

United Nations



Nations Unies

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
DEPUTY EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, KYUNG-WHA KANG**

SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING ON SYRIA

New York, 15 January 2016

Checked against delivery

Mr. President,
Distinguished members of the Security Council,

On behalf of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Stephen O'Brien, I have the honour to deliver the following statement on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

For more than four years, the humanitarian community, including United Nations agencies and NGO partners, has sounded the alarm about the impact of Syria's conflict on ordinary men, women and children. We have written scores of reports, given numerous briefings and made countless statements describing the brutality, desperation and destitution facing Syria's people. We have requested, called for, insisted and even demanded that the conflict be brought to an end, that civilians be protected from the relentless violence and access be granted for life-saving humanitarian assistance. Our requests have mostly gone unanswered and the people of Syria continue to live in a nightmarish reality dictated by a conflict that respects few rules and obeys no laws.

In recent days, the Syrian town of Madaya has shocked the world's conscience with harrowing images of malnutrition and hunger. Regrettably, siege and starvation as a weapon of war has become routine and systematic in Syria, with devastating consequences for civilians. The barbarity of this tactic cannot be overstated. By besieging civilian towns and villages the parties to the conflict have launched a vicious war on ordinary men, women and children, with callous indifference for their lives, health and well-being. A siege that denies people access to the basic necessities of life is unlawful, unacceptable and unconscionable. There can be no reason or rationale, no explanation or excuse, for preventing aid from reaching people in need. It is a grave violation of international law and it must stop immediately.

The primary responsibility for this suffering lies with the party maintaining a siege. It is, however, shared by those that conduct military activities in or from populated areas, thereby using civilians as shields and placing them in harm's way. As the Secretary-General pointed out in his statement to the General Assembly yesterday, all sides, including the Syrian Government, which has the primary responsibility to protect the Syrian people, are committing atrocious acts prohibited under international humanitarian law.

Tragically, the situation in Madaya is not unique. Around 400,000 people in Syria are trapped in areas besieged by the various parties to this conflict. This includes towns and villages besieged by ISIL, by Government and allied forces, and by non-state armed groups and the Al Nusra Front. More broadly, the United Nations estimate that 4.5 million people reside in areas in Syria that are hard-to-reach, subject to various forms of restrictions on the movement of people and goods that severely limit their access to services and assistance. In addition to conflict and insecurity, this includes the deliberate obstruction of or delays in the delivery of aid, as well as the denial or removal of certain relief items, such as medical or surgical supplies, from aid convoys.

Mr. President,

The United Nations and its partners, including ICRC, SARC and NGOs, have worked tirelessly for over four years to bring life-saving assistance to people in need across Syria. In 2015, this included, for example, food assistance for over 6 million people on average each month, safe drinking water for over 8 million people, non-food items for over 4.8 million people and nutrition interventions for over 1.6 million people, many of them children. This week, on the 11 and 14 of January, inter-agency convoys comprised of 130 trucks reached the towns of Madaya, Foah and Kafraya with urgent assistance for over 60,000 people, including food and nutritional support, medicines and medical equipment, and non-food items. Separately, the third part of a series of convoys brought assistance to over 37,000 people in Al Waer in Homs Governorate. Further assistance is scheduled to reach the areas later this week. These and other aid deliveries have saved thousands of lives, often at great cost; more than 80 humanitarian workers have been killed since the conflict began and many others remain missing.

In some cases, simply bringing assistance to people in need is not enough. In Madaya, the siege has resulted in conditions so severe that people have lost their lives and many others currently suffer severe acute malnutrition, which – if left untreated – may result in death. Teams on the ground are working on multiple tracks to provide urgent treatment on site, conduct screening to identify critical cases and, where required, negotiate for the timely medical evacuation of patients. At present, almost 390 patients have been screened, 9 have been evacuated together with their family members and at least 19 others are in need of urgent evacuation. The United Nations has requested an approval for their immediate and unconditional transfer to a safe place for treatment and for sustained access for medical and humanitarian partners to the area.

While these developments are positive and welcome, they are a trickle. In 2015, the United Nations was able to reach less than three per cent of population of besieged areas on average with assistance in any given sector; in 2014, the figure was less than five per cent. Throughout the year, 80 requests for inter-agency cross line convoys to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, out of a total of 113, went unanswered. This week, the United Nations submitted requests for further inter-agency convoys to bring life-saving assistance to besieged and hard-to-reach communities across the country. These requests and other outstanding requests must be approved as a matter of urgency and without further delay. Similarly, the slow and bureaucratic procedures that have been imposed on humanitarian operations in Syria must be simplified and streamlined. Food, water and medicine are not bargaining chips or favors that the parties to a conflict can grant or deny at will; they are basic necessities that lie at the very essence of survival and the right to life, which this Council and its Members have a responsibility to protect. You cannot let more people die under your watch.

Mr. President

As highlighted by the Emergency Relief Coordinator to this Council this last Monday, there is no alternative to a political, negotiated solution to this desperate conflict. This Council and all relevant stakeholders, in particular those that support the warring parties, must put their differences aside and place Syria on a firm path to peace.

In the meantime, may I reiterate the Under-Secretary-General's call – on behalf of the humanitarian community and all people in need – that the parties to the conflict immediately end the practice of siege and starvation and fully adhere to the international humanitarian law and this will require:

- Facilitating full, unhindered, unconditional and sustained access to all people in need, including in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, for all types of assistance, including medical and surgical supplies.
- Allowing freedom of movement for civilians, of all ages, to enter and exit besieged and hard-to-reach areas in safety and dignity, and permit the immediate medical evacuation of sick and wounded patients to a safe place for treatment.
- Protecting civilians from any form of violence, including targeted or indiscriminate attacks, as well as the use of explosive weapons or landmines in populated areas, at all times.

Thank you.