



**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND  
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

**Statement to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria**

New York, 27 April 2017

*As delivered live from Geneva*

Ms. President,

On 15 April, the exhausted, oppressed people of Syria suffered yet another horrendous attack. Scared and starved men, women and children from the towns of Foah and Kefraya were targeted by a car bomb while stuck at a checkpoint in Rashadeen. There were 67 children among the 125 dead. Such a terrible price for those already robbed of so much. Yet I do not raise the incident solely because of the loss of life or depravity of the attackers. Rather, it was the unity of the humanitarian response to the attack that ought also to be in the headlines.

Humanitarians from all directions rushed in to save lives. Syrian Arab Red Crescent workers, first responders, medical NGO staff, some 15 Syrian NGOs along with countless civilians, bound together to aid survivors as best they could. Out of a deplorable terrorist act arose a testament to the strength of the Syrian spirit – of ordinary civilian Syrians coming together to help others, regardless of their background.

All too sadly, such glimmers of humanity, acts that we see everyday at a local level across Syria, are overshadowed by the sheer number and ferocity of attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, schools and markets. The last months have seen fighting continue to intensify on numerous fronts. The Secretary-General has said time and again that there will be no military end to this conflict. Yet, military might continues to be used against civilians in a way that defies all reason, let alone morality or the law. The use of abhorrent chemical weapons on 4 April in Khan Shaykhun is yet another horrific account of such brutality. I wish I could say mindless brutality – but no, it was deliberate, planned, predetermined, by other humans against their own fellow human beings, sheer unbridled cruelty by leaders and commanders. And we await the investigation to confirm which ones.



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Just a few days ago, two more hospitals were rendered inoperable after reported airstrikes that also led to the deaths and injury of civilians, including children. At least six hospitals and three schools have reportedly been impacted in April alone. I echo the call from our humanitarian coordinators that attacks against medical facilities are completely unacceptable and must stop. What purpose can the use of such military tactics bring? Well, certainly, not peace, nor any benefit to any Syrian. These gross tactics will only cause further human suffering; human suffering borne primarily by the civilian population and for which perpetrators must, and we are determined, be held to account – if not now, in the nearest future possible.

And beyond these attacks that have so shocked the world, as I said to you last month, I am also gravely concerned about the situation in besieged eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, where civilians remain trapped amid reports of relentless shelling, airstrikes, and ground fighting. The last informal access routes have reportedly been closed further restricting movement for the some 400,000 people who live in the area, and who the UN has been unable to access since October last year. Increased fighting has also resulted in displacement in northern Hama, where some 20,000 people have been displaced in recent days. In Idleb, airstrikes and shelling continues to kill civilians and damage civilian infrastructure. Just this week, a medical facility in Shinan village was reportedly struck by airstrikes, and in Khan Shaykhun, where the chemical attack occurred earlier in the month, its market was taken out by aerial bombardment that resulted in the death of seven civilians, including a child, and the wounding of 30 more.

In Raqqa, ongoing fighting has also led to deaths, injury and displacement. Some 39,000 newly displaced people fled fighting to join the tens of thousands already in camps outside Raqqa city, and more arrive every day. The situation for those in the camps is extremely difficult, with four out of five people lacking appropriate shelter, and now reports of the death of several children due to a lack of medical care. The UN and our NGO partners are responding from Qamishly, and there are plans to scale up the response in the coming days.

While insecurity causes the humanitarian situation to deteriorate for hundreds of thousands, access to provide them with life-saving support is challenged at every turn. I am concerned by the rise – I repeat rise – in administrative and other bureaucratic restrictions by all parties. For example, in the north-east of Syria, requirements for humanitarians to register with local authorities have been in place since March, which include provisions regarding NGOs recruitment policies and interference with procurement processes, amongst others. Further, since 4 April, local authorities have attempted to direct where assistance could be delivered. Such directing of assistance is contrary to the humanitarian principles. These wrongful attempted coercions have resulted in a pause in UN operations in Hasakeh governorate, affecting nearly 100,000 people. In Idleb, similar restrictions such as new registration demands, and requests for



## Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

information on, and interference in the staffing, logistics and finances of NGOs only penalise those most in need.

I will not repeat again the bureaucratic delaying tactics used by the Government of Syria to thwart humanitarian assistance at every turn, beyond saying that it continues to bring untold human suffering. As a result of these tactics and the ongoing insecurity, levels of access for inter-agency cross-line convoys are no greater than they were at this time last year. Only four convoys have deployed so far under the new two-monthly April-May plan, reaching 157,500 people. None of these convoys reached besieged areas, due to a lack of necessary authorizations. In fact, the only besieged people reached this year by land were the 6,000 people trapped in Khan al Shieh and the 60,000 in the four towns of Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya who were accessed separately through the objectionable, tit-for-tat Four Towns agreement. Deir ez-Zor, besieged by ISIL, continues to be reached by airdrops. I have said publicly that the failure to deliver is a stain on not just the parties to the conflict, but also to those in the international community, including this Council, as well as the members of the humanitarian task force of the International Syria Support Group, who have committed themselves to exercise their influence to improve humanitarian access, particularly to besieged areas.

Despite this challenge, the UN and humanitarian partners continue to relentlessly negotiate access as we have always done and wherever it is possible. Real progress is needed now, to stymie the tide of death and suffering inflicted on people day after day, month after month.

For many it is already too late. Inaction has played a part in material changes to the humanitarian landscape. As the noose has tightened around eastern Ghouta, some 30,000 people in the adjacent areas of Barza and Qaboun have also come under siege by the Government of Syria.

Significantly, however, we continue to see an overall reduction in the number of people besieged, due to the ‘starve and surrender’ tactics used primarily by the Government of Syria. Among others, thousands of people in Wadi Barada, Khan el Shieh, Al Wa’er in Homs city, and in the Four Towns referred to earlier have now been displaced as part of local agreements, which followed years of besiegement and intense airstrikes, shelling and sniping. Khan el Sheih and Zabadani have now been removed from the list of besieged locations. In fact Zabadani is now devoid of its civilian population. As a result of these changes, the number of people in besieged areas now stands at just over 620,000 people.

Although the overall number of those besieged is reducing, this process of evacuation must be misconstrued as a positive development. These evacuations are not in line with humanitarian principles, and are not conducted in consultation with the people affected. Let us not pretend that those who evacuate move to a location of safety. Many of those who displace to Idleb or



## Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

northern Aleppo continue to live in areas where civilian structures, including hospitals, come under regular aerial bombardment, and their access to basic goods such as food and shelter is limited. These civilians may no longer be besieged, but they have been forced to leave their homes and they continue to suffer.

Ms. President,

Given the shifting frontlines, all routes need to remain open to allow people safe passage, and for aid to reach people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes by the brave humanitarian aid workers. We have seen innovations of necessity successfully implemented through air drops to Deir ez-Zor and the air bridge to Qamishly. Now, with needs increasing in north-east Syria and more traditional routes inaccessible, an increasing number of UN partners are looking for alternatives. The number of international NGOs operating out of north-east Syria has nearly quadrupled in the last year, and is expected to grow further as needs continue to outstrip the assistance being provided. A land route from Aleppo to Qamishly to provide support to Raqqa is also being negotiated and explored.

The humanitarian situation is deteriorating, if that were possible, and the need for active engagement by members of the Council is urgently needed. The core needs of the Syrian people from the international community in general, and to those Member States seated at this Council in particular, remain largely unchanged. They include:

- A consolidation of the nationwide ceasefire, and in particular a pause in fighting in eastern Ghouta to enable the delivery of aid.
- The protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure by all parties to the conflict.
- The lifting of arbitrary and bureaucratic impediments by all parties throughout Syria. It is imperative that no country or group prevent people from moving in safety, and humanitarian organizations from accessing people in need wherever they are in Syria.
- A step-change in access to besieged and hard-to-reach locations is needed in order to ensure full implementation of UN inter-agency convoy plans, and to ensure delivery on the basis of humanitarian needs assessments.
- Also an end to the removal of medical items off of convoys.
- Immediate, unimpeded and sustained access to all in need throughout Syria. In particular, there must be an immediate lifting of all sieges.



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- Finally, there must be a political solution to the conflict, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué. As long as military tactics are prioritized over political there can be no lasting peace, and it will be the civilian population that is exposed to further needless suffering as a result.

Also, I would wish to say, it is now that we need action. As it is already too late for the more than a quarter million Syrians who have died already in this atrocious war. So, members of the Security Council it is action today that counts.

Thank you.