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**Human rights situation in Palestine and other
occupied Arab territories**

Written statement* submitted by Jammu and Kashmir Council for Human Rights (JKCHR), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 May 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Gaza blockade placed by Israel must be lifted

Human Rights violations of the Palestinian people at the hands of Israel's right-wing government and the recent violence and bloodshed within Gaza is a stain on the global community and matter of real shame for us all.

According to Health officials in Gaza, 232 Palestinians have been killed, including 65 children and 39 women. 12 Israelis have also lost their lives. Since 10th of May, Israeli forces have been indiscriminately striking Gaza, at times wiping out entire families in one go.

Israel is an erring state, where Palestinians are second class citizens. These are people that have faced decades of humiliation, and displacement. Anyone believing otherwise needs to witness Palestinians at separate check points, where they face intense inspection which can take up to several hours. Such instances are degrading and humiliating, but there is no choice but to comply.

Palestinians are being illegally evicted from their homes, as recently witnessed in Sheikh Jarrah, provocation which served as a catalyst for events that unfolded. People protested against the forced evictions and were met with brute force. Then we witnessed the attack on the Al Aqsa Mosque, one of the holiest sites for Muslims. Worshippers were fired with stun grenades and tear gas by the Israeli forces in an unnecessary act of provocation.

The blockade of the Gaza strip by land, sea and air highlights just how suffocating life is for those living in the densely populated area. There are restrictions on imports and exports, and Palestinians on a daily basis have their lives controlled by racist and inhumane policies.

Palestine's struggle is often wrongfully viewed through a religious lens, projected as a complex issue between Muslims and Jews. But this is not the case. This is a Human Right issue, where there are the oppressed and the oppressor.

Palestinians are also robbed of their right to protest. Various tactics are used by Israeli forces to disperse protestors, such as the use of skunk water, a tactic many see as one with a deeper meaning. The use of skunk water is also viewed as a form of degradation. The foul odour can at times remain on the skin for days.

Female protestors have been violently arrested, often dragged aggressively. A Palestinian female, Mariam Alafifi, was arrested during a protest in Sheikh Jarrah. Footage of her arrest went viral on social media, showing her being dragged by the Hijab by Israeli forces. This is not an isolated incident. Females are seen as an easy target and subjected to manhandling.

Protests took place worldwide, in all corners of the world, in solidarity with the people of Palestine and calling for an end to oppression. People from different walks of life, faiths and ethnicities have shown empathy for the Palestinian people that face brutality and are stripped of their right to live in dignity. People all over the world have shown that their moral compass is still working. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of world leaders.

While Gaza was under attack, many world leaders chose to rally behind the Israeli government, calling the onslaught as Israel's "right to self-defence." Countries such as the United States of America, who call out Human Rights violations in other places such as Iran and China, fail to do the same for its close ally. The United States and its unwavering support for the right-wing Israeli government shields it from accountability.

Instead of using its influence to apply pressure, Joe Biden's administration has approved of a \$735 million weapons sale to Israel, at a time when the Netanyahu government was striking Palestinians. This only weakens America's role as a so-called peace broker and exposes the double standards of the US administration. It cannot speak of Human Rights and criticise other countries if it is selling arms to Israel, knowing full well what it is being used for.

We need to be open and honest: Israel is committing ethnic cleansing, wiping out people and erasing their identity, and America's unconditional backing makes it complicit.

Anyone that speaks for the rights of Palestinian people and advocates their to right of self-determination, is often smeared with allegations of anti-Semitism. Some individuals try to muddy the debate by comparing Israel's aggression as an attack on people of the Jewish faith, and this is dangerous. It is simply used as a weapon against Palestinian supporters and activists in order to silence them. Labelling supporters of Palestine as anti-Semite only shuts down any criticism of the Israeli government, giving the aggressor a free pass.

But it needs to be made clear that people belonging to the Jewish faith are not responsible for the actions of the Israeli government. Many people belonging to the Jewish faith have condemned Benjamin Netanyahu for his cruelty and callousness and have marched in solidarity with Palestinians across the globe. We must be careful of individuals masquerading as allies that want to use the Palestinian cause as a cover to push an anti-Semitic agenda. Such people are not well-wishers of the people of Palestine.

All human life is valuable and the death of civilians on either side is condemnable. Whether it is a Palestinian child killed in an Israeli airstrike, or an Israeli child killed by a Hamas rocket, it is innocent life that is lost. But it is imperative that we understand the imbalance of power here. The death toll for Palestinians has been much higher, and civilians are disproportionately targeted. Israel is protected by an iron dome which reduces the risk of casualties. But Gaza has been described as the world's largest open-air prison. People residing there do not have iron domes to protect them. They are always in harms way.

Eleven children that were receiving trauma therapy were killed by an Israeli air strike in Gaza. The Norwegian Refugee Council, which supports displaced people around the world, said the children were taking part in its psycho-social scheme helping schoolchildren in the Gaza Strip to deal with trauma. Another airstrike hit Gaza's only Covid centre. Roads leading to hospitals have been bombed and Dr Abu al-Ouf, head of internal medicine at the Palestinian territory's main hospital was killed by an airstrike along with other members of his family.

These actions are unjustifiable and inexcusable. Israel cannot hide behind its outdated excuse of self-defence because these actions amount to war crimes. Israel has failed to provide evidence to justify these actions. But no amount of evidence can justify the killing of children, children haunted by the nightmares of violence, now buried along with their dreams of a better future. It is beyond comprehension how world leaders are willing to look the other way.

Speaking at the UN General assembly, Secretary General Antonio Guterres was right to say, "if there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza." But words bring no comfort to the children living in fear. They deserve to have a future, where they are given an opportunity to carve their own destiny. But this can only be possible if long lasting peace is achieved. And this can only be achieved if Palestinians are able to exercise their right to self-determination. A ceasefire between Israel and Palestine has now been called, but this is not the solution, only a temporary pause on violence.

A ceasefire does not mean a return to normalcy because nothing was ever normal. Palestinians will still face systemic discrimination and will continue to be displaced. If normalcy is to be achieved, then the Gaza blockade placed by Israel must be lifted. The Israeli government cannot go unpunished for its crimes against humanity.

The United Nations has to accept that it is failing in its moral obligation towards Palestinians. It is time for the UN to play a more proactive role and take the lead wherever possible, because the only other alternative is a never-ending vicious cycle.

It must take note of the fact that the United States of America continuously blocked a UN resolution calling for a Gaza ceasefire. So called Human Rights defenders and gate keepers of peace have supported bloodshed and this has happened on the UN's watch. This is unacceptable. The UN cannot silently watch as powerful governments unjustly use their influence to bully and intimidate.

The United States is partly responsible for the situation within Gaza, as it continues to protect Benjamin Netanyahu on all platforms. The constant vetoing and blocking at the UN will only hinder peace and emboldens the Israeli government. The world cannot wait for

another bout of violence. The United Nations must regroup and join heads with sane voices to find even the smallest of openings towards achieving an everlasting solution.

The dehumanisation of the Palestinian people for decades should sit heavily on every soul with a conscience. Israel's peace is interlinked with the Palestinian people. If it is genuinely concerned for its citizens, it should work with the UN. State violence is never the answer.
