

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**
Statement to the Security Council on Syria
New York, 28 July 2015

As delivered

Mr. President,

Distinguished members of the Security Council,

With much regret, my inaugural statement to the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria continues where my predecessor left off, chronicling yet another month of grim statistics to convey the horrors of a brutal conflict and the immense suffering of beleaguered civilians, particularly women, children, the elderly and those living with disabilities.

What began in Syria as unrest in March 2011 has transformed into a war characterized by the complete failure to protect civilians, generating gargantuan levels of suffering for most civilians. Since the adoption of resolution 2139 almost 18 months ago, each of the Secretary-General's reports have detailed the widespread violations of international humanitarian law and the inability or unwillingness of all parties to uphold their basic minimum legal obligations. This latest report is no different and comes, depressingly, as no surprise, highlighting how much worse the situation has become for so many civilians across Syria. 12.2 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance today. It is estimated that some 220,000 people have been killed in Syria since the start of the conflict.

Over the past weeks, Mr. President, violence has continued to escalate across the country, causing death and destruction, and complicating and severely impeding brave aid efforts. Indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks by all parties to the conflict, including through the use of barrel bombs and other explosive weapons in populated areas, remain by far the primary cause of civilian deaths and injuries. Not even residential neighbourhoods or places of community life – public markets, schools, hospitals and places of religious worship – are immune from attack. In the face of such violent, indiscriminate onslaughts, it is simply not difficult for each one of us to feel what that must be like for the Syrian people, community by community; it is, Mr. President, as you can imagine, the worst of all choices – either flee or be killed.

In early June, 60 civilians were killed and 120 injured when missiles were fired on the central market of Al Janudiya, west of Idlib city. Later that month, nine civilians, including six from the same family, were killed when mortar rounds from a non-State armed group hit the heart of a shopping area in Damascus city. In late June, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device near a mosque in Al Tel in Rural Damascus killed 14 civilians just after evening prayers had concluded. Attacks on medical facilities continued, with 14 attacks recorded in June, 12 of which were from airstrikes. Such attacks further degrade the capacity to provide medical care when and where it is most needed, and blatantly ignore the special protection afforded to medical facilities and personnel under international humanitarian law.

Over the last several weeks, the Government of Syria and allied forces have pressed their attack on Zabadani in Rural Damascus, leading to an unprecedented level of destruction and deaths among civilians. At the same time, non-State armed groups have threatened to overrun

two Government-held villages near Idlib city, Kefraya and Fouah. I remain extremely concerned about the 15,000 civilians caught in the middle of fighting in these areas. I have not included a specific number as the number of deaths cannot be verified and I have based this statement on the verified incontrovertible facts, and the clear conclusions, options and asks that flow from them.

Mr. President,

Intense fighting across the country has also caused a surge in displacement. Well over 100,000 people fled the southern areas of Al-Hasakeh city following ISIL's advances last month. In Ar-Raqqa Governorate, over 70,000 people had to flee as fighting escalated between ISIL and non-State armed groups. In southern Syria, over 40,000 people fled Dar'a city following an offensive by non-State armed groups launched on the city.

Altogether, over one million people have been displaced from their homes in 2015 so far, many for the second or third time; this adding to the 7.6 million people already internally displaced as of the end of 2014.

Another tragic milestone was recorded when the number of registered refugees reached four million in early July – the largest refugee population from a single conflict worldwide in over a quarter of a century. I commend the neighbouring countries who shoulder this extraordinary burden with remarkable generosity and hospitality, despite the destabilisation it brings. The international community must do more to support these refugee-hosting countries, as well as themselves receiving a higher share of those seeking safety.

Mr. President,

The parties to the conflict continue deliberately to cut essential services to civilians. In July, non-State armed groups cut the water supply in Aleppo city, affecting some 1.7 million people. Such acts, which are clear violations of international humanitarian law, only serve to worsen humanitarian conditions. Overall, water availability has been reduced by half around the country since the start of the conflict. Many people only have sporadic access for a few hours per day. The lack of access to clean water has resulted in a significant increase in water-borne diseases during the hot summer months, with thousands of cases of acute diarrhoea, Hepatitis A and typhoid reported as families can only drink unsafe water.

More broadly, the relentless conflict in Syria is gradually destroying the country's social and economic fabric, eroding the development gains made over several generations: 80 per cent of people living in poverty; rampant food insecurity amid rising prices; degradation of vital infrastructure and limited access to basic services; and families and community networks destroyed. Neither should we lose sight of the immeasurable human impact of this crisis, the trauma and emotional toll on civilians, particularly young people, too long exposed to living in a climate of violence and fear. This, Mr. President, will have profound implications for generations to come. A child born in 2011, entering school this year, will only know war. With the bombing of schools and the fear of young people, this is producing a completely lost generation of educated Syrians, which bodes ill for the future we all hope Syria will one day start rebuilding.

Mr. President,

Despite the difficult environment, United Nations organisations and NGOs operating from within Syria and from neighbouring countries support millions of people in need using all available modalities, including across borders pursuant to resolution 2165, which the Security Council united behind. In the first months of 2015, UN agencies and NGOs provided food assistance for 5.8 million people per month; medicine and supplies for nearly nine million treatments; water and sanitation support for almost five million people; and provided basic relief items, such as blankets, and other necessities of life, for nearly three million people.

With unimpeded access, Mr. President, imagine how many more millions could be reached.

But access is severely restricted – and of course to make a difference, it is vital that humanitarian organizations have the necessary resources to do their critical work. The response plan for Syria is only 27 per cent funded. I thank donors for the generous contributions so far, and urge them and others to step up their financial support to the humanitarian response effort. Until there is a political settlement, humanitarian needs will only grow.

Mr. President,

The courageous efforts of humanitarians to reach people with assistance should not hide the fact that widespread fighting, shifting conflict lines, and intentional obstacles and restrictions put in place by all parties continue to significantly hinder the delivery of aid to people in need in Syria. 77 humanitarian workers have been killed since the start of the conflict. A total of 32 United Nations Staff members, 28 of whom are UNRWA staff, continue to be detained or are missing.

Some 4.6 million people, around a quarter of the country's population, live in areas that remain extremely hard to reach for humanitarian actors. Of these, some 422,000 people are in areas that remain besieged by the parties. These people remain largely cut off from assistance and face a daily struggle to survive. In June, humanitarian actors were only able to bring assistance in one besieged area following an airlift of WHO medical assistance to areas of Deir ez-Zor city besieged by ISIL. That is less than 5 per cent of people in besieged areas. No other type of UN assistance was permitted into any other besieged area during June.

UN organisations and partners delivered medical supplies and treatments for over four million people in June, including over 350,000 treatments across conflict lines. But, there were some areas where these items were prevented from delivery, including to Talbiseh in Homs Governorate, where life-saving medical and surgical items were removed from aid convoys by Government authorities.

Some progress was made when the Government approved an additional number of inter-agency convoys in June. However, 45 convoy requests, including 33 made on 1 July, remain pending and I call upon the Government of Syria to positively consider and grant these requests. At a time when needs are deepening, we must have rapid, sustainable access to deliver essential humanitarian items to all people in need, in all parts of the country, without delay or hindrance. It is the obligation of all parties under international humanitarian law to facilitate this.

Mr. President,

In advance of my proposed visit to Damascus next month, I can only report on the verified facts – but the facts speak for themselves. I am shocked and outraged – Syria today, amongst sadly and appallingly an enlarging pool of humanitarian need and human misery across many parts of the world, but notably in this region, is the most acute, unrelenting and shameful blot on the world’s humanitarian conscience.

I hope that my proposed visit to Damascus next month will provide an opportunity to constructively engage with the Government to address some of the significant access challenges that seriously impede humanitarian operations and prevent ordinary Syrians from getting the assistance they so desperately need.

Carving out space to meet the humanitarian needs of Syria’s people is today’s imperative.

But, as we have said repeatedly to this Council, there are no humanitarian solutions to this crisis. Each day that passes without the parties upholding their most basic obligations to protect civilians, and the strong demands of this Council, only results in more lives lost; more people displaced; more people without access to basic services; and a generation of children who struggle to obtain an education or have any sense of a future for themselves. It is their innocent voices, their suffering that need advocating – as indeed it is my mandate, and thus all of us within the UN, to do.

A political solution is more urgent than ever to end this futile, hopeless cycle of brutality and violence. We must show the people of Syria that the world has not forgotten them or the plight of their country. I urge the Security Council to consider its options through their eyes, the eyes of the beleaguered, now long-suffering Syrian people.

Thank you.