

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

STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA

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Checked against delivery

Mr. President,

Let me take you to East Aleppo this afternoon – in a deep basement, huddled with your children and elderly parents the stench of urine and the vomit caused by unrelieved fear never leaving your nostrils, waiting for the bunker-busting bomb you know may kill you in this, the only sanctuary left to you but like the one that took your neighbor and their house out last night; or scrabbling with your bare hands in the street above to reach under concrete rubble, lethal steel reinforcing bars jutting at you as you hysterically try to reach your young child screaming unseen in the dust and dirt below your feet, you choking to catch your breath in the toxic dust and the smell of gas ever-ready to ignite and explode over you.

These are people just like you and me – not sitting around a table in New York but forced into desperate, pitiless suffering, their future wiped out. These are constant, harrowing reports and images of people detained, tortured, forcibly displaced, maimed and executed. Bombings take place in plain sight, night and day, day in and day out. Hospitals destroyed, doctors killed. Schools destroyed, children denied education. Water stations destroyed, families cowering in basements. Peoples' lives destroyed and Syria itself destroyed. And it is under our collective watch. And it need not be like this – this is not inevitable; it is not an accident – it is the deliberate actions of one set of powerful human beings on another set of impotent, innocent human beings.

Never has the phrase by poet Robert Burns, of “Man’s inhumanity to man” been as apt. It can be stopped but you the Security Council have to choose to make it stop. And please remember, the world is not going to think the worse of you for loss of face, or power-politics global leadership is about doing the right thing to stop the draining of the blood of Syrians. Syria is now a country that will soon no longer resemble even the most basic definition of a country. We should all remember that Syria was one of the UN charters first signatories: “We the peoples...”

Mr. President,

As the Secretary-General pointed out last week, the Aleppo offensive by Syrian and Russian military forces has been the most sustained and intensive aerial bombardment campaign witnessed since the beginning of the conflict more than half a decade ago. The results in human terms have been horrific. Aleppo has essentially become a kill zone. Since my last report to this Council less than a month ago - 400 more people have been killed and nearly 2,000 injured in eastern Aleppo. So many of them – too many of them – were children.

Earlier last week, the High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that indiscriminate airstrikes across the eastern parts of the city by Syrian and Russian forces caused the overwhelming majority of civilian casualties. He stressed that - and I quote, “these violations constitute war

crimes [And] if knowingly committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against civilians, they constitute crimes against humanity”, end of quote.

Mr. President,

In amongst this apocalyptic horror in eastern Aleppo, there have been cruel glimmers of hope, but they are too quickly extinguished. Throughout last week, following the welcome announcement of a halt of all Russian and Syrian airstrikes on Aleppo, the UN, together with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Syrian NGOs, immediately set up plans to urgently evacuate critically injured and sick people, as well as their family members, from eastern Aleppo to places of their choosing. Our brave, tireless humanitarian teams led by the UN's RC/HC in Aleppo itself engaged in long and complex negotiations involving multiple rounds of clarifications on conditions and guarantees. It is with intense frustration that the evacuations were obstructed by various factors, including delays in receiving the list of patients to be medically evacuated from the very representatives and interlocutors of the people in eastern Aleppo as well as the Government of Syria's objection to allowing medical and other relief supplies into the eastern side of the city.

Despite these delays, the United Nations were ready to launch our operations on Sunday, 23 October. However, objections by two non-State armed opposition groups, namely Ahrar as Sham and Nureddin Zenki, scuppered these plans. The United Nations made every effort to get assurances from all parties, only for the parties to then fail to agree on each other's conditions about how evacuations should proceed. And then we couldn't prevail upon the Syrian and Russian authorities to extend their "pause". Our teams stayed for another 24 hours and the bombs were dropping before, disappointed and frustrated, they managed to leave Aleppo within 500 yards of the fighting line with two UN OCHA and one WHO staff bravely staying in Aleppo to try salvage the talks.. And the result? Once again humanitarian hopes have been smashed by parties who consistently fail to put civilian lives above political and military interests. For example, two children aged 9 and 14 – suffering from heart problems and intestinal disease respectively – were to be evacuated for urgent medical treatment, but now remain trapped in eastern Aleppo city. These are not soldiers, nor sympathizers, nor militants. They are children in urgent need of medical care – and we, the international community, have just failed to reach them. Goodness knows we've tried – but selfish, inhuman interests have trumped the moral and humanitarian imperative.

There will be complaints and accusations about who caused the failure of the medical evacuations. But it was these very complainers and these very accusers who put their own interests above that of the injured and sick, who refused to make reasonable compromises, who refused to allow anything to be done unless it was their way. And their way was not possible. And, yes, they'll fingerpoint at the UN – the one party in all this not to blame – to attempt to divert the blame from the perpetrators and refusers and their hideous calumnies. Humanitarian needs – the lives of children not even in their teens – cannot be used as political or military bargaining chips, and yet, once again parties to this terrible conflict have sought to do exactly that. It is wrong for armed groups to hold to ransom the sick, injured and children of those they cynically claim to fight for; it is wrong for the airstrikes to start again when the bombers know we still had a chance to get the evacuees out.

Not only have the parties to the conflict not had the moral fortitude to allow medical evacuations, nor have the Syrian and Russian forces from air and land demonstrated a willingness to protect what meagre medical facilities still function inside eastern Aleppo. Relentless attacks on health workers and hospitals have left the handful of doctors still alive in eastern Aleppo unable to cope. In fact, fewer than 30 doctors remain in the east of the city, and only six partially-functional hospitals are still in service. Only 11 ambulances are currently operative, rendering the collection of injured people from the scene of attacks ever more challenging. For many, it is impossible so their fate is left unattended. Hospital beds are too few, and essential medicines, including

anesthetics, IV fluids, vaccines and trauma supplies, are running out. Blankets are in such short supply that body bags are being used for warmth instead.

Mr. President,

Let me be clear – eastern Aleppo is besieged by the Syrian Government. No UN assistance has entered in nearly four months. Food is so scarce that many people survive on one meal of rice a day, and what is available on local markets is at vastly inflated prices. At the same time civilians are being bombed by Syrian and Russian forces, and if they survive that, they will starve tomorrow. The tactics are as obvious as they are unconscionable. Make life intolerable; make death likely. Push people from starvation to despair to surrender. Push people to leave on green buses.

The leaflets which have been dropped on eastern Aleppo by Syrian and Russian aircrafts operating in that area make the intention chillingly clear. They read “This is your last hope....Save yourselves. If you do not leave these areas urgently, you will be annihilated” and they end by saying “You know that everyone has given up on you. They left you alone to face your doom and nobody will give you any help”. And it is clear that the aircraft which drop the bombs, the generals who give the orders and the politicians who have designed the strategy intend to make good on that horrific promise.

We have seen this happen numerous times already - whether in Homs, Darayya, Moadamiyeh, Al Waer, and now in eastern Aleppo. And it will be the fate of those hundreds of thousands of people still trapped in besieged locations all across the country. This is not a world we can accept. All parties and their sponsors must put an end to these medieval tactics. All parties and their sponsors must grant us safe humanitarian access; sustained and non-politicized humanitarian and medical access to all in need, throughout the country, to those in Aleppo and the hundreds of thousands of people trapped in the other 17 besieged locations around the country. Despite what these abhorrent leaflets say, we must demonstrate to the Syrian people that we have not given up on them, that they are not left alone to their doom and they will not be annihilated.

Mr. President,

In addition to the air offensive against eastern Aleppo, and despite a brief lull in fighting last week by Russian and Syrian air forces, non-State armed opposition groups continued to fire mortars and other projectiles into civilian neighborhoods of western Aleppo. These last few days alone, scores of mortars were fired into Hamdaniya, Zahraa, Midan and Soulainanyeh neighborhoods in western Aleppo. Some landed right next to Shahba hotel, forcing occupants, including UN staff, to take shelter in bunkered rooms. Five people were reportedly killed, and 41 injured – including three representatives of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation in Aleppo, during the four days of the unilateral pause. All in all, throughout October, non-State armed opposition groups fired more than 184 mortars and other projectiles into western Aleppo, reportedly killing at least 100 people, including 17 women and 22 children, and injuring 533 persons.

While the destruction of Aleppo – both east and west – is perhaps the most distressing front in the conflict at present, it is not the only place in which humanitarian needs continue to rise, driven ever higher by the relentless fighting. Hospitals and schools, critical to both the survival and growth of communities already trapped in conflict, continue to be targeted and attacked, increasing the humanitarian crisis in these areas. The precise details of what is happening in other parts of Syria have been documented in the Secretary-General’s monthly report.

Government facilities have also come under attack. In Hama, non-State armed opposition groups reportedly continued to push towards the city, now just mere kilometres away from the city limits.

Two suicide bombings targeting a government checkpoint and Baath party building in Hama city were reported on 2 October with multiple casualties.

Mr. President,

Each month I have come before you and presented an ever-worsening record of destruction and atrocity, grimly cataloguing the systematic destruction of a country and its people. While my job is to relay to you the facts, I cannot help but be incandescent with rage. Month after month, worse and worse, and nothing is actually happening to stop the war, stop the suffering. This Council has been charged with the responsibility for ending this horror. The buck stops with you. This litany of horror must surely shake your moral conscience as it does around the world. Surely the international community must question the value they genuinely place in humanity, when entire neighborhoods in one of the world's oldest cities risk annihilation, their residents treated with gross contempt as nothing more than bricks and mortar pounded into dust; when the destruction of hospitals has become the new normal; when more than 100,000 children are trapped in basements with nowhere else to hide.

This is the legacy that parties to this conflict and their supporters leave as of today. We cannot turn back the clock on what has happened, but surely this Council and its members can take some action to prevent the endless repetition of these events that will surely occur if the status quo is maintained. At the very minimum, I call upon all Council members who have operational military assets in Syria to take concrete steps to halt the aerial bombardment of civilian areas in order to deliver on your existing international obligations and, above all, to protect civilians and allow us to deliver humanitarian assistance to those in need.

Mr. President,

As already announced on 30 September, the Secretary-General established an internal and independent UN Board of Inquiry into the horrific incident on a UN – Syrian Arab Red Crescent relief operation to Urum al-Kubra (Big Orem) on 19 September. The Board will be led by Lieutenant General Mr. Abhijit Guha. Lieutenant General Guha and his team have experience with similar bodies and expertise in areas relevant to this investigation, including international humanitarian law, humanitarian operations, munitions and explosives. The Board started its work earlier this week and is expected to deliver its findings in early December. The Board's report will be an internal document of the UN. The Secretary-General however intends to make available a summary of the Board's findings. I urge all parties concerned to extend their full cooperation to the Board.

Mr. President,

As I have stated previously, deliberate interference and restrictions by the parties to the conflict, most notably the Syrian Government, continue to prevent the effective delivery of aid. On 19 September, the UN submitted its inter-agency convoy plan for the month of October that included requests to reach some 962,000 people across 29 besieged, hard-to-reach, and priority cross-line locations. Based on current procedures, a response was expected around 30 September. The Syrian authorities responded on 7 October, granting full and partial approvals for 25 locations and 63 per cent of the beneficiaries requested by the UN, while denying access to four locations. Denied locations included once again eastern Aleppo, as well as three areas in Rural Damascus. Last week, on 18 October, the November monthly inter-agency convoy plan was submitted to the Syrian authorities. This plan includes 18 requests to reach 904,500 people in need in 25 besieged and hard-to-reach areas. A response is expected tomorrow.

To put things into perspective: last month, September, only six of the 33 requested locations were reached. In August, only four inter-agency convoys were deployed as a result of late approvals of the monthly plans, delays in the issuance of facilitation letters, requirements for additional

approvals above and beyond the two steps agreed with the Government in April, lack of adherence to agreed protocols at checkpoints, and insecurity. For the same reasons, this month, only five aid convoys have been able to proceed so far: Duma on 19 October, Dar Kabira on 20 October, Moadamiyeh this past Sunday, and Al Houla on Monday, Al Wa'er today.

All in all, in the last three months, the UN has been unable to deploy the first convoy until the third week of the month. The first cross-line convoy in August only deployed on the 23rd of the month. The one in September deployed on the 19th of the month, and now in October, again, our first inter-agency convoy only deployed on the 19th. This means that no aid reached many of those most in need, in besieged and hard-to-reach locations, for the first three weeks of each of the last three months. And while airlifts to Qamishly continued these past few weeks, air drops to Deir ez-Zour needed to be suspended as one SARC volunteer was hit by shrapnel from ISIL shelling while on the collection site.

Moreover, the removal of life-saving medicines and medical supplies by the Syrian authorities, such as surgical kits, midwifery kits, and emergency kits has continued unabated. So far this year, between January and September, 220 tons of medical supplies were delivered to besieged and hard-to-reach areas as part of inter-agency convoys. But 65 tons of medicines and medical supplies were not. These last few weeks alone, the Syrian authorities removed or prevented the loading of nearly 6 tonnes of medical supplies, mostly surgical materials, diarrhoeal and midwifery kits, IV fluids, anaesthetics, and various medicines, from inter-agency convoys to Duma (19 October), Dar Kabira (20 October), Moadamiyeh (23 October), Al Waer (24 September), Zabadani and Madaya (25 September) and Al Rastan and Duma (aborted on 27 and 28 September). These restrictions are not only violations of international law and your Council resolutions, they are actions deliberately and cynically designed to inflict more unnecessary suffering on civilians living in besieged and hard-to-reach locations.

Mr. President, distinguished Council members,

Throughout the country, nearly eight million children have lost their parents, their homes, their schools. They have suffered immense emotional and physical traumas. Children in besieged eastern Aleppo were due to resume school in late September. They didn't. Instead, shell-shocked children are retrieved from rubble and left writhing in bloody clothes on dirty hospital floors. They are stuck in hideouts. They cannot play, they cannot sleep. That has become the reality for 100,000 children in eastern Aleppo. Across the country, as you all know, one in four schools has ceased to function. More than 52,000 teachers have left their jobs. Over two million children remain out of school and another 400,000 are at risk of dropping out as the horrors of this brutal and savage war continue unabated. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian children have become stateless, it doesn't matter that many of us are trying and would reach them if we could, those children who are and somehow just surviving, feel abandoned by the world, abandoned to face their future alone.

What future do these children have - illiterate, orphaned, starved and maimed? What future does a country have when its next generation is a lost generation? These children do not have the luxury of waiting for another Geneva, Vienna or Lausanne to succeed. They need our protection now. What happened to 'never again'? What happened to our commitment to protect the most vulnerable, those who face mass atrocities? What happened to this Council's responsibility to act in a timely and decisive manner? There's surely nothing timely nor decisive about the world's approach to Syria so far. The international community cannot fail the children of Aleppo as it did in Srebrenica, Cambodia and Rwanda.

Mr. President,

There is no question today about whether you, Members of this Council, know what is going on – you clearly and tragically do. The question today is what you will do? What steps will you take to

ensure people in dire need get assistance? Humanitarians stand ready to continue to deliver to any and all in need, but that is not enough. Action must be taken, make safe access possible, and for that the violence must be stopped. It is within your power to do it. If you don't take action, there will be no Syrian peoples or Syria to save – that will be this Council's legacy, our generation's shame. It is in your hands today to take the right path, and avert this looming irreversible tragedy of our time.

I thank you Mr. President.