

ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS
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GENERAL ASSEMBLY INFORMAL MEETING ON SYRIA

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On behalf of the USG for humanitarian affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, I thank you for this opportunity to brief the General Assembly on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

During the three years of the conflict, the death toll has reached well over 100,000 many months ago and over 680,000 have been injured. And the relentless violence and brutality continues. More than 9.3 million people are in need of assistance inside Syria, including at least 6.5 million who are internally displaced. Just this month, an estimated 500,000 people were forced to leave eastern Aleppo City and rural Aleppo following intense fighting in the area. With the situation becoming increasingly dire, the number of people fleeing Syria continues to grow, with a crippling impact on the host communities in the neighboring countries that are bearing an enormous burden -- as the High Commissioner for Refugees has powerfully presented.

Despite constant calls for the parties to the conflict to abide by international humanitarian law, violations are reported on a daily basis. Civilians are under fire and the social fabric has been torn to shreds, with reports of horrific human rights violations including sexual and gender-based violence. International humanitarian and human rights law continues to be flagrantly violated by all parties to the conflict.

Every day we hear of indiscriminate attacks, the use of heavy weapons, aerial bombings, including the use of barrel bombs, mortars and car bombs in densely populated areas. Last week, on 18 February, at least 18 people were killed, including five Palestinian refugee school children and an UNRWA staff member, when an explosive struck near UNRWA's Zeitoun school in Muzeirib, as already mentioned by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Just eight days earlier, an explosion injured 40 school children at another UNRWA school in the same town.

It is unacceptable that international humanitarian and human rights law continues to be flagrantly violated by all parties to the conflict. All parties are failing in their responsibility to protect civilians.

Mr. President,

The long-term trauma and emotional impact of this humanitarian catastrophe for future generations of Syrians are chilling. Nearly 4.3 million children in Syria are affected by the conflict and more than 1.2 million more have been forced out of Syria as refugees. Children have been killed, arrested, abducted, tortured, mutilated, sexually abused, and recruited by armed groups. They have been used as human shields. They are malnourished. Syria is in danger of losing a generation of its children.

Essential infrastructure has been destroyed and militarised by parties to the conflict, including more than 4,000, or 18 percent of Syria's 22,000 schools. Healthcare has collapsed. Sixty-four per cent of the country's 91 public hospitals have been severely affected by the conflict with 40 per cent out of service. Water supply has decreased by 50 per cent from pre-crisis levels. Even Syria's ancient cultural heritage has not been spared. Many of its sites have been used for military purposes and attacked and irreparably damaged, taking a part of our shared human history with them.

These numbers grow every day and have become routine news. Perhaps they no longer shock, but they must. It is critical that we remember that behind each number is a family; a child whose life has been ended or devastated.

Mr. President,

Despite the insecurity and lack of access, humanitarian workers continue to do their utmost to help the 9.3 million people in need throughout the country.

Since the onset of the crisis, over fifty humanitarian workers have been killed, including 15 UN staff and 34 Syrian Arab Red Crescent staff and volunteers. Just two weeks ago, United Nations and SARC workers were shelled when carrying out a humanitarian operation inside the Old City of Homs. All parties to the conflict should be reminded that it is a war crime to fire on those carrying out humanitarian operations. The perpetrators must be held accountable.

Despite the worsening security environment, United Nations agencies and partners remain committed to staying and delivering in Syria. They continue to reach millions of people with life-saving assistance day after day. WFP now reaches almost four million people each month, half of whom are in opposition-held or contested areas. UNICEF and partners' interventions enabled around 10 million people to get safe water across the country in 2013. UNHCR and partners have provided core relief items to 4.8 million people. UNICEF supported a 'Back to Learning' campaign delivering school supplies to 1.5 million conflict-affected children. UNRWA is assisting the nearly 500,000 Palestine refugees in Syria with health, education and food assistance. UNFPA has assisted 1.8 million women with emergency reproductive health care while WHO and other health partners helped 3.6 million with consultations and treatments. WHO and UNICEF continue supporting a national campaign against polio, as Dr. Chan mentioned.

Delivery through cross-line inter-agency convoys to hard-to-reach areas continues. Since January 2013, 58 cross-line convoys delivered one-off assistance to hard-to-reach areas providing some aid to millions of people, over half in opposition-held or contested areas.

Yet, each convoy carries assistance for only a few thousand people, falling far short of covering all the needs in these hard-to-reach areas. Despite our best efforts to scale up the response, there

are still 3.3 million people in urgent need of assistance in hard-to-reach-areas that we cannot reach systematically. As fighting continues and conflict lines shift, we fear many more will become trapped. 240,000 people are already besieged by either the Government or the opposition, some of whom have been cut off from aid for two years. They are desperate for help and an escape from the constant fighting, shelling, and snipers. Parties to the conflict must facilitate safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance to all people in need, including in hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

Despite persistent requests and negotiations, we have had only very limited improvement in the past months in reaching those besieged. Agreement between the parties last month allowed UNRWA to deliver assistance to over 6,800 Palestine refugee families and the Palestine Red Crescent and SARC to evacuate hundreds of people from Yarmouk camp. But regular and sustained access is needed.

The recent humanitarian operation in the besieged Old City of Homs allowed the evacuation of close to 1,400 civilians and the provision of assistance to 2,500 people who had been trapped in the area since late 2012. Workers saw the scale of devastation. The people who left Homs are thin, malnourished and traumatized. Our colleagues reported the destruction of the Old City with not a single building left unscathed. The hospital in Homs has extremely limited medical supplies and staff and no equipment. It was described as a place to die, not a place to be saved.

The operation in the Old City of Homs was a breakthrough for the few thousand people evacuated and assisted after such a long siege. But it is only a very small piece of the larger horrific picture of devastation. Action to facilitate humanitarian access and the delivery of aid is urgent.

Mr. President,

In addition to improved security, there is also a need to address the remaining administrative challenges that will allow for a scaling up of assistance. While we have had some limited progress, much more needs to be done so that humanitarian organisations can bring the staff and expertise to deliver more help to more people.

The Syrian authorities must also take action to bring down the bureaucratic obstacles to the delivery of humanitarian goods, including medical and surgical supplies, to all in need throughout the country through the most effective, efficient and direct routes. Opposition groups – some of which have openly threatened aid workers – must also allow access and guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers and must not politicize aid deliveries.

Mr. President,

We are in a race against time. More people are slipping out of our reach as the conflict intensifies and armed groups fragment and more battle lines are drawn.

We desperately need a political solution to the conflict in Syria. Yet while a political solution is in the making, we must do all we can to drastically expand the course of humanitarian action in Syria today.

Civilians must be protected and able to receive the assistance they need. Parties that fail to uphold their international legal obligations, including the protection of civilians, must be held accountable for their action, and inaction.

Mr. President,

Just few days ago, the Security Council adopted a landmark resolution on the humanitarian situation in Syria. In doing so, it reiterated its unanimous recognition that the status quo is wholly unacceptable and aid must reach those in need. It is our hope, the hope of all humanitarians, that the Council will maintain its unity in ensuring its prompt implementation.

Ordinary Syrians, who have suffered and lost too much already, must be protected and assisted. More than anything the conflict needs to end so that people can begin to rebuild their lives.

Thank you very much.