



**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, 30 March 2017

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Mr. President, Distinguished Members of the Security Council,

The Syrian conflict has entered its seventh year and we have all borne witness to one of the largest man-made humanitarian and protection crises in the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and millions more injured. Over five million people have fled and are now living as refugees. Crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed by all parties time and again, as the Commission of Inquiry attested to earlier this month. In Syria, there is not a man, woman or child from any walk of life who hasn't been impacted by the particular wretchedness of this particularly gruesome and protracted conflict. Syrians have watched huge parts of their historic and proud country reduced to rubble. The building blocks of civilian life have been gradually destroyed, including bakeries, water stations, hospitals, schools, and places of worship.

The parties gathering in Geneva this week – and those around this table today – surely understand the huge responsibility on their shoulders to bring this Syrian nightmare to an end after years of political intransigence. I cannot emphasize enough how high the stakes are. The Syrian people need to see a tangible improvement in their daily lives because, quite frankly, it is they who have borne the brunt of this conflict. It is my hope, and the hope of every humanitarian, to see the current political process succeed and we are fully behind the Secretary-General, his Special Envoy de Mistura and his team.

While we rightly acknowledge the current efforts on the political track, we have to maintain a laser focus on the fact that violence continues to rear its ugly head in various parts of the country, even if it largely disappeared from the world's TV screens since the evacuation of East Aleppo. Indeed, the last months have been some of the worst yet for civilians inside Syria. For Syria, that is saying something. The continued use of explosive weapons as well as ongoing military operations in populated towns and villages in Hama, Damascus, Idlib, Aleppo, Dar'a, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates have killed and injured hundreds of civilians over the past weeks and



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displaced tens of thousands more. Attacks on civilian infrastructure such as medical facilities and schools – a trademark of the war in Syria – continue to be reported.

I remain deeply anxious for the safety and protection of over 400,000 civilians due to ongoing military operations in Raqqa governorate. We continue to receive reports that fighting and airstrikes continue to result in death and injury of scores of civilians and damage to civilian infrastructure, including schools, bakeries, markets and water infrastructure. For example, on 21 March, airstrikes reportedly hit the al-Badiya School in the Al-Mansoura town in western rural Ar-Raqqa Governorate, resulting in scores of deaths and injuries among the internally displaced people who were living at the school. On 22 March, airstrikes reportedly hit a bakery and a local market in the Al-Tabqa area of Ar-Raqqa resulting in dozens of civilian deaths and injuries. And on 27 March, an engineer and technicians, including a Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) volunteer, were reportedly killed as a result of an aerial attack while at the Taqba Dam to undergo an assessment to conduct repairs and stabilize the dam. Meanwhile, tens of thousands have reportedly been displaced as a result of the offensive since November 2016 and humanitarian partners have been responding to the displaced.

As the fighting moves to more civilian-populated areas closer to Raqqa city, concerns about the fate of civilians will only grow. I urge all parties to do everything in their power to protect and spare civilians from the effects of the hostilities as required, not just requested, under international humanitarian law. The UN and partners stand ready to scale up assistance through whichever modality is most appropriate and have pre-positioned stocks of relief items in several locations to enable a rapid response in Raqqa, access permitting. But that's the key phrase – access permitting.

Elsewhere, fighting in the northern countryside of Hama governorate over the past week has had significant safety and protection concerns for civilians. The closure of key roads in Hama has restricted commercial and civilian movement. A hospital was reportedly attacked from the air in Latmana town, resulting in the death of a doctor and a patient. Up to 40,000 people have reportedly fled the affected areas of fighting in northern rural Hama to locations in Hama, Idlib, Homs, Tartous and Lattakia where the UN and partners are responding. Some of these IDPs are at risk of further displacement as fierce fighting continues and frontlines continue to shift.

In the capital, Damascus, the death and injury of dozens of people by two explosions targeting Bab Al-Saghir, where many pilgrims were visiting, in mid-March was an appalling reminder of the willingness of extremist, terrorist groups to wantonly target civilians. Similar explosions targeted a court house and a restaurant. The last fortnight has also seen non-state armed groups increase their shelling on populated-areas of Damascus, including Bab Touma, Rukn Al-Din and



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Abbasin square, killing and injuring many civilians over the past two weeks and leading to the temporary closure of schools in some neighbourhoods.

The hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped in besieged areas continue to face severe and horrific threats at every turn. I remain extremely concerned about by the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the besieged parts of eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus where some 400,000 people are trapped by Government forces. Over the last month, we have continued to receive reports of civilian casualties and injuries due to heavy aerial bombardment and artillery shelling on the besieged enclave and adjacent areas of Barzeh, Qaboun and west Harasta. Some 27,000 people have been displaced due to the fighting including some 17,000 people further into eastern Ghouta and 10,000 people to At Tall in Rural Damascus. More people are likely to flee in the coming days if fighting continues.

According to WHO, all three public hospitals and 17 public health care centres in eastern Ghouta are non-functioning and inaccessible to the population, with several of them reportedly destroyed by airstrikes, although some facilities are reportedly still operational elsewhere. The number of children suffering from trauma injuries is alarmingly high: 30 per cent of all patients with war-related injuries are children under 15 years of age. The death of patients due to lack of dialysis equipment and a measles outbreak has also been reported. Since 20 March, Government forces reportedly have prevented commercial trucks from entering eastern Ghouta resulting in elevated price hikes of basic staples while informal trade has also been curtailed.

Put starkly, this tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta. It is critical that the UN and partners be facilitated access to the enclave before the conditions deteriorate further. The last UN humanitarian delivery to any of the besieged areas of eastern Ghouta areas was in October 2016, nearly six months ago, with other areas not accessed since June 2016. Recent approvals to reach the area couldn't be acted upon due to the security situation and lack of facilitation letters, although SARC was able to deliver a portion of the health supplies planned for the convoy on 9 March, including 250 dialysis kits, vaccines and baby milk, to its sub-branch in Duma. This partial delivery was welcome, of course, but clearly wholly insufficient given the scale and gravity of circumstances people are facing.

I have also been following the situation in the besieged neighbourhood of Al Wa'er, in Homs, with great concern, a community of tens of thousands of people I visited cross-line in 2015. From November last year until this month, sporadic fighting, limited access to commercial supplies and a growing scarcity of basic supplies has resulted in an insufferable situation for trapped civilians. There has been no UN inter-agency humanitarian delivery to the besieged neighbourhood since 26 October 2016 and as I reported last month, a planned convoy on 20 February was forced to turn back due to insecurity, and in the process, trucks were diverted, aid



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was taken (although some was later retrieved) and drivers were abused.

It is our understanding that a local agreement was signed between the Government of Syria and non-State armed groups in Al Wa'er earlier this month. As part of that agreement, some 3,500 people, including fighters, their families and civilians were evacuated on 18 and 27 March from the besieged neighbourhood of Al Wa'er in Homs towards Jarablus in rural Aleppo. It is our understanding that further evacuations are to take place on a weekly basis until the process has been finalized. Also as part of the agreement, Government forces reopened one of the roads connecting Al-Wa'er neighbourhood with the rest of Homs city and food items are now entering the neighbourhood without hindrances, prices have fallen, and electricity has also been restored.

The UN has also received reports of an agreement between parties to the conflict to evacuate people from the besieged towns of Madaya and Zabadani in Rural Damascus and Foah and Kefraya in Idleb, otherwise known as the Four Towns. The agreement reportedly includes the entry of humanitarian assistance and a nine-month pause in fighting covering the Four Towns and southern parts of Damascus and its countryside. We are monitoring the developments closely as the level of humanitarian and protection needs of those in each of the besieged Four Towns remains of the highest severity.

Let me be clear: the UN was not involved in any of the negotiations for these agreements or the evacuation process for Al Wa'er, but I must underscore our concern over such agreements. As we have seen elsewhere, evacuations from besieged areas typically follow months or even years of unrelenting military siege and offensive military action; of severe restrictions on freedom of movement for civilians, as well as on commercial and humanitarian goods; and of unremitting appalling humanitarian conditions.

All sieges are stark, contemptuous violations of this Council's resolutions. All sieges must be lifted immediately – full stop. However, as I have made clear before, this should not be through any type of “surrender” agreement which results in the decimation of an area and the forced displacement of some parts of the civilian population. Any evacuation of civilians must be safe, must be voluntary, and must be to a place of their choosing. It is imperative that all those who are displaced through such agreements are allowed to return voluntarily, in safety and in dignity, to their homes as soon as the situation allows it. Parties must allow humanitarian organizations safe and unimpeded access to bring life-saving help to those displaced and those who wish to remain, and identify and respond to protection threats.

Let me now turn now to access. I had sincerely hoped that 2017 would bring about a step change in our level of humanitarian access, particularly to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, building on



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the relative progress of last year, particularly the first nine months. The bottom line is, however, that with a quarter of the year gone, our current levels of access are no better than this time last year.

Through the March inter-agency convoy plan, we had sought to reach 787,500 people through road convoys. However, original approvals were only received for 44 per cent, or 348,200 people, the lowest approval rate since March 2016 when the monthly plan process began, although this increased to some 74 per cent later in this month when additional approvals for some other locations were received following intense engagement by the UN team on the ground.

As we sit here today, with the month virtually complete, we have reached some 200,000 people against the plan. This includes convoys for some 133,500 people in the hard-to-reach areas of Bludan and Wadi Barada in Rural Damascus and Talbiseh in Homs. This is limited incremental progress, thanks to extraordinary efforts of the team on the ground.

The only besieged areas reached through our convoy plan were the Four Towns and Khan El Shih in Rural Damascus, which was completed today. (In addition vastly expensive and technically challenging airdrops to Deir-ez Zor continue for nearly 93,500 people given no land access at all to these people besieged by so-called Islamic State.) Even then, various medical items were removed from the convoys, and when we reached Madaya, one of the Four Towns, we were unable to distribute all of the delivered assistance due to sniping by the surrounding militias that in and of itself left several people dead.

After painstaking negotiations by our Humanitarian Coordinator and the OCHA team, another convoy is planned to deploy today: to the hard-to-reach area of Rastan in Homs, reaching over 110,000 people in total, which would mean we would reach some 310,000 people against the plan if it successfully deploys.

With several convoys over the past week, the pace of convoys is picking up – and I salute the round the clock efforts of my humanitarian colleagues in the UN, SARC, ICRC and other humanitarian partners in Damascus who bravely make it possible. However, it is still the case that for every one convoy that reaches its intended destination, several more are unable to deploy during the month due to the recurring administrative issues and delays from the Government of Syria. At the same time, some non-State armed groups continue to threaten or refuse to cooperate with humanitarian workers. And sustained UN access to areas under the control of ISIL – such as parts of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates - remains extremely limited.

While the number of convoys this month represents some progress compared to previous



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months, it is essential that the government agree to take further steps to simplify the bureaucratic processes around the preparation and deployment of inter-agency convoys. The current bureaucratic architecture is at best excessive and at its worst, deliberately intended to prevent convoys from proceeding.

The UN, in good faith, continues to engage the Syrian authorities to find a way to improve the inter-agency convoy process. As part of this, the UN team has submitted a two-month inter-agency convoy plan covering April and May with the aim of reaching one million beneficiaries in 28 besieged and hard-to-reach locations. It is hoped that spreading the plan over this two-month period, instead of the one-month period, will provide enough space for the approvals to be translated into deliveries on the ground. Aside from genuine insecurity, there should be no compelling reason why these convoys are not able to proceed over the two-month period.

We will do our part to make this happen, but we hope the Syrian authorities will also do theirs and take the necessary steps. That means removing the requirement for multiple facilitation letters to be received for health, agricultural or WASH supplies. That means signing facilitation letters within two days of the UN request. That means allowing delivery on the basis of UN needs assessments. That means allowing loading of requested surgical and medical items. All simple steps – that if taken immediately – would have a definite positive impact on the lives of suffering civilians in so many parts of Syria.

At the same time, for continued progress to materialize, we also need the renewed support of Council Members and ISSG Humanitarian Task Force Members to do their part: to exert their individual and collective influence over the parties. The breakthroughs last year and even the progress this week – however incremental – are proof that when there is enough political will, when we work together in the name of humanity, it is really possible to reach people in desperate need of life-saving assistance. But if we're honest with ourselves and if we add up the score sheet today, the ISSG has not actually secured us, the humanitarians or the UN more broadly, any access to the besieged or hard-to-reach areas. Those we have reached have always been as a result of our brave and persistent team's patient negotiation and utilizing one or two influential channels.

The years of fighting and continued access challenges translate into millions of Syrians forced to live in appalling conditions, often without safety and the basic essentials of life. Some 13.5 million Syrian people will try to go to sleep tonight in dire need of assistance. The scale and severity of humanitarian needs show no sign of dissipating and that's why the humanitarian work of the UN and its partners remains as vital as ever and despite all the obstacles and dangers are nonetheless doing brave, successful life-saving work.



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Brave and committed humanitarians have ensured the delivery of aid to as many in need as possible. In 2016, some 6.8 million people on average were reached with food assistance per month, some 18 million medical procedures were carried out or supported, 12 million treatment courses provided, 13 million people reached with water, sanitation and hygiene support, and 3.4 million children and pregnant lactating women reached with essential nutrition services

I must underline that the UN and its partners, mostly brave Syrian colleagues, will continue to stand with the people of Syria to deliver aid to millions of civilians – regardless of which side they are, or are perceived to be, on or not. I welcome the release of the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria which outlines requirements of some \$3.4 billion to undertake a comprehensive humanitarian response in Syria, including saving lives, enhancing protection and building people’s resilience. I thank donors for their continuing support and respectfully ask them to go above and beyond this year so we can maintain our critical humanitarian support to civilians across the country – pending any success in securing peace and the full permanent silence of the guns, we must meet Syrians’ immediate life-saving needs and for the recovery time beyond. Again – for as long as it takes in this now seventh year of this hideous conflict. So that is why the meeting in Brussels on 5th April is so important as this year pledging event for the Syrian people and surrounding neighbours – building on the successful strategic approach in London last year – but very mindful that the international community and donors, as much as the humanitarians, are at full stretch.

In addition to all the points I’ve advanced today, allow me to finish by adding my voice to the two urgent appeals to all parties made by the Secretary-General earlier this month. First, to make the most of the 30 December 2016 ceasefire established by the guarantors of the Astana meetings; to enhance it further – ensuring real protection for civilians and civilian infrastructure – and ensure that humanitarian aid keeps flowing to reach all those in need in Syria by removing remaining obstacles and impediments.

Second: to appeal to the parties, and all those with influence over them, to strive to overcome their differences, and work together to put an end to the conflict. This is the only way to stop the suffering of Syrian men, women and children. I sincerely hope this is the year the parties to the conflict – and those that support their actions – regain the sense of humanity. As the Secretary-General has said, peace in Syria is a moral and political imperative both for the Syrian people and for the world – an imperative that cannot wait.

Thank you