



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, 26 January 2017

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Mr. President and distinguished Council members,

2016 was a year where we witnessed devastation and suffering in Syria at levels that defy comprehension. We witnessed people dying of starvation, with the pictures of emaciated, starving children from the besieged town of Madaya staining our conscience. There were the constant, harrowing images of bombs and mortars raining down on schools, medical facilities, internally displaced settlements, public markets, and critical water networks. We saw a shocked, blank stare from five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, his silent face covered in blood and dust after being pulled from the rubble caused by an airstrike in eastern Aleppo. We are still horrified by reports of rescue and medical workers teams, SARC volunteers and humanitarian personnel attacked while on duty. We witnessed the destruction in Darayya, dubbed “Syria’s capital of barrel bombs,” and the relentless demolition of eastern Aleppo. Towns besieged, bombed and then emptied. We saw buses, intended to evacuate civilians, burning outside of Foah. We have seen ISIL recapture the ancient city of Palmyra. And we have watched as these actions brought with them an atrocious, incalculable human toll. The Secretary-General, myself and my colleagues have called the situation a slaughterhouse, a complete meltdown of humanity, the apex of horror. There’s no pretending, this is what daily life has been like for millions of civilians across Syria throughout 2016. So much suffering in just twelve months, and all of it under our collective watch.

And yet, as we start 2017 and as hard as it is to imagine, there are some emerging reasons to hope. Since 30 December, a nationwide ceasefire continues to hold, despite some breaches. This has provided a rare moment of respite for many, and we must all do everything in our power to see that it is consolidated and extended. I have also just returned from Helsinki, where the world came together to support Syrians and the region. Even with continuing dire humanitarian needs, I took away a sense of hope from my meetings in Finland, none more so than in the steady determination of Syrian NGOs who I had the honor to sit alongside as we discussed the humanitarian priorities for the coming year. Together with the EU, the UN will host a conference



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on Syria in the beginning of April. This will be an opportunity for the international community to reiterate and pledge their commitment to support the Syrian people.

I also take hope in recent developments on the political track. This week we saw those who, despite years of fighting, were willing to set the past aside to sit alongside one another in Astana. The agreement by Iran, Russia and Turkey in Astana to establish a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire is a welcome development. Saving Syrian lives is the shared priority of all of us, and the UN stands ready to assist in the establishment of this mechanism. It is also our hope that further consolidation of the ceasefire will help to create a supportive environment for the resumption of intra-Syrian negotiations in Geneva under the auspices and lead of the United Nations as per relevant Security Council resolutions. Special Envoy de Mistura has just attended the Astana meeting and he will brief the Council – as the President just mentioned -- on more fully on the political track on 31 January. As we move toward UN talks, the collective hopes of the world for a political solution based on SCR 2254 and the Geneva Communique - there is no other solution, neither humanitarian nor indeed military. However emboldened any party may feel following the final full evacuation of eastern Aleppo. We all owe it to the people of Syria, who have suffered so much, to do everything in our power to see the political process succeed. To see their hope restored.

Mr President,

Sadly, in recent months we have too often been unable to translate hope into humanitarian action. From the formation of the humanitarian task force as part of the International Syria Support Group in early 2016, through to September last year, we saw unprecedented access to those most in need in Syria. By September of last year over one and a quarter million people were reached via inter-agency convoys to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, compared to just 487,000 in all of 2015. Such access was not easily achieved, but took the hard work of the UN team in Damascus, and in Geneva, with the support of influential Member States – especially the Russian Federation and the United States. Frustratingly, and with dire humanitarian consequence, significant challenges with cross-line access have re-emerged. Sadly, access has currently returned to the levels we saw before the humanitarian task force came into effect.

This diminution in access is in part because the two-step approval process agreed by the Syrian authorities has become, in practice, a ten-step process. Despite high rates of in-principle approvals, only one or two approved convoys have reached their destinations in each of the last three months. In December, one – just one – inter-agency convoy delivered assistance to 6,000 people out of a total of 930,250 people requested under the December inter-agency convoy plan. This is less than one percent of what we aimed to achieve. And even in this one instance when we could deliver, yes, I have to say it again, over 23,000 medical items were removed from the



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UN inter-agency convoy. So far, in January, the situation is not much better, with only one inter-agency convoy deployed to Moadamiyeh, on 7 January, reaching 40,000 people, however this was a location we requested under last November's plan.

In both December and January, the Syrian Government did respond within the agreed seven working days to our monthly inter-agency convoy plans, but subsequent administrative delays on the part of the government, including in the approval of facilitation letters, approval by local governors and security committees, as well as broader restrictions by all parties continue to hamper our efforts, and deprive the most vulnerable civilians from much needed assistance.

Mr. President,

Let me be perfectly clear - we have a humanitarian task force whose sole purpose is to ensure access, and since 30 December we have had a ceasefire that has improved security in many areas. And yet, despite these two positive factors, we continue to be blocked at every turn, by lack of approvals at central and local levels, disagreements on access routes, and by the violation of agreed procedures at checkpoints by parties to the conflict. Are these important? Yes. We can't – and if I may quote – “just plough on” or “just get on with it” as I've heard one member sitting around this say table to me. Because if one brave aid worker drives through the checkpoint without the facilitation letter and the command transmitted down the line, the checkpoint guard or their sniper takes the shot.

On 11 January, the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator in Damascus sent a Note Verbale to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a list of practical suggestions to speed up access, simplify procedures and get convoys moving. No response has yet been received. We have capacity to deliver to hundreds of thousands of people in besieged and hard to reach areas every month and we are ready to move, should the access be allowed by the parties to the conflict. We call on Council members with influence over the Syrian authorities, and on members of the humanitarian task force, to do more to ensure the support of the Syrian Government to deliver life-saving assistance through the existing structures and mechanisms. The fault is not at the door of the UN or the NGOs – it is the Syrian Government and the governors. We need to be allowed to pass – not as a favour but as a right – and safely.

Mr President,

On the ground, despite enormous challenges, the UN and its humanitarian partners in Syria continue to deliver lifesaving assistance and support to millions of people across the country every month. For example, the World Food Programme – who you will hear more from in a few minutes – reached over 4 million people with food commodities in December alone. WHO, who



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you will also hear from later this morning, along with UNICEF, implemented their accelerated routine immunization campaign in northern Syria, vaccinating some 104,000 children in Jarablus and other parts of Aleppo Governorate. Over the course of 2016, over 4 million non-food items were distributed across Syria, nutrition items were provided to some 3 million, and shelter was provided to nearly 300,000 people.

Moreover, the vital humanitarian cross-border activities continued to represent a crucial element of the UN response. Since cross-border operations began in July 2014, following the adoption of UNSCR 2165 (2014), the UN has conducted more than 467 cross-border convoys, or nearly four a week on average. This allowed UN partners to deliver medical supplies sufficient for 9 million treatments, including for two million people to be vaccinated. Some three million have been fed, many on a monthly basis. Assistance has been delivered to various parts of Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia and Hama governorates from Turkey, and Dar'a and Quneitra governorates from Jordan. These operations complement the critical role played by international and Syrian NGOs who provide assistance and services to millions more from neighbouring countries.

In addition, the UN has completed 294 airlifts to Qamishly, delivering 10,000 metric tons of food, WASH, nutrition, education, shelter and NFI assistance on behalf of humanitarian actors, including 120,000 full food rations. I will leave it to WFP to give you their report, particularly on the situation surrounding airdrops.

I pay a complete tribute to all the extraordinary steadfast and unflinchingly courageous aid workers: those from NGOs, Syrian, regional and international; those working from both Jordan and Turkey cross-border as well as those within Syria; those across the UN agencies, funds and programmes, and my colleagues in OCHA; those with the ICRC, SARC, IFRC, and the local communities and families who have set aside so much to help others. They can rest assured that their actions have saved the many lives of their fellow Syrian and global citizens, protecting them wherever possible and never desisting, despite relentless setbacks, threats and danger. And we honor all those humanitarian aid workers who have been killed in their duties.

Mr President,

As was noted last month, with the evacuation of eastern Aleppo, the number of those besieged in Syria was reduced. Following a comprehensive review by the United Nations, it is now estimated that as of January 2017 some 643,780 people are living in 13 areas under siege. Three locations were removed from the previous list of 16 locations where some 974,080 people were unable to move freely. The eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo were removed following their full take over by the Government of Syria in December. Madimayet ElSham in Rural Damascus was delisted due to the significant improvement in humanitarian access and freedom of movement over the



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last three months following the signing and subsequent implementation of a local agreement. Hajar al Aswad, in Rural Damascus, was also removed due to the access that has been available through Yarmouk, Yelda and Al-Qadam.

Further, population figures have been adjusted for other locations based on the latest and most accurate information received from the ground. This includes a reduction of 1,200 people for Foah and Kefraya in Idlib following their evacuation from the two towns in December. Adjustments were also made for areas in the eastern Ghoutah enclave due to movements within the enclave, as well as for Zabadani and Khan Al Shih. The reduction in numbers, however, should not be mistaken for progress in addressing the scourge of besiegement. Parties continue to use sieges as a weapon of war, and in each of these cases we saw protracted periods of restricted aid, as well heavy fighting and bombing, as a precursor to the agreements that brought the areas back under Government of Syria control. I continue to call for an immediate end to all besiegement by all parties in this conflict. The act does nothing other than to punish civilians, who already bear the brunt of this terrible conflict.

Mr President,

Let me provide the Council with an update on four locations in Syria where humanitarian action remains greatly needed and, sadly, often contested: Aleppo, Deir-ez Zor, rural Damascus and Raqqa. Addressing each of these in turn:

First Aleppo: In Aleppo, humanitarian needs continue to be staggering. Since 24 November, nearly 160,000 people have been at least temporarily displaced from formerly besieged neighbourhoods of east Aleppo. This includes over 120,000 people displaced to government-controlled areas in and around Aleppo city or having stayed in Eastern Aleppo, and over 36,000 people evacuated to non-State armed group-controlled Idleb and rural western Aleppo. The humanitarian situation for many of those who have been displaced or have stayed has been difficult, and the cold winter has exacerbated the situation further. Following the cut of running water to the some 1.8 million in Aleppo due to a technical problem (as we understand it) whose solution lies in ISIL controlled territory outside of the city, the humanitarian situation has become even more difficult.

Mr President,

Last month, OCHA provided Council members with a detailed overview of our response to those 36,000 people who evacuated into rural western Aleppo and Idleb. These 36,000 were provided with immediate life-saving assistance, and are now part of the regular cross-border humanitarian programming that assists some 900,000 IDPs in Idleb as well as elsewhere in the north. I'll now



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brief you on the UN response in each of the main areas where those affected by the Aleppo crisis have been displaced or returned to across the city itself.

The UN has had an ongoing presence in Aleppo since 2014, and responded immediately to the additional humanitarian needs caused by the displacement of so many. The level of assistance was immediately increased and the UN has since continued to address the needs of those people displaced from or returning to eastern Aleppo, alongside the brave humanitarians working for SARC and ICRC, as well as other national and international NGOs. Nearly 90 per cent of the supplies distributed by all partners are provided by the UN, and just last week, 19 million US dollars was released from the OCHA-managed Syria Humanitarian Fund to support immediate life-saving and early recovery assistance for thousands of people. These funds will provide responses to immediate needs, assist with the rehabilitation of basic services and removal of rubble and undertake other steps necessary to create the conditions where people can safely return to their homes.

In eastern Aleppo, a total of over 65,000 people have been officially registered as having returned to or having stayed in the eastern districts of the city. Most now live in damaged houses, and are scattered across various neighbourhoods, with Hanano hosting the largest number of returnees to date. Other neighbourhoods that registered high levels of returnees include Tariq Al-Bab, Al-Kalaseh and Bustan Al-Qaser. In these areas, the UN has been active providing immediate relief. Food items, medical services, protection and education support have all been provided to those in need.

Mr President,

I am deeply concerned about reports concerning the stockpiles of humanitarian supplies found in eastern Aleppo since the evacuation. I take these very seriously – we need to ascertain the facts. We are following up on these reports as I speak. I emphasize to the Council that such matters draw into stark relief the need for unimpeded access of the United Nations and humanitarian partners to all areas in Syria, not only to allow us to deliver, but to monitor the needs and the appropriate distribution of assistance, even after they have been prepositioned.

On the outskirts of eastern Aleppo city, there are 5,077 people who have been displaced to the Jibreen collective shelter. Parts of the shelter remain in need of rehabilitation, particularly winterization. The UN and its partners have provided hundreds of stoves and other essential winterization items. Furthermore, the UN is supporting communal kitchens that provide hot meals for thousand, and supporting a static clinic and, in coordination with the relevant authorities, commenced with the distribution of personal ID documents.



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In western Aleppo, over 50,000 are being supported as part of increased regular programming activities already being delivered on a daily basis to support the over 400,000 IDPs inside western parts of the city. This includes regular distribution of food and non-food items. The UN has recently provided 250 metric tons of medical supplies (enough for 300,000 treatment courses) to Aleppo city, and in December provided enough medicine for 430,000 treatments. UNICEF continues emergency water trucking and the provision of fuel for operating wells, which together benefit nearly 1 million people (400,000 people from water trucking and 600,000 people from public wells) across the city. And together with the Aleppo Department of Education, UNICEF and NGOs have provided education support to thousands of children and youth.

So we must ensure the record and the positive balance are put in the public domain. The UN remains committed and actively engaged in assisting all those in need in Aleppo that we can access, working tirelessly with humanitarian partners to ease suffering and provide a basis for recovery.

Second, I will update on Deir ez-Zor. I am deeply concerned for the safety and protection of an estimated 93,500 people in the besieged western side of Deir-ez-Zor in Syria following reports of ISIL attacks, resulting in the death and injury of scores of civilians. Since 15 January, ISIL reportedly took control of several areas including the main road and the Deir-ez-Zor airport and is gaining ground in several more areas, splitting the besieged enclave in two. Beyond the temporary suspension of air drops by WFP, the Al-Assad national hospital was temporarily closed. Water has reportedly also been cut for thousands of people living in ISIL-controlled areas around Deir ez-Zor due to fighting damaging power generators in the area. Mobile communication has reportedly stopped throughout the area.

Mr President,

Thirdly, I want to turn now to rural Damascus where the situation remains deeply troubling. Fighting in the Wadi Barada, just outside of Damascus city, continues and has already displaced an estimated 17,500 people. Water remains cut-off from the main source since the fighting began, affecting the primary water supply for some 5.5 million people in Damascus and surrounding areas, who now only have minimal access to water. In response, technical teams comprising the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and water authorities, entered the Wadi Barada area on 13 and 14 January for a preliminary assessment of damages. However, following the assassination of a member of the reconciliation committee, fighting was rekindled and the assessment mission suspended before the repair works could commence. Should such deprivation of water to civilians be determined to have been deliberate, those responsible may have committed a war crime. Accountability must be ensured for the perpetrators of such acts.



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Mr. President and distinguished Council members,

Fourthly, I would draw the Council's attention to the military operation in Raqqa district, where I have serious concerns for the safety and security of over 400,000 people in need, including over 150,000 internally displaced people. So far, some 35,000 people have been displaced as a result of the fighting, although many have returned to their homes since the fighting has subsided. Humanitarian partners are providing a response to those displaced to the north towards Tell Abyad. The majority of the population of Raqqa district are reportedly facing critical problems in meeting their immediate needs. Fighting has impacted infrastructure such as water and power stations, affecting people's ability to access basic services. Food insecurity is also considered a major problem. Access to Raqqa by the UN has been highly constrained due to insecurity and ISIL's restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance, with the last UN inter-agency convoy to Raqqa taking place in October 2013. Access and security permitting, which they currently do not, the UN and humanitarian partners do stand ready nonetheless to respond to further large-scale temporary displacement as military efforts to push ISIL out of Raqqa continue.

Mr. President and distinguished Council members,

After nearly six years of senseless and brutal conflict, we have all been longing for a glimmer of hope that the suffering of the Syrian people might finally be coming to an end. The past few weeks have seen far fewer civilians killed and injured since the ceasefire came into effect on 30 December 2016. In some parts of the country at least, it has given a respite for people who have told us loud and clear that all they want is to be safe and for their families to be protected from violence. But the ceasefire alone is not enough. We must maintain our outrage at what is occurring in Syria and what is being perpetrated against the Syrian people. Now is the time for advocacy and now is the time for renewed determination.

I call on the Member States in this council to do all in your power, collectively and individually, to see the following implemented:

- 1) Ensure the current ceasefire is sustained, and that it results in increased access after months of stagnation. We need full implementation of the monthly access plan to reach all those in need.
- 2) Ensure that all parties protect civilians and civilian infrastructure and abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law.



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- 3) Recommit to ensure that the barbaric act of besiegement is immediately lifted across the entire country.
- 4) And finally I ask that all of us rally behind Staffan de Mistura's tireless efforts on behalf of the Secretary-General to find a political solution that brings an end to the conflict and meets the aspirations of the Syrian people. After a chronicle of missed opportunities, this is the time for the various parties to come together and bring an end to this horrendous chapter in Syria's history.

Thank you.