



Following visit to Israel and the occupied West Bank, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms. Pramila Patten, finds sexual violence occurred on 7 October, and against hostages and calls for a fully-fledged investigation

Press Release: Under embargo

New York, 4 March 2024: At the invitation of the Government, Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Pramila Patten led an official visit to Israel, supported by a team of technical experts, from 29 January to 14 February 2024. The objective of the visit was to gather, analyze and verify allegations of conflict-related sexual violence reportedly committed during the brutal, Hamas-led terror attacks of 7 October 2023 and in its aftermath, given the absence of relevant UN entities operating in Israel, in order to inform reporting in the exercise of her mandate, including to the United Nations Security Council.

SRSG Patten and team (the mission team) also visited the occupied West Bank to engage with the Palestinian Authority, civil society organizations, released detainees and other relevant actors. Considering the ongoing hostilities, the mission team did not request to visit the Gaza Strip, where several other United Nations entities are present, including some that monitor and address sexual and gender-based violence.

The visit was neither intended nor mandated to be investigative in nature, a mandate vested in other United Nations bodies, which have promptly signaled their willingness and availability to investigate all alleged violations committed in the context of the 7 October attacks and their aftermath. The scope and parameters of the visit were agreed in advance with the relevant authorities, to ensure, unimpeded and confidential access to interlocutors and information. The mission team adhered to standard UN methodology, including principle of independence, impartiality, objectivity, transparency, integrity, and “do no harm” principles, related to respecting confidentiality and informed consent. SRSG Patten was supported by a technical team composed of nine experts from the United Nations system, including specialists in safe and ethical interviewing of victims/survivors and witnesses of sexual violence crimes, a forensic pathologist, and a digital and open-source information analyst. The mission team spared no effort to gather information and to encourage victims/survivors and witnesses to come forward and share their stories.

The mission team conducted a total of 33 meetings with Israeli national institutions, including relevant line ministries, as well as the Israeli security forces. It visited the Israeli National Center of Forensic Medicine, the Shura military base, the morgue to which the bodies of victims were transferred, as well as four locations affected by the 7 October attacks, in relation to which reports of sexual violence had emerged. The mission team reviewed over 5,000 photographic images and approximately 50 hours of footage of the attacks, in a concerted effort to identify any potential instances or indications of conflict-related sexual violence. It conducted confidential interviews with a total of 34 interviewees, including with survivors and witnesses of the 7 October attacks, released



hostages, first responders, health and service providers amongst others. While the number of survivors/victims of sexual violence of 7 October remains unknown, the mission team was made aware that a small number of those are reportedly undergoing treatment and continue to experience severe mental distress and trauma. Despite concerted efforts to encourage them to come forward, the mission team was not able to interview any of these survivors/victims.

The mission team also met with families and relatives of hostages still held in captivity, members of displaced kibbutzim communities, as well as representatives from Israeli civil society organizations and academia.

The Israeli national authorities faced numerous challenges in the collection of evidence in pursuit of their investigations. Efforts to collect evidence were beset by the limited availability of forensic information, due to the large number of casualties and widely-dispersed crime scenes; a context of active hostilities; the prioritization of search and rescue operations as well as the recovery, identification and burial of the deceased in accordance with religious practices over the collection of forensic evidence; the loss of potentially valuable evidence due to the interventions of some untrained volunteer first responders; the alteration of crime scenes in some cases, as well as the large number of bodies affected by extensive burn damage.

Other challenges it encountered in the gathering and verification of incidents of sexual violence included: limited professionally-gathered forensic material; inaccurate and unreliable forensic interpretations by non-professionals; the extremely limited availability of victims/survivors and witnesses of sexual violence due *inter alia* to the internal displacement of affected communities; the lack of public trust and confidence in national and international institutions; the questioning by some of the narrow focus of the mission on crimes of sexual violence given the range of other grave crimes committed on 7 October and its aftermath; and the intense media scrutiny of individuals whose accounts have appeared in the public domain, increasing trauma and fears of social stigmatization.

Based on the information it gathered, the mission team found clear and convincing information that sexual violence, including rape, sexualized torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment has been committed against hostages and has reasonable grounds to believe that such violence may be ongoing against those still held in captivity. In line with a survivor/victim-centered approach, findings are conveyed in generic terms and details are not revealed.

In the context of the coordinated attack by Hamas and other armed groups against civilian and military targets throughout the Gaza periphery, the mission team found that there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred in multiple locations during the 7 October attacks, including rape and gang-rape in at least three locations, namely: the Nova music festival site and its surroundings, Road 232, and Kibbutz Re'im. In most of these incidents, victims first subjected to rape were then killed, and at least two incidents relate to the rape of women's corpses.



The mission team also found a pattern of victims, mostly women, found fully or partially naked, bound, and shot across multiple locations. Although circumstantial, such a pattern may be indicative of some forms of sexual violence, including sexualized torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

In other locations, such as kibbutz Kfar Azza, while circumstantial information may indicate some forms of sexual violence, the mission could not verify reported incidents of rape. In Kibbutz Be'eri, the mission team determined that at least two allegations of sexual violence, which had been widely reported in the media, were unfounded. These included the graphically publicized case of a pregnant woman whose womb had reportedly been torn open, before she was killed, and her fetus stabbed while still inside her. In relation to the Nahal Oz military base, the team was not able to verify a reported case of rape, nor did it find a discernible pattern of genital mutilation in either female or male soldiers, though forensic analysis revealed injuries to multiple body parts, including genitalia. Regarding genital mutilation overall, the mission team was not able to establish a discernible pattern.

Overall, the mission team is of the view that the true prevalence of sexual violence during the 7 October attacks and their aftermath, may take months or years to emerge and may never be fully known.

The mission team also visited Ramallah in the occupied West Bank to hear the views and concerns of Palestinian officials and civil society representatives in response to allegations of conflict-related sexual violence received by the mandate in the aftermath of the 7 October attacks, allegedly implicating Israeli security forces and settlers. Interlocutors raised concerns about cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of Palestinians in detention, including various forms of sexual violence in the form of invasive body searches, threats of rape, and prolonged forced nudity, as well as sexual harassment and threats of rape, during house raids and at checkpoints. This information will complement information already verified by other UN entities on allegations of CRSV in Gaza and the occupied West Bank for potential inclusion in the annual Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence.

In terms of recommendations, SRSG Patten encourages the Government of Israel to grant access to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel to conduct fully-fledged independent investigations into all alleged violations to complement and deepen the findings emerging from her mission. She calls on Hamas to immediately and unconditionally release all individuals held in captivity and to ensure their protection, including from sexual violence. The SRSG further calls on all relevant and competent bodies, national and international, to bring all perpetrators, regardless of rank or affiliation, to justice based on individual, superior and command responsibility. In this regard, she extends the support of her Office to enhance the capacity of the national authorities.

She also urges all relevant actors to uphold the highest standards of information integrity, including respect for safety and ethical principles in reporting of sexual violence cases, given the risks of inflammatory rhetoric and sensationalized headlines escalating



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tensions, as well as media and/or political pressure compounding trauma and stigmatization of survivors of sexual violence.

SRSG Patten echoes the calls of the Secretary-General for a humanitarian ceasefire and urges the inclusion of expertise on addressing conflict-related sexual violence to inform the design and implementation of all ceasefire and political agreements, stressing that the voices of women and affected communities should be heard in all conflict-resolution and peacebuilding processes.

She reiterates her profound sympathy and solidarity with all civilians affected by the brutal violence in the region since the 7 October attacks and urges a sustainable return to the path of peace.

For media inquiries, please contact:

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The mission report is available **XXXXXX**

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