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PRESS RELEASE

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IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES**

ON THE CRISIS IN THE GAZA STRIP

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The Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip represent severe and massive violations of international humanitarian law as defined in the Geneva Conventions, both in regard to the obligations of an Occupying Power and in the requirements of the laws of war.

Those violations include:

Collective punishment – the entire 1.5 million people who live in the crowded Gaza Strip are being punished for the actions of a few militants.

Targeting civilians – the airstrikes were aimed at civilian areas in one of the most crowded stretches of land in the world, certainly the most densely populated area of the Middle East.

Disproportionate military response – the airstrikes have not only destroyed every police and security office of Gaza's elected government, but have killed and injured hundreds of civilians; at least one strike reportedly hit groups of students attempting to find transportation home from the university.

Earlier Israeli actions, specifically the complete sealing off of entry and exit to and from the Gaza Strip, have led to severe shortages of medicine and fuel (as well as food), have resulted in the inability of ambulances to respond to the injured, the inability of hospitals to adequately provide medicine or necessary equipment for the injured, and the inability of Gaza's besieged doctors and other medical workers to sufficiently treat the victims.

Certainly the rocket attacks against civilian targets in Israel are unlawful. But that illegality does not give rise to any Israeli right, neither as the Occupying Power nor as a sovereign state, to violate international humanitarian law and commit war crimes or crimes against humanity in its response. I note that Israel's escalating military assaults have not made Israeli civilians safer; to the contrary, the one Israeli killed today after the upsurge of Israeli violence is the first in over a year.

Israel has also ignored recent Hamas' diplomatic initiatives to reestablish the truce or ceasefire since its expiration on 26 December.

The Israeli airstrikes today, and the catastrophic human toll that they caused, challenge those countries that have been and remain complicit, either directly or indirectly, in Israel's violations of international law. That complicity includes those countries knowingly providing the military equipment including warplanes and helicopters used in these illegal attacks, as well as those countries that have supported and participated in the siege of Gaza that itself has caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

I remind all Member States of the United Nations that the UN continues to be bound to an independent obligation to protect any civilian population facing massive violations of international humanitarian law – regardless of what country may be responsible for those violations. I call on all Member States, as well as officials and every relevant organ of the United Nations system, to move on an emergency basis not only to condemn Israel's serious violations, but to develop new approaches to providing real protection for the Palestinian people.
