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# Reasonable Grounds to Believe Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Occurred in Israel Tells Security Council

## However, Urges Mandate Is Not “War Without Rape” but “World Without War”

There are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence — including rape and gang-rape — occurred across multiple locations of Israel and the Gaza periphery during the attacks on 7 October 2023, a senior United Nations official reported to the Security Council today, as she presented findings from her visit to Israel and the occupied West Bank.

Following allegations of brutal sexual violence committed during and in the aftermath of the Hamas-led terror attacks, Pramila Patten, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, led an official visit to Israel from 29 January to 14 February to gather, analyse and verify reports of sexual violence related to the 7 October attack. Due to ongoing hostilities, the Special Representative did not request to visit Gaza, where other UN entities that monitor sexual violence are operational.

“What I witnessed in Israel were scenes of unspeakable violence perpetrated with shocking brutality,” Ms. Patten recalled. Detailing her methodology, she said that her team met with families of hostages and members of communities displaced from several kibbutzim. It conducted confidential interviews with 34 individuals, including survivors and witnesses of the 7 October attacks, released hostages, first responders and health and service providers. It visited four attack sites — as well as the morgue to which the bodies of victims were transferred — and reviewed over 5,000 photographic images and some 50 hours of footage of the attacks.

“It was a catalogue of the most extreme and inhumane forms of killing, torture and other horrors,” including sexual violence, she stated. The team also found convincing information that sexual violence was committed against hostages, and has reasonable grounds to believe that such violence may still be ongoing against those in captivity. While there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred in the Nova music festival site, Route 232, and kibbutz Re’im, reported incidents of rape could not be verified in other locations. Concurrently, the team determined that at least two allegations of sexual violence in kibbutz Be’eri — widely reported in the media — were unfounded.

Turning to the West Bank, she painted a grim picture of “intense fear and insecurity, with women and men terrified and deeply disturbed over the ongoing tragedy in Gaza”. On her visit to Ramallah, she spotlighted instances of sexual violence in the context of detention, such as invasive body searches; beatings, including in the genital areas; and threats of rape against women and female family members. Sexual harassment and threats of rape during house raids and at checkpoints were also reported. She expressed disappointment that the immediate reaction to her report by some Israeli political actors was not to open inquiries into those alleged incidents but, rather, to reject them outright via social media.

However, she underscored that her findings do not legitimize further hostilities. Instead, they create a moral imperative for a humanitarian ceasefire to end the unspeakable suffering imposed on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and bring about the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. “I am horrified by the injustice of women and children killed in Gaza,” she said, stressing that the end goal of her mandate is not “a war without rape” but a “world without war”.

In the following discussion, numerous Council Members — among them, the representatives of China, Switzerland, Japan, Slovenia, Malta, Mozambique and Ecuador — expressed shock over the incidents of sexual violence related to the 7 October attacks detailed in the Special Representative’s report.

Many urged Hamas to immediately release all hostages, who — according to the report — can still be subjected to such acts. Some, including the representatives of the United States and France, criticized the Council’s failure to condemn Hamas.

There can be no doubt about what happened on 7 October, said the representative of the United States, pointing to the report’s findings that several bodies, naked from the waist down, were recovered — mostly “women with hands tied and shot multiple times, often in the head”. The report also indicated that the detention of Palestinians has been compounded by sexual violence. Nevertheless, she rejected “the false equivalency between these actions and hostage-taking by a foreign terrorist organization”.

Incidents of sexual violence in Israel and the West Bank contained in the report “add another horrific dimension to the tragedy unfolding in the Middle East”, observed Guyana’s delegate. Noting that at least two widely reported allegations of sexual violence were unfounded, she urged all parties “to act responsibly and avoid sensationalizing headlines”.

Tariq Ahmad, Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom, said that London is ready to provide support, including its team of experts on preventing sexual violence in conflict and its toolkit that provides practical measures to address the stigma faced by survivors. “All reports of sexual violence must be fully investigated to ensure justice for survivors and victims,” he said, adding that “justice delayed is justice denied”.

Many echoed that call for accountability, including Sierra Leone’s delegate, who urged Israel to grant access to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) — as well as the Independent International Commission of Inquiry in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel — to fully investigate all alleged violations.

Likewise, his counterpart from Switzerland underscored that competent bodies must establish the facts to help identify violations and ensure accountability. Adding to that, the representative of the Republic of Korea stressed that a comprehensive investigative process, involving national authorities and OHCHR, will “bring light to the complete extent of alleged violations”.

The Russian Federation’s delegate, meanwhile, questioned the UN’s selective approach to visits in the region — including the Special Representative’s recent trip, which did not cover the Gaza Strip. “We are dealing with some sort of half-truth that in no way gives a full picture,” she stressed. Noting that the Special Representative’s report was based on data received from the Israeli Government rather than accounts of the 7 October victims, she underscored that “putting an end to violence, including sexual violence, will only be possible when we have objective and verified information”.

Calling for such impartiality was Algeria’s delegate, who said that the Special Representative should have been granted authorization to visit the numerous detention centres where more than 3,484 Palestinian administrative detainees are held without trial. “Her presence in the Gaza Strip would have allowed her to witness, first-hand, the extent of sexual abuse inflicted upon Palestinians by occupying forces and convey it to the international community,” he stressed.

The plight of Palestinians is not a recent phenomenon, he continued, noting that only three criminal investigations have been initiated in response to 1,400 complaints about acts of torture since 2001. None have led to indictments. “What the Palestinians — particularly women — endure is a litmus test for the credibility of international law and the global framework outlined in Security Council resolutions,” he underscored, urging an immediate end to ongoing atrocities.

For his part, the Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine said that the Council has shown “unprecedented reactivity” by convening a briefing on a report just released. For decades, similar reports regarding sexual assault against Palestinians have not led to the convening of a single Council meeting. He then recalled that the Special Representative’s mission did not seek to gather information or verify allegations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, so as not to duplicate the ongoing work of other UN entities there.

Yet, none of these entities were invited today to present their findings, he pointed out, extending an invitation for the Special Representative to visit Gaza. He also pledged Palestine’s readiness to cooperate with OHCHR and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry. The Council should demand that Israel do the same since that country keeps saying that it has nothing to hide, he stated, adding: “Let the facts speak, let the law decide.”

Israel Katz, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Israel, criticized the United Nations for remaining silent about Hamas’ horrible acts for too long. According to the Special Representative’s report, the killings of innocent young men and women on 7 October were crimes against humanity. Against this backdrop, he called on the United Nations to declare Hamas a terrorist organization, citing the recognition of this status by numerous countries. Emphasizing that “Hamas does not speak on behalf of the Muslim world,” he urged Muslim leaders to denounce the crimes committed by Hamas, particularly those involving sexual violence.

Turning to the situation of hostages, he urged the Council to take urgent action to ensure the release of 134 kidnapped individuals and “stop this living hell”. “By doing so, you will show the world that the Security Council can be a shining light of justice for all,” he added.