

Prioritising peace and cooperation in the Middle East in the midst of COVID-19

Mr President, as others have said this morning, COVID-19 is a global crisis with testing implications for us all. The virus does not respect borders, nor political, cultural or religious differences. Cooperation must therefore be our first instinct and we should work to combat this unprecedented challenge together.

We therefore welcome the formation of a national unity government by Israel. This is an important step, demonstrating the need to put political differences aside in the fight against COVID-19.

We continue to welcome the ongoing cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Government of Israel in their respective responses. This is an example of the responsible approach we need at this difficult time, and particularly in the spirit of the Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire.

The UN has played an important part in ensuring ongoing coordination between the Palestinian Authority, Israel and the UN agencies, and we hope this will continue.

It is clear that UNWRA has an important role to play in helping to respond to the crisis brought about by COVID-19. The virus and its impact on Palestinians and basic services will put additional pressure on UNWRA. The UK remains firmly committed to supporting UNRWA and Palestinian refugees across the Middle East, providing over \$80 million for 2019/2020. And we are reviewing our contributions in the light of the COVID-19 challenge.

And the UK is also providing vital support to help respond to COVID-19 in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Our \$1 million funding contribution will enable the World Health Organisation and UNICEF to purchase and coordinate the medical supplies, treat critical care patients, train frontline public health servants and scale up laboratory testing capability.

We must also be mindful of the impact of the virus on the Palestinian economy and economic development. The Palestinian Authority's revenues, which come mostly from levies on trade, are expected to decline by between 60 and 70% as a result of the crisis. The Occupied Palestinian Territories are excluded from most international mechanisms, including the World Bank's \$14 billion COVID-19 fund. The Palestinian Authority does not issue a currency and cannot adopt the measures many countries are taking to increase liquidity.

We welcome the Palestinian Authority's emergency budget and Israeli agreement to guarantee minimum levels of monthly revenue. And we look to Israel to ensure that the Palestinian economy is permitted to function and to support

the Palestinian Authority's economic stability.

During this fragile period we call on both parties to avoid any provocative action, which might undermine the cooperation that is so critical. This includes incitement, settlement activity, demolitions and settler violence.

The UK is particularly concerned that demolitions have continued, including of temporary health centres, which weaken the capacity of Palestinians to respond to COVID-19. Under International Humanitarian Law, an occupying power has the duty of ensuring and maintaining public health and hygiene in the occupied territory to the fullest extent of the means available to it. That is why continued cooperation is so vital.

It is also with regret that we have heard about the deaths of two Palestinians who were shot by Israeli forces during clashes near Nablus in March. It is important that Israel Defense Forces investigate in an independent and transparent manner, and if any wrongdoing is found, that those responsible are held to account.

Finally, we are deeply concerned by reports that the new Israeli government coalition has reached an agreement which paves the way for annexation of parts of the West Bank. The UK position is clear: any unilateral moves towards annexation of parts of the West Bank by Israel would be damaging to efforts to restart peace negotiations and would be contrary to international law.

Mr President, the United Kingdom's longstanding position on the Middle East Peace Process has not changed. We support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states and a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees.

Thank you, Mr President.