

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief
Coordinator Stephen O'Brien, Remarks at the European Parliament on the
situation in Syria**

Brussels, 29 November 2016

As delivered

Honourable Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee,

Honourable Chairperson of the Development Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Parliament and its noble institutions are fundamental to the life of the European Union. It is a great pleasure and a real honour to address this Parliament through your renowned and respected committees and in so doing to reach the more than 500 million citizens who you represent across 28 Member States.

As a former parliamentarian and minister myself, I place a particularly high premium on the time I have now as an international civil servant to exchange with you. You give us the license to operate, and we need to account for and justify the significant resources you devote to us, paid for by your constituent taxpayers to whom you are accountable. Let me assert that there is no higher public investment than the meeting of humanitarian needs and emergency relief. As global citizens, we would hope to be supported if the positions were reversed. Let me take this opportunity up front to thank you for all you are doing to support the Syrian people.

Over more than half a decade of senseless and brutal conflict, the Syrian people have faced an onslaught of unspeakable violence. We have all seen the harrowing images of bombs and mortars raining down in recent weeks and months on schools, medical facilities, water and electric stations, public markets and IDP settlements across the country. Constant, tormenting images of people murdered, maimed, tortured and executed. Constant. Bombing in plain sight, night and day, day in and day out. The reports have been endless: barrel bombs, hellfire cannons, cluster munitions, chemical weapons, bunker-buster bombs, thermite bombs,

napalm, suicide bombs, mortars and rockets, snipers, double-tap attacks, rape, illegal detention, torture, child recruitment, medieval sieges of entire cities. Schools bombed. Hospitals bombed. Hundreds of thousands killed, and well over a million injured. Life expectancy in Syria has dropped by more than 20 years. Approximately half of the population has been displaced, 6.5 million of them inside the country, in addition to the half a million Palestinian refugees. Almost 5 million Syrians have fled the country, and much of the remaining population – some 13.5 million people – are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Eighty per cent of Syrians live in poverty, and nearly 9 million Syrians are food insecure amid rising prices and food shortages.

Nowhere is the reality of the Syrian tragedy worse than what is seen today in Aleppo, where an intense unleashing of military aggression is having truly devastating consequences for civilians. As you have heard me say before, Aleppo has become the apex of horror for the suffering of people. There are barely any functional hospitals left in eastern Aleppo to treat those who have escaped death, as all the hospitals are being bombed into oblivion. The entire city is affected by fighting, causing hundreds of civilian casualties. Airstrikes in the east and rocket and mortar attacks in the west are destroying civilian structures, forcing yet more people to flee for safety, their houses destroyed. Others are trapped by fighting and unable to move due to fear and insecurity.

Since July, 275,000 civilians, including 100,000 children, have been trapped in eastern Aleppo due to the siege tactics imposed on them by the Syrian Government and its allies. I have long called for a lifting of all sieges, which have become one of the most prevalent and insidious aspects of this merciless conflict. Yet this past year, we have seen the opposite. We have seen a massive increase in the use of besiegement, particularly by the Government of Syria. This time last year, the number of besieged people stood at 393,700. Six months ago it stood at 486,700. Today, we estimate that 974,080 people – nearly 1 million Syrians – are living under siege.

As I advocated for the Syrian people to the Security Council earlier this month, there is nothing subtle or complicated about the practice of besiegement. Civilians are being isolated, bombed and denied medical attention and food and other humanitarian assistance in order to force them to submit or flee. It is a deliberate tactic of cruelty to compound a people's suffering for political, military and in some cases economic gain, to destroy and defeat a civilian population that cannot fight back. Most violations are perpetrated monstrously by the one party, which is, the main duty bearer and which should be defending and protecting its own citizens.

Surely all of this should shake the moral conscience of the world. Surely the international community must question its humanity, when entire neighbourhoods of one of the world's oldest cities risk eradication. When the destruction of hospitals has become the new normal. When more than 100,000 children are

trapped in basements with nowhere else to hide. This is obscene. This callous carnage that is Syria has long moved from the cynical to the sinful. It is a chilling thought that these actions and levels of suffering happened under our noses, as only very limited international access has been granted or possible. The fact that this conflict has gone on for so long and with such devastating consequences is a stain on the world's collective conscience and the failure of politics at all levels.

Chairpersons of the Committees, Members of the European Parliament,

While the conflict inside Syria has shown us some of the worst in humanity, it has also in some ways brought out the best in many people. In my visits to Syria and the region, I have spoken to dozens of Syrians who have retained hope despite their desperation. I have witnessed the deep generosity of families in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and beyond who are sharing their modest accommodation with displaced families. I have met volunteers and staff of Syrian NGOs and grassroots organizations, of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, of civil defence teams, and the staff of hospitals, clinics and schools throughout the country who live and all too often die by their commitment to ensure the survival of their fellow citizens. And I have seen it in the thousands of United Nations staff, including my own OCHA staff, and humanitarian partners on the ground who risk danger every hour of the day to get help to people who need it most.

The UN and aid agencies are working day and night to assist millions of Syrians affected by this conflict month after month, whether from within Syria or through cross-border assistance. Despite almost impossible odds and conditions this year alone, we have reached up to 5.8 million people with food assistance each month. This assistance is delivered through regular programming and cross-line activities from Damascus, and cross-border assistance from Turkey and Jordan. In fact, since cross-border operations began over two years ago, the UN has conducted more than 420 cross-border convoys, or nearly four a week on average, delivering health assistance sufficient for 9 million people (including vaccinations for 2 million people), food for 3 million people, many of these deliveries on a monthly basis, non-food items for almost 3 million people, and water and sanitation supplies for over 2.5 million people.

Assistance has been delivered to various parts of Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia and Hama governorates from Turkey, and Dar'a and Quneitra governorates from Jordan. You need to know that your will and your resources have translated into successful humanitarian relief, saving and protecting millions of people.

But it is not enough, because the scale is so relentless and growing. Our efforts complement the critical role played by international and Syrian NGOs who provide assistance and services to millions more from neighbouring countries. We also continue to reach people via air. Since operations started several months ago, WFP has completed 153 airdrop rotations, dispatching 2,900 MT of food,

nutrition, health and WASH supplies over Deir Ez Zor city. The UN has also completed over 160 airlifts to Qamishly, delivering more than 5,700 MT of food, WASH, nutrition, education, shelter and NFI assistance on behalf of humanitarian actors, including 61,500 full food rations.

And just last night, brave humanitarian aid workers from the UN, ICRC and SARC delivered much-needed humanitarian assistance to 60,000 people in the four besieged towns: Madaya, Zabadani, Fuah and Kafraya. The delivery was made after countless renegotiations and outstanding coordination involving UN teams in Damascus, Geneva and Gaziantep. The heroic team on the ground returned at 12.30 am. This delivery is frankly one of the rare good-news items out of the nearly incessant deluge of cross-line delays, blockages and rejections. Every month we submit our monthly inter-agency convoy plans to the Government of Syria. Every month we encounter new bureaucratic challenges that need to be navigated. We have dealt with late approvals, approvals with restrictions on the number of beneficiaries, delays in clearing trucks at the warehouse, negotiations over routes, medical supplies removed or not approved, and additional clearances beyond the agreed two-step process. As a result, only a handful of inter-agency convoys were deployed each month since earlier this summer.

As you are well aware, Syrians fleeing the war and violence are now willing to risk everything aboard unseaworthy boats and dinghies to reach Europe. Of the 300,000 arrivals by sea in the Mediterranean so far in 2016, many of them are Syrians. These people have a right to seek asylum without any form of discrimination. Addressing the needs of these refugees may place a burden on Europe, but let's not forget: the total number of refugees in Europe pales beside the millions who are being hosted in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. In Lebanon, more than a quarter of the population is now made up of Syrian refugees; the equivalent number of refugees in France or the United Kingdom would be 15 million to 17 million. The equivalent number of refugees in Hungary or the Czech Republic would be 2 million to 3 million.

Syrian families are often living in total poverty, having exhausted their savings. Young children are forced to work; girls are forced into early marriage when they should be studying. They all have suffered immense emotional and physical traumas. Children in besieged eastern Aleppo were due to resume school in late September. They didn't. Instead, shell-shocked children are retrieved from rubble and left writhing in bloody clothes on dirty hospital floors. They are stuck in hideouts. They cannot play, they cannot sleep. Across the country, as you all know, one in four schools has ceased to function. More than 52,000 teachers have left their jobs. More than 2 million children have been forced out of school altogether. Another 2 million are at risk of dropping out as the horrors of this brutal and savage war continue unabated. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian children have become stateless, abandoned by the world, abandoned to face their

future alone. What future do these children have—illiterate, orphaned, malnourished and maimed? What future does a country have when its next generation is a lost generation?

They need our support, and so do the communities that are hosting them. We must take a holistic approach that recognizes the full spectrum of humanitarian needs, from caring for internally displaced people and refugees in neighbouring countries, to looking after refugees on the move, and supporting their resettlement in other parts of the world. This Parliament adopted resolutions on 6 October and 24 November. These resolutions are important. But we can, we must, do better. So if I may, let me be frank: we need to better fund the humanitarian response plans for Syria and the region. We need to urgently regain the momentum, from earlier this year, on protection and access. We need a cessation of all violence; an end to indiscriminate attacks that recklessly kill and injure civilians. We need all necessary action from the parties and their supporters to ensure safe, sustained, unhindered and unconditional humanitarian access. And we need an immediate end to the sieges, which still collectively punish hundreds of thousands of civilians mercilessly. Anything less than the full lifting of the sieges will never be enough and we cannot pretend otherwise. I call on all with influence over the parties to the conflict, I call on this Parliament, to use their influence to do their part to end these senseless cycles of violence once and for all and put an end to the slaughter in Syria.

The world needs a Europe of moral leadership; a Europe that commits - not just in words - to protecting the most vulnerable and providing assistance to those who are in need, those who face mass atrocities, those who face unspeakable sufferings. It is the sincere hope of all humanitarians that political differences are finally put aside that the international community comes together as one to stop this humanitarian shame upon us all – once and for all – by finally paving the path to peace in Syria.

I thank you.