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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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

**STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA**  
**New York, 23 June 2016**

*Checked against delivery*

Mr. President,

We meet today in the shadow of Jo Cox's murder last Thursday: a brilliant British MP killed in the line of her public duty just days before her 42nd birthday, leaving a husband and two very young children. A loss to all of us and particularly to the innocent people of Syria, who never met her but for whom she worked relentlessly, courageously, effectively. And working with the local brave NGO, the White Helmets. She was a humanitarian to her core. Jo was one of the greatest advocates for this long destructive, senseless war to stop – and stop immediately. That is what Afin said to me in the Reyhanli hospital near Hatay in Turkey on the Syrian border near the Bab al Hawa crossing when I was there the other day. He is a White Helmet working in Syria who had just lost his leg from below the knee in an IED explosion and was trying to get used to his prosthesis. Jo took his message to the House of Commons and to this Security Council chamber. She joined politics to speak truth to power, fearlessly, to you the Security Council.

I dedicate this statement to Jo, to her values, to her inspiration – and above all her call for peace, in Syria, now.

There is something fundamentally wrong in a world where attacks on hospitals and schools, on mosques and public markets, on ethnic, religious and confessional groups, have become so commonplace that they cease to incite any reaction. Month after month, indeed year after year, we have each spoken about ending the carnage, and about the importance of justice and the need for accountability in Syria. Syrians have begged for action, like Dr. Mazin as I reported to you last month, simply said from his hospital bed “please, peace”, and cried for justice. And yet, the world continues to watch Syria disintegrate into bloodshed. In many parts of the country, violence continues unbridled as parties seemingly fail to grasp that there can be no military solution to this conflict. Civilian neighbourhoods are pummelled. Medical and other healthcare facilities are destroyed. Education is disrupted and livelihoods are devastated. And wouldn't each and every one of you try to flee as well?

The latest report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, issued on 16 June, notes that in the east, the terrorist group ISIL has committed

genocide as well as multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Yazidis. The report describes the thousands of Yazidis held captive in Syria where they are subjected to unimaginable horrors, the Yazidi women who continue to be sexually enslaved and the Yazidi boys, who are indoctrinated, trained and used in hostilities. Thousands of Yazidi men and boys are missing.

In the northwest, in Aleppo Governorate, an ISIL offensive on Azaz and the surrounding area led to numerous civilian casualties, threatening up to 200,000 civilians. In addition, since the beginning of the anti-ISIL offensive in Menbij, 45,000 people have been displaced and 65,000 others are now encircled by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Moreover, airstrikes and shelling increased on the Castello road, the only remaining access route for non-State armed group areas of Aleppo, and the adjacent villages of Anadan, Hritan, Kafr Hamra and Khan al-Assal, risking again the complete encirclement of the area and the entrapment of more than 300,000 civilians. Imprecise weaponry, notably the unrelenting use of barrel bombs by Government forces, has resulted in hideous loss of life. For example, in Darayya – now dubbed “Syria’s capital of barrel bombs” – dozens of barrel bombs have reportedly been dropped during the last few weeks alone. Much has been said about the use of these weapons, but let me repeat: their use in this manner constitutes indiscriminate attacks. Their sole purpose is to terrorize and punish the civilian population. All attacks against civilians and civilian objects, as well as the indiscriminate use of weapons in populated areas, including shelling and aerial bombardment, must end. They must end now. And Mr. President, before anyone tries to suggest that this is not the truth, these barrel bombs are documented facts, indisputable facts, for which, however long it takes, the decision-makers and perpetrators will be held to account one day.

Mr. President,

This cruel conflict continues to tear families apart and inflicts brutal suffering on the innocent. Just last week, at least six children were killed and tens of others injured in heinous attacks near the Sayidda Zeinab shrine, south of Damascus, as well as on a public market in Idlib. Millions more are in the line of fire, facing crushing poverty and alarming physical danger. Children have been forcibly detained: they have been tortured, subjected to sexual violence, and in some cases executed. Childhoods have been lost as ISIL and some non-State armed groups have targeted children for recruitment into their forces.

How much longer will the children of Syria have to suffer like this? How much longer will we tolerate the utter disregard of the most basic precepts of humanity – the complete disrespect of international law and indeed this Council’s resolutions? On 3 May, you unanimously adopted Resolution 2286 on the protection of the wounded and sick, medical personnel and humanitarian personnel in armed conflict. And yet, since then, the United Nations and its partners have received reports of dozens of new attacks. Documentation from Physicians for Human Rights, received in late April, identified 365 attacks on 259 medical facilities as well as the deaths of 738 medical personnel. Of these attacks, the Syrian Government forces were reportedly responsible for at least 289 attacks (more than 76%), resulting in an estimated 667 medical personnel killed. Moreover, since 1 May, the UN and its partners have received reports of many more attacks on medical and other healthcare facilities. This includes the destruction, on 23 May, of a hospital in Tartous, as well as the attacks, on 8 June, on three medical facilities in Aleppo: the Al Bayan and

Al Hakeem hospitals, within a distance of 300 metres, and the Abdulhadi Fares clinic, all in the eastern part of the city. Again, facts – all facts, undeniable facts.

The UN's Special Rapporteur on the right to health, Dainius Pūras, recently warned – and I quote – that “medical units are being damaged and destroyed in large numbers throughout Syria, revealing what has become a repugnant hallmark of this horrific conflict. The sheer number of such facilities being hit, as well as information relating to some of the incidents, suggests that some hospitals and other medical facilities may have been directly targeted.” [End quote.]

I am also gravely concerned, Mr. President, about the situation at the berm along the Jordanian border, where the number of asylum seekers has increased exponentially, in recent months, tripling to a current estimate of over 70,000 people. The population at the berm includes high numbers of extremely vulnerable people. Over half are children. UNHCR estimates that the population will top 100,000 by the end of the year. Moreover, the security situation at the berm has deteriorated considerably, as was painfully illustrated on Tuesday when at least six Jordanian soldiers were killed during an attack on a nearby border guard post. This attack took place close to a waiting area for Syrians hoping to gain entry into Jordan.

Surely all of this should shake the moral conscience of the world? Surely the international community must question its humanity, when religious, ethnic and confessional communities risk eradication, when IDP settlements are no longer safe from bombardment, when refugees and migrants drown in the Mediterranean by the thousands, and – to quote UNICEF – when “babies have to be taken out of incubators because of attacks on hospitals”. This is obscene. This is not a world we should nor can accept.

Mr. President,

UN agencies and NGO partners continue their tireless efforts to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the Syrian population.

The June plan for humanitarian access was submitted on 19 May and sought access to 1.1 million people in 34 locations. On 2 June, an initial response was received from Syrian authorities. Of the 34 locations to which access was sought, 16 locations were granted full access, 13 partial access, meaning that items such as food were not authorized or that the number of people we were authorized to deliver to was below our estimate of actual people in need, and 5 not granted any access. Following a second round of consultations, on 6 June the previously excluded town of Al Wa'er was granted partial access and partial approvals for Darayya and Douma were expanded, to include food for some beneficiaries.

As regards besieged areas in particular, following intense negotiations at various levels for access to besieged areas requested under the June plan, the United Nations received approvals to reach 15 by land, either in full or to part of the population in need. I should also note that during the month the total number of besieged areas was revised downward, as Zabdin was retaken by the Syrian Government. This leaves a total of 18 locations besieged. The only besieged location requested but not approved under the June Plan is Zabadani in Rural Damascus. Zabadani is included in what is known as “the Four Towns Agreement” and as I stated earlier, any delivery to those towns continues to be planned and implemented under that framework. Requests for the

other two besieged areas – Yarmouk and Deir-ez-Zor – are not under the convoy plan but are covered by UNRWA and WFP-led airdrops respectively, both of which continue.

Mr. President,

As I speak, inter-agency convoys are delivering much needed multi-sector assistance to Jirud, in Rural Damascus and Sheikh Maqsoud, a neighbourhood in the city of Aleppo, which has been the subject of constant shelling in the past months. This is the first of a multi-phase delivery to bring food, as well as nutrition items, health, hygiene and other humanitarian supplies for some 22,500 beneficiaries. On 19 June, a UN/SARC convoy proceeded to Kafr Batna sub-district, providing food and health assistance for 25,000 beneficiaries in two besieged locations, Ein Terma and Hamouria, as well as three hard-to-reach communities, namely Hazeh, Beit Sawa, and Eftreis. On 16 June, a UN/SARC convoy delivered food, health, nutrition, NFI, WASH and agricultural assistance for 50,000 beneficiaries in Afrin and neighbouring towns in Aleppo Governorate. That same day, an inter-agency convoy delivered humanitarian assistance to 37,500 residents in the besieged neighbourhood of Al Waer in Homs. A follow-up convoy is planned in the coming days, pending Government approval. Together, these convoys to Al Waer will provide food, medicine, health, nutrition, WASH and emergency supplies for 75,000 people.

Earlier this month, a UN/SARC convoy delivered food, health, nutrition, WASH and NFI materials for 33,500 beneficiaries in Al Dar-Alkabirah, Tier Mallah and Ghanto in northern Rural Homs. In addition, on 10 June, the UN and its partners completed the first of a multi-phase delivery to bring food for 24,000 people, as well as nutrition items, health, hygiene and other humanitarian supplies for some 40,000 people in Douma. The day before, on 9 June, the UN and its partners delivered food, nutrition, health and medical, WASH and education assistance to Darayya, as a follow up to the 1 June convoy that delivered health supplies including vaccines and certain nutritional supplies for children. This was the first time that the UN and SARC were able to deliver supplies to Darayya in four years. Moreover, on 1 and 3 June, interagency convoys were deployed to Moadamiya to deliver food and health, nutrition supplies for 45,000 people.

Mr. President,

Despite the continued best efforts of the United Nations and our humanitarian partners on the ground to reach all those in need in communities across Syria, the realities of the ongoing conflict and the continued interference and intransigence of the parties to the conflict present serious challenges to our ability to do so. The limitations by the Syrian authorities placed upon access in terms of where, who and how much aid can be delivered continues to render assistance to some communities quite simply a non-starter, and is compounded by those same authorities then making every effort to delay, distract and dismantle convoys as we are attempting to undertake our work. Organizing the delivery of aid must remain the responsibility of the UN and its partners based on need, and not subject to political or other considerations.

We must understand that the delivery of aid is not a simple matter of pointing a truck in the right direction in the morning and hoping for the best. Security issues are a minute-by-minute concern for those on the ground organising humanitarian convoys, trying to calculate the safest, most

efficient way through a nightmarish conflict situation, this requires extraordinary and brave people. In the most optimal conditions, it is a complex undertaking. In Syria – when presented with the reality of the conditions I’ve described today and every month during an active and volatile conflict - it seems a Herculean challenge fraught with danger, conducted by extraordinary and brave people – whose work we must make safer, not ever more dangerous, by allowing them the space to negotiate without this glare of publicity attending their every move. It is not one, however, at which we can afford to fail. I call on all with influence to continue to pressure the authorities to allow unrestricted humanitarian access, free from interference.

Mr. President,

Since January this year, some 844,325 people have been reached by the UN and its partners through inter-agency cross-line convoys. This includes 334,150 of the some 590,200 people living in besieged areas as designated by the United Nations, some more than once. While this certainly represents progress and is welcomed, it is but a trickle compared to the level of protection concerns, needs and suffering in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Moreover, following careful review, we now estimate that some five million people are living in hard-to-reach areas, an increase of over 900,000 people from the previous estimate. This large increase is based on several factors, but primarily the inclusion of areas in parts of Aleppo, Raqqa and Hasakeh governorates as a result of insecurity, as well as constrained access for humanitarian actors both from within Syria as well as via cross-border operations. It is therefore vital that the stuttering momentum sustained on humanitarian access over the past few months continues and improves, and is significantly expanded into the second half of this year.

The key now is to turn these requests and approvals to besieged and hard-to-reach locations into full and sustained humanitarian deliveries to all Syrians in need. The team on the ground is working day and night to make this a reality, including negotiating with the Syrian authorities to turn partial approvals into full approvals and to put an end to the removal of medical supplies, which continues. By the end of this month, hopefully we will have been able to reach all besieged locations. Be assured, if given the full approvals to all areas, the UN and its partners do have the capacity to step up and fulfil those needs, so long as the funding is flowing as cash, not just the words of pledges.

We have also submitted the July access plan now to the Syrian authorities, we did that on 19 June, requesting access to reach 1,220,750 beneficiaries in 35 besieged, hard-to-reach and cross-line priority locations. This must be approved in full and without any conditions. We also need the parties to the so-called “Four Towns Agreement” to end the tit-for-tat, so as to ensure that approved convoys can proceed and that civilians in need of medical treatment can timely access for healthcare. In order for that to happen, and to ensure sustained access in the weeks and months to come, we will require the continued support of the Security Council, the ISSG and Member States. And we need to continue to support our brave NGO partners working tirelessly in besieged and hard-to-reach locations, whose ongoing programmes are absolutely vital to complement the important efforts of the UN and SARC in reaching people in need.

Mr. President,

As I have said numerous times before, we remain committed and ready to deliver aid – through any possible modality including air drops – for civilians in desperate need, whoever and wherever they are. The bottom line, however, is that the real extent of the progress cannot only be measured by *ad hoc* deliveries to besieged communities. That dozens of barrel bombs were reportedly dropped on 10 June in Darayya – the day after the United Nations and the SARC delivered the first food aid to the town since November 2012 – shows that the situation for people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas will not be solved by humanitarian aid delivery alone. The real measure will be when the sieges, these medieval sieges, are no more, when boys don't risk sniper fire when bringing medicine to their mothers, when doctors can administer lifesaving treatments without the fear of imminent attacks, when Yazidi girls don't have to scratch their faces out of fear of being bought and sexually enslaved. That is the disgusting reality in Syria today.

Mr. President, distinguished members of the Council,

While the ultimate responsibility lies with the Syrian parties, future generations will judge harshly the inability of the international community to save and protect civilians in Syria.

I thank you, Mr. President.