

Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
18th June 2015, Security Council Chamber

Statement made by Riyad Mansour, Ambassador of Palestine to the United Nations

I would like to wish a blessed Ramadam to all. I salute His Excellency the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, Mr. Anifah Aman, and the President of the Security Council for convening this timely debate on children and armed conflict. This matter is of highest priority and urgency for the State of Palestine, whose children's lives are gravely endangered by the Israeli occupation. I also thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon; Ms. Leila Zerrougui, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Ms. Yoka Brandt, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF; and Ms. Eunice Apio, Director of Facilitation for Peace and Development, for their important briefings.

We come before the Security Council anguished by the Secretary-General's decision to exclude Israel from the list of shame of parties committing grave violations against children in his annual report on children and armed conflict (S/2015/409). Israel, the occupying Power, is without doubt a flagrant violator of children's rights. Israel systematically commits crimes against Palestinian children. Its actions contravene its obligations under human rights law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international humanitarian law, which obligate the occupying Power to ensure the well-being and safety of the civilian population under its occupation. Evidence verified by the United Nations and numerous human rights organizations affirms that Israel continues to kill and maim children, attack schools and hospitals and prevent humanitarian access, with devastating impact on the rights, lives and well-being of Palestinian children.

Those facts are well documented in the current report and similar past reports.

According to the criteria established by the Security Council, such actions would trigger a listing among the grave violators identified in the annexes to the report. One qualifies to be on the list of shame whether Boko Haram figures there or not. If one meets the criteria, then one has to be there. Political considerations should not be the basis for removal because some abhorrent terrorist organization is on the list.

Yet Israel was not included in that list, as political pressures were again blatantly exerted to shield it from censure and measures of accountability, notwithstanding the objective recommendation of the experts in the United Nations system. We salute those experts for their professional and honest position. They recommended Israel's inclusion, but political pressure led to the deletion of Israel from the list of shame. This glaring omission and the failure to hold Israel responsible for its crimes come at a heavy cost to our innocent children, who are being denied the protection of the law, their rights violated, their suffering deepened and their lives, dreams and futures shattered, without consequences.

Israel's brutality increased against Palestinian children in 2014, causing the third-highest number of child fatalities in armed conflicts worldwide. As reported, 557 Palestinian children were killed. My statement, which will be circulated, contains an annex with a list with the names of all those children and their ages. The majority are from the Gaza Strip, who were killed during the Israeli military assaults of July and August 2014. There are 340 boys and 200 girls, from one-week-old babies to youth 17 years old. As time constraints do not allow me to read out the names of all of those beloved children to properly memorialize their lives and souls, we are distributing the list of their names with the copies of our statement today.

The Palestinian people still grieve this massive loss of human life and innocence. Among them are 19 children of the Abu Jama'a family, the youngest a 6-month-old girl, Bisan, who were massacred in an Israeli air strike on their home that killed 25 family members in total. They suffered the same disaster inflicted on 142 families who lost multiple members — mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins — in such criminal assaults, with 89

The grim reality is that the Israeli occupying forces killed an average of 10 children per day in Gaza, most of whom had not yet celebrated their twelfth birthday. Children were killed on beaches as they played in broad daylight before the eyes of the world, in the sanctity of their homes, in their beds as they slept, in schools, in playgrounds, in the arms of their parents who could not save them from the Israeli onslaught. And an estimated 3,000 children were injured and maimed by the deliberate Israeli strikes and bombardments of civilian areas. One thousand of those children will be disabled for life. These facts, documented and verified by United Nations agencies on the ground, cannot be disputed, distorted or justified by any shameless propaganda.

In addition to these horrific facts, 1,218 Palestinian children were injured in 2014 by the occupying forces in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, more than half of whom were under 12 years of age. Many were critically wounded, and 13 were killed. Among them were Mohammed Abu Khdeir, aged 16, who was abducted and burned alive by terrorist settlers, and Nadim Siam Nuwara, aged 17, who was killed as he was returning home from school during the Day of Nakba in May 2014. I am honoured to have his father here with us today as we appeal again to the Security Council to act to redress the crimes perpetrated against his son and our people and to bring an end to this 48 years of illegal occupation and decades of injustice.

Moreover, along with rampant Israeli strikes on hospitals and homes that have caused death and injury to children, the report indicates that Israeli attacks damaged or destroyed 543 schools in Palestine, the highest recorded number of all time. This includes schools of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, where many Palestinian families, the majority of whom were refugees seeking protection under the United Nations flag, met a tragic fate at the hands of the occupying forces, who killed at least 42 people, including 16 children, and injured 230 in strikes on the schools.

Generations of Palestinian children have been traumatized by the depravity of the Israeli occupation. As noted by the Secretary-General in the report,

“The cumulative impact on children and the civilian population in general of these military operations, and the ongoing military occupation in the State of Palestine, is devastating” (*S/2015/409, para. 110*).

The average 8-year-old in Gaza has witnessed three acts of major military aggression but has never set foot outside Gaza. Too many young lives have been cut short by the violence and terror of the occupying forces and extremist settler militants, who, along with the Israeli Government, should be included in the list of violators, the list of shame.

The children who survive this constant aggression are left to cope with deep physical and psychological wounds, which gravely impairs their lives. Those wounds result from the loss of family members, with at least 1,500 children orphaned in the last Israeli war alone. There have been detentions and arrests, with children as young as 12 seized from their beds in the dead of night, detained, interrogated, beaten, blindfolded, strip-searched, forced to endure solitary confinement and other acts amounting to torture and prosecuted in the only juvenile military court system in the world. There is also the illegal blockade by which Israel has inhumanely deprived the Palestinians in Gaza, isolated them from the world and obstructed humanitarian assistance and recovery. Forced displacement has been endured repeatedly by many children, with the destruction of their homes and loss of their life possessions.

Where else in the world would such deplorable treatment of children be permitted? How long will the Security Council allow Israel to act as a State above the law, perpetrating such grave violations against children with impunity?

This shameful situation renders meaningless the law and the obligation to protect civilians in armed conflict, and the accountability mechanisms established for this purpose. The failure to apply the same standards and demands for compliance to Israel undermines the credibility of the international system and proves that it is broken. This accountability gap clearly fosters Israeli impunity, as shown in its callous response to the report and the persistence of its violations against our children, who are left to fend for themselves against Israeli savagery. As the Council knows, had Israel been added to the list of grave violators, a process of increased oversight would have been initiated. The United Nations and Israel would have had to negotiate a time-bound, mandatory action plan to protect children. Listing would also have provided the Council with the tools to prevent and respond to future Israeli violations. Israel's exclusion from the list, despite the expert advice of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the United Nations agencies monitoring the situation in Palestine, is a missed opportunity to hold Israel accountable and to save the lives of Palestinian children.

In 2009, the Secretary-General came before the Council and stated that “All countries and all groups must put the protection of children in situations of armed conflict above politics.” (*S/PV.6114, p. 3*). We echo that appeal today in the light of the tragic plight of Palestinian children under Israeli occupation. Israel must be held accountable for its crimes. We are convinced that only collective international action can compel it to cease its violations and respect the law. Our pursuit of accountability and commitment to international law are evident in our accession to the Rome Statute and other international treaties. While the Israeli Government continues to demonstrate in word and deed that it has no interest in peace and the rule of law and insists on denying the Palestinian people their rights and entrenching its occupation, the Palestinian leadership remains committed to peace.

To salvage the prospects for peace, we implore the international community, with the Security Council at the forefront, to act to uphold international law and United Nations resolutions towards ending Israel's illegal occupation and achieving freedom and justice for the Palestinian people. Until then, we again appeal for protection of the Palestinian people, beginning with our children.