

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and
Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien**
**Remarks at the launch of the 2017-2018 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan and
presentation of the 2017 humanitarian response priorities**

Helsinki, Finland, 24 January 2017

As delivered

May I start by thanking Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and Finnish Minister of Foreign Trade and Development, Kai Mykkänen. Excellencies, Ministers, esteemed colleagues, it is a pleasure to be here with you today to highlight the humanitarian and protection priorities inside Syria for this year. My thanks in particular go out to the Government of Finland for hosting this event, alongside the organizing teams from UNDP, UNHCR and my own team at OCHA.

Close to six years on from the onset of violent conflict in Syria, the humanitarian and protection crisis there remains one of the most complex and volatile in the world. As plans for UN-facilitated peace talks move forward, civilians continue to be targeted in brutal attacks and besieged, with their basic rights to assistance and basic services denied.

Let me make it clear, humanitarian and protection needs inside Syria are not on the wane, but are at unprecedented levels in terms of their scale, severity and complexity.

Some 13.5 million men, women and children now urgently need protection and life-saving aid. Some 6.3 million people are internally displaced across Syria, many multiple times over and of whom 1 million are in camps or shelters. And we should recall that of the 430,000 Palestine refugees in Syria, some 95 per cent of them are in need of humanitarian assistance. All over Syria, civilians are suffering because they lack the most basic elements to live – they are denied food, water, warmth, medical supplies, winterization, WASH and other aid as a weapon of war.

Of those in need, close to 2 million are children under the age of five – infants and children who have known nothing but conflict and loss throughout their short lives. These children face a heightened risk of malnutrition, dehydration, diarrhoea, infectious diseases, and injury. Many need support after being exposed to traumatic events, violence and human rights abuses and violations.

In Syria today, 13 areas across the country are besieged, trapping some 643,780 people, including approximately 300,000 children, and denying them access to aid. This is down from 974,080 people besieged just a few weeks ago, largely before all those in formerly besieged neighbourhoods of east Aleppo city were evacuated. But there can be no let up

at this point - there should be no one left besieged in Syria. A further 3.9 million people - 40 per cent of them children - live in areas that are extremely difficult to reach with humanitarian assistance due to the fighting, insecurity and restricted access. We call, once again, for unconditional, unimpeded and sustained access to all of these people and to all who need aid to survive across Syria.

But let me say that due to the brilliant and brave work of so many, millions of Syrians are being reached nonetheless every month. Lives are being saved; they are being protected. But all of us engaged in meeting immediate needs know it is insufficient for those levels of needs and the difficulties and the barriers continually put in the way of the UN and all our partners in delivering humanitarian relief.

Syria is one of the largest protection crises of our times. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed, and parties to the conflict continue to carry out violations of human rights, with women and children particularly vulnerable to exploitation - including breaches of international humanitarian law.

Beyond the indiscriminate and targeted attacks against civilians themselves, the essentials of civilian life such as hospitals, schools, markets, electricity and water networks have also not been spared in this conflict. For instance, some 5.5 million people in Damascus and surrounding areas – equal to the entire population of Finland - have been cut off from their main water source since late December due to the ongoing fighting. Another 1.8 million people in and around Aleppo are facing today a similar hardship as water access there has also been cut since mid-January.

We are now concluding a 2017 humanitarian response plan with an estimated ask of US\$3.4 billion. The plan sets out the framework within which the humanitarian community will respond to the humanitarian and protection needs of 13.5 million Syrian men, women and children in 2017. It follows a rigorous inter-agency prioritization exercise undertaken across and within all sectors and across the hubs. While discussions are ongoing with the Syrian Government on the plan, we remain squarely focused on delivering humanitarian assistance to all those in desperate need across Syria by whichever means possible, including regular programmes, cross-line convoys, cross-border shipments, and air operations.

Unless these additional funds are promptly secured, the UN and its partners will have to scale back life-saving assistance, not only for Syrians but also refugees and host communities, with catastrophic consequences. It will force families to try to survive with inadequate food intake; it will stop short nutrition programmes to bring babies back to health; it will mean families having to sleep without even plastic sheeting to protect them. And yes, to pick up on the Prime Minister and the Minister, we must keep women and girls front and centre in all of our planning and our operations.

These funds need to be disbursed early so that aid agencies can plan their operations in advance, can allocate funds where they are most needed, and provide a level of operational consistency.

And if I may, let me say here I think for all of us here in this room, and take a moment to praise the courage and steadfast commitment and action of aid workers. Be they in the UN, in all the implementing partners, in the international NGOs, the local NGOs in Syria, indeed those operating from outside Syria, the local community groups, the CSOs. It is their safe access to reach the people in need that we are focused on and it is their courage we depend upon.

The Central Emergency Response Fund continues to be a vital enabler of effective, timely and life-saving humanitarian action, helping front-line partners reinforce emergency activities to displaced people and host communities. In 2015-2016, close to 70 per cent of CERF's total contributions targeted operations to help displaced people and the communities hosting them. Since 2011, CERF has allocated over US \$217 million to support displaced people in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

We are at a critical juncture. The public dialogue and rhetoric around Syria, the refugees and host communities is changing. We cannot rely on the narratives we have been using to elicit public empathy. Above all, we cannot let an erroneous perception that the crisis in Syria is somehow "over" distort the reality that the crisis remains widespread, severe and ongoing for millions of Syrians. And it will do even if a lasting peace was to break out today.

This is a crisis that continues to test our shared humanity and our commitment to the protection of those in dire need in horrific circumstances.

Without a political solution to the Syria conflict, intense and widespread hostilities will likely persist in 2017. Unless the political solutions address the amplitude of the horrors of the past six years and pave the way to an inclusive peace, we will likely see similar scales of displacements, worsening socio-economic conditions, strained inter-communal relations, and deepening vulnerabilities and protection concerns.

As I described it to the Security Council, the apex of horror which was the siege of the eastern districts of Aleppo city may have disappeared from the public consciousness and indeed nightly from our television screens around the world – but we must not let the needs, the lives and the futures of all those who remain besieged or out-of-reach fade from the world's conscience. Complacency, averting our gaze, shutting our ears or just feeling exasperated that there is still no respite, no resolution, no future, or indeed, for many, no hope; they are our real dangers and the highest risks to the surviving people of Syria - inside Syria and those beyond its borders, who one day may want to come home. So let this room send out that flaring beacon of hope. We haven't forgotten. We won't forget. From Helsinki, we, the international community and the local people, call on the world that now is the time to intensify and grow our support for the Syrian people and their chance of hope.

Thank you.

