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Letter dated 19 May 2021 from the Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the President of the Human Rights Council

I am writing to you in my capacity as the Chair of the Group of Arab States, Geneva Chapter.

As Israel persists with its scorched earth tactics in Occupied Palestine, the Arab group is compelled to appeal for humanity, for responsibility, and for urgent international action to stop this criminal military aggression and to protect the Palestinian people, who have for too long suffered under Israel's illegal occupation.

The occupying Power continues to intensify its bombardment of the besieged Gaza Strip, and has unleashed a wave of killings across the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, and emboldened terror attacks by its State-sponsored settler militias, leaving behind scores of dead, wounded and widespread destruction. Once again, the world is witness to crimes against humanity that it long ago pledged to never again let befall innocent civilians.

All of this is happening as the Palestinian people once more somberly commemorate the anniversary of the *Nakba*, the catastrophe they have endured since 1947–1948, endlessly brutalized, dispossessed and uprooted from their homeland, with no end in sight to this historic injustice.

Israel has killed 200 Palestinians, including 58 children and 34 women, and more than 1,300 people have been injured, and many critically wounded, by the Israeli military assaults on Gaza since Monday, 10 May. Families continue to be devastated; for example, 10 members of a family were killed in an Israeli air strike on Al-Shati refugee camp, a two-month-old baby now the sole survivor of this massacre, wounded and orphaned of his entire family.

Just days ago these people – children, women and men – were alive, awaiting Eid celebrations, resilient in their hope for better, more just days that never came, as now they are among the scores of dead and wounded left behind by Israel's deliberate onslaught on civilian areas, a war crime being perpetrated before the eyes of the world.

The number of persons displaced by this Israeli aggression also continues to climb, now estimated at more than 40,000 civilians. Once again, traumatized Palestinians have been forced to shelter in United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) schools, mosques, and even hospitals and in the midst of an ongoing pandemic, with limited access to water, food and health services, as Israeli war planes and drones targeting Gaza, now joined by tank and cannon bombardment, have destroyed thousands of homes, flattened entire apartment buildings, as well as commercial buildings, including those housing journalists, and damaged other vital civilian infrastructure.



There is no other option for refuge in Gaza, where there are no bomb shelters and where Israel's illegal land, air and sea blockade continues to imprison 2 million people in an act of massive collective punishment constituting a crime against humanity.

On 13 May, in one of Israel's most vicious bombardment campaigns, 160 Israeli warplanes fired 450 missiles in just 40 minutes. That is an average of 11 airstrikes per minute, intentionally targeting a civilian area, reducing homes and neighbourhoods to rubble, with families in their entirety being buried beneath flattened and burning buildings, the smell of death from charred and mutilated bodies pervading the area. On 15 May, the Al-Jala building, which housed several media and news offices, including those of Associated Press and Al-Jazeera, was bombarded and flattened. The building was also home to several Internet providers and private apartments. This war crime is yet another attempt by the occupying Power to silence the international media, to shield the world from the truth and the facts: its genocidal slaughter of civilians, including tens of children, its extensive destruction of civilian structures, and the general barbarism of an apartheid and colonial regime.

This horrifying attack on the freedom of the press is complemented by the shocking censorship carried out by Facebook, Instagram and Twitter of content raising awareness of the violations of Palestinian human rights, in breach of international standards on freedom of expression. The clear politicization of these platforms has compromised access to posts by Palestinians on the ground, as well as by journalists and advocates for human rights and international law worldwide, as they have tried to bring attention to Israel's violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and against Palestinian citizens of Israel. There must be a clear demand by the international community and all those who uphold freedom of expression, for Facebook, which also owns Instagram, and Twitter to immediately stop censoring content aimed at raising awareness of violations of international law and of the human rights of Palestinians, to reinstate affected posts and accounts, and to provide a clear and public explanation for the reasons why the content was removed, including any political pressure. These companies must be held accountable against their responsibilities under the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

How can anyone defend atrocities? How can anyone justify Israel's war crimes? And yet, Israel, the occupying Power, is not held accountable to the same laws all countries in the world are obligated to respect.

In the occupied West Bank, Israeli occupying forces used live ammunition and other lethal measures to attack protesters demonstrating against the aggression on Gaza, the imminent threat of forced expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in occupied East Jerusalem, and Israeli attacks and provocations against Al-Aqsa Mosque/Al-Haram Al-Sharif, killing a total of 21 Palestinians, of which 11 on 14 May alone. Palestine Red Crescent ambulances and medics raced back and forth transporting more than 500 Palestinians wounded by the firing of live ammunition, rubber-coated metal bullets, concussion grenades, teargas canisters and sound bombs, and direct physical attacks carried out by the Israeli occupying forces, with medics themselves coming under attack, all in grave violation of international humanitarian law.

Palestinians also continue to be targeted in racist terror attacks by Israeli extremists, under the full protection of Israeli forces, knowing they can get away with murder, gloating in the impunity long fostered by Israel against Palestinians. At this moment, Israeli settlers are rampaging through the Silwan neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem, threatening and attacking Palestinian families.

Whether in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, or the besieged Gaza Strip, the excessive and unwarranted use of lethal force paints a stark picture of Israel's disregard for Palestinian life. These acts are unjustifiable and indefensible, inhumane and illegal, and all part of a systematic policy deliberately designed to create a coercive environment through violence, repression and fear. Such rogue acts by Israel, the occupying Power, its occupying forces and settlers amount to war crimes, and the perpetrators of such wanton and deliberate terror, murder and destruction must be held accountable to the full extent of the law.

At the same time, violent, racist attacks continue to be perpetrated by extremist Israeli mobs against Palestinian citizens of Israel, further exacerbating this cycle of violence. In this

regard, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed, *inter alia*, concerns “that Israeli police failed to intervene where Palestinian citizens of Israel were being violently attacked, and that social media is being used by ultra-right-wing groups to rally people to bring ‘weapons, knives, clubs, knuckledusters’ to use against Palestinian citizens of Israel”. Reports of these disturbing attacks have also exposed excessive, discriminatory force by police against Palestinian citizens of Israel, and hundreds of Palestinians have been detained. In this regard, the High Commissioner reminded the Government of Israel of “its duty to protect all its residents and citizens without discrimination based on notions of ‘nationhood’, religious or ethnic origin, and to ensure equal treatment before the law”.

Regrettably, Israeli politicians continue to embolden extremist elements through inflammatory rhetoric and incitement, fomenting further attacks on Palestinians. The viciousness of attacks by armed and radical Israeli settlers against Palestinians throughout the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is further testament to the violence being fuelled by such reckless and provocative hate speech. In Sheikh Jarrah, videos show armed Israeli settlers shooting at Palestinians and breaking into their homes. Without doubt these intensifying settler attacks are part and parcel of Israel’s forced displacement campaign in Sheikh Jarrah, reminiscent of the terror and attacks by Zionist militias in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were driven from their homes in the Nakba, a grave injustice that continues to this day.

The international community is witnessing first-hand the outcome of decades of obstruction of accountability for such flagrant violations of international law and United Nations resolutions. There is no excuse for the continued silence on Israel’s aggression and crimes and no excuse for continued inaction. As the number of innocent civilians killed, wounded and traumatized increases by the minute, and as peoples all over the world gather in protest and demonstrations of solidarity calling for action to stop this carnage and calling for freedom and justice for the Palestinian people, it is shameful that the international community has yet to act to uphold its legal obligations and enforce the law.

How, one might ask, has Israel carried on this long with complete disregard for international law, without consequence? Needless to say, Israel has been beyond emboldened by such silence, which only encourages it to commit barbaric crimes and human rights violations that have no place in the twenty-first century.

Arguments equating the “two sides” are unjust and unacceptable. The Palestinian people have endured the crimes of this occupation for 54 years, to no avail. When they are silent and restrained, quietly suffering the brutality of the Israeli occupation, the world looks away. But when they rise up against this inhumane occupation, they are rebuked, no less with lectures about Israel’s “right to defend itself”, rhetoric completely detached from the context and root causes of this crisis and completely detached from international law, which does not deny the occupied population protection, but rather ensures it protection.

It is illogical and immoral to expect a defenceless occupied population to accept its occupier’s repeated aggressions, while excusing the occupier’s transgressions and placing the occupier’s security above fundamental human security. Such arguments and double standards bring shame to those who claim to respect international law and human rights and to value human life.

The question of Palestine remains the longest standing item on the agenda of the United Nations. It must overcome its paralysis and take action to bring an end not only to the symptoms of this injustice that we so painfully witness in these moments, but also to its root causes: mass dispossession, 54 years of occupation, apartheid, and the persecution of the Palestinian people by Israel, the occupying Power.

This is urgent in order to protect and save human lives, which remain in peril as Israel continues its barbaric onslaught against defenceless children, women and men, and to salvage the prospects for a future of peace and security. We urge you to act now, humanely, responsibly and firmly, to take the effective measures and to call upon Member States to take legal measures and sanctions, to bring an end to this grave injustice.

There is no peace and no stability without the creation of an independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital, in line with endorsed international principles,

including as enshrined in the relevant United Nations resolutions and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

The Arab Group would be grateful if you could arrange to have the text of the present letter made available to States Members of the Human Rights Council for their immediate, valuable consideration, and also distributed as a document of the thirtieth special session of the Council.

(Signed) Ahmed Ihab **Gamaleldin**
Ambassador and Permanent Representative
of Egypt to the United Nations Office at Geneva,
and Chair of the Group of Arab States, Geneva Chapter
