**Israel s forever war**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-05-24

THE ceasefire announced between Israel and the Palestinian organisation, Hamas, does not erase the memory of the chilling and heart-wrenching images from Gaza during the 11 days of violence. Refugee camps bombarded by Israeli forces, children killed in missile attacks, buildings targeted and destroyed, people watching helplessly as bodies of family members were pulled out of the rubble and thousands left homeless and traumatised. The humanitarian crisis unleashed by Israeli aggression affected every Palestinian.

The Israeli military onslaught against the Palestinians added another grim chapter to over 70 years of brutality and suffering inflicted on a dispossessed and displaced people by an occupying power.

Palestinians have been forced out of their homeland, deprived of their land and subjected to unceasing repression, arbitrary arrests and collective punishment. They have seen entire neighbourhoods being demolished and people uprooted to make way for illegal Israeli settlements. Gaza`s two million inhabitants have suffered 14 years of a blockade and cruel restrictions imposed by Israel.

Against this backdrop of historical injustice, it took only a spark for the situation to erupt in which the occupying power rained havoc but was met by resistance from people armed only with an unshakable belief in their cause. The trigger for the latest flare-up was a combination of factors an unprovoked police assault on worshippers at Al Aqsa Mosque during Ramazan and eviction of Palestinians from their homes in occupied East Jerusalem`s neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

What followed were mass protests by Palestinians in Gaza, in cities and villages across the West Bank and in Israel. They were ruthlessly crushed by Israeli forces. Rocket attacks by Hamas followed and then indiscriminate Israeli airstrikes that claimed the lives of more than 240 Palestinians including over 65 children.

While this carnage continued for 11 days, the OIC issued a statement of condemnation but contemplated no collective action. The statement was long on rhetoric but short on action. Arab countries that recently established diplomatic relations weren`t asked to suspend those ties. In fact, their so-callednormalisation policy towards Israel may have emboldened Tel Aviv to act with impunity.

The US and its Western allies were blindsided to the Palestinian plight by their unflinching support for Israel. US leaders called for `de-escalation` after days of crisis. An emergency UN Security Council meeting was delayed for days, because of Washington. When it met, the US repeatedly blocked a statement that all other 14 members of the Council agreed on, which called for de-escalation, an end to evictions of Palestinian families and respect for international humanitarian law. This left the US isolated at the UN but did not persuade Washington to modify its stance.

None of this was surprising. The US, as Israel`s principal benefactor, has long protected its closest ally and shown little of the concern for Palestinian rights that it routinely voices about human rights violations elsewhere. Many Western governments echoed the US in voicing support for Israel`s right to selfdefence against attacks by Hamas. Nevertheless, countries like Norway and Ireland, both non-permanent members of UNSC, voiced concern for civilian casualties including children from Israeli airstrikes and asked that Israel cease its settlement activities.

Russia warned Israel that more civilian casualties in Gaza were intolerable and called for an end to violence.

While the latest eruption in Palestine`s long and tragic history has familiar echoes, some dimensions of the crisis were a departure from the past and could prove consequential. The first difference was the scale of protests by Palestinians that simultaneously took place across the occupied territories and in Israel. Never before had Palestinians living in Israel joined the protests in the numbers witnessed. Even otherwise biased reports in the New York Times acknowledged that the protests were `finding new footholds and threatening the veneer of Israeli society in ways not seen before`. The Guardian noted that the outpouring of support from Israel`s Palestinian citizens created a `new front` inside Israel rarely witnessed in the past. The unprecedented anger `within` was widely attributed to what Human Rights Watch in a recent report called Israel`s apartheid policies towards Arabs who consti-tute a fifth of its population.

Another unprecedented aspect of the crisis was the show of popular solidarity with Palestinians across the world, that too in times of a pandemic. In Muslim nations this was to be expected but the scale of protests was significant, while Western countries, including the US and UK, also saw big demonstrations. This wave of global public support contrasted sharply with the positions adopted by governments especially in the West, although bold voices in the US Congress and other Western parliaments were a call of conscience for them. President Biden faced growing criticism from progressive Democrats for his stance. It also prompted prominent American opinion makers to assert that the `unshakable bonds of friendship` with Israel were shaking in America `especially in the Democratic party`. A Gallup poll for example found that over half of Democrats felt the US should lean on Israel to make concessions rather than the Palestinians.

While a ceasefire has brought the latest Israeli aggression to an end this will only be a lull before the next storm. The ineluctable reality is that the unresolved Palestinian issue remains a collective failure of the international community. Scores of UNSC and General Assembly resolutions have called for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine. There are 88 Security Council resolutions on the Palestine question. The answer to the dispute, the oldest on the UN agenda, has long been spelt out in several resolutions a two-state solution that ensures a viable and independent State of Palestine. But in recent years Israel was encouraged by president Donald Trump`s policies into abandoning the two-state `solution` and sought instead to impose a one-state `solution` while expanding illegal settlements in violation of UNSC Resolution 2334 and in defiance of international demands to cease this activity.

Inaction on these resolutions is an indictment of those members of the global community who possess the power to effect change but are unwilling to act because of a blind commitment to Israel and contrary to their claims to respect international law and abide by a rules-based international order. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.