groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra that consistently try to undermine the cessation of hostilities. We continue to press the opposition to resist being drawn into violence as a result of Jabhat Al-Nusra and regime actions. We have urged the opposition to maintain compliance with the cessation of hostilities. There must be a halt in the escalating violence in Aleppo and in other areas, including Latakia, Hama and the suburbs of Damascus, where recent events pose a serious threat to the durability of the agreement.

To understand the human dimensions of violations to the cessation of hostilities, I want to say just a word about Dr. Hassan Al-Araj, a respected cardiologist in the norther part of Hama, who was killed

in an air strike last week. As of today, there are very few doctors left in Hama, and there are no cardiologists. Hearts that need care will have no one.

Once again, the Syrian regime needs to end the killing and the violence, and it needs to do much more with regard to humanitarian access in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Of the 4.1 million Syrians in hard-to-reach locations, the United Nations has been permitted to reach just 249,000 this year — 249,000 out of 4.1 million, or little more than 6 per cent of those in hard-to-reach areas. The main reason for that is clear: the deliberate obstruction by the Syrian regime, including disputing the United Nations population figures as a new mechanism to prohibit aid from reaching starving populations. The regime deployed that new strategy in the Damascus suburbs of Arbeen, Zamalka and Zabadin, as all three regions had been approved for assistance delivery but were stalled as the United Nations had to renegotiate with the Syrian regime exactly how many people were in need of assistance. Instead of feeding people, the United Nations is forced to negotiate and renegotiate exactly how many starving people will be fed. For those trapped within the besieged areas, where people are intentionally starved and maliciously denied access to international assistance, of the 486,000 people in 18 besieged locations the United Nations has been allowed to reach only 12 locales and 152,500 people. We must do better, and we must do so quickly because people are literally starving to death.

As such, we commend the United Nations efforts in the recent successful airlift of food supplies for the approximately 4,000 residents in Deir ez-Zor besieged by Da'esh, while noting the remaining challenge to address the needs of all 200,000 in the city. We also hope that the recent United Nations trip to Darayya will lead to the immediate delivery of assistance to its people, who have not received one crumb of aid since 2012. The world is witnessing an intentional massive starvation campaign in real time. All actors, including the regime, need to allow food to reach people who are literally dying for it. We once again call on the Syrian regime to comply with international law, including resolution 2254 (2015) and the demands of the international community, to allow assistance to reach all Syrians in need. The next steps in Syria are as urgent as they are clear. There must be a permanent cessation of hostilities, full humanitarian access and an end to the violence, and all Member States must support the political transition in Syria.

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