



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, 30 November 2016

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Mr. President,

I join you from the Office of the Maritime Organization in London and thank Special Envoy Stefan de Mistura for his statement.

For over five years now, the United Nations and the entire humanitarian community has raised the alarm about the devastating impact of the conflict in Syria on millions of ordinary men, women and children. We have pleaded that the Security Council and the international community come together to ensure civilians and civilian infrastructure is protected in accordance with basic humanity and international obligations, that access be granted to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance and all efforts be made towards a political solution to the conflict. Our calls, and the requests, even the demands, of this Council, have largely gone ignored.

The parties to the conflict in Syria have shown time and again that they are willing to take any action or do any deed to secure military advantage even if it means killing, maiming or besieging civilians into submission in the process. There are no limits or red lines left to cross. The rules of war – sacrosanct notions borne out of generations of costly and painful lessons and set more than 150 years ago, in 1864 to be precise, in the First Geneva Convention – have been systematically disregarded in Syria.

Mr. President,

Nowhere has the cruelty of this war been more grimly witnessed than in Aleppo. Aleppo, one of the world's oldest continually-inhabited cities and Syria's manufacturing capital, has been recklessly destroyed over the course of the past five years. We have all seen the harrowing



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images of bombs and mortars raining down in recent days, weeks and months – on civilian areas, residential houses, schools, medical facilities, water and electricity stations, and public markets. Constant, tormenting images of people murdered, bloody, and exhausted. Constant. Bombing and shelling in plain sight, night and day, day in and day out. The noose of siege tightened and civilians trapped in desperate conditions. These attacks have not been limited to eastern Aleppo, but have also killed and injured civilians in western Aleppo and damaged civilian infrastructure. As you have heard me say before, Aleppo has become the apex of what has become a catalogue of horrors in Syria. Its people have been living in a long terrifying nightmare reality which no human being should have to endure.

Mr. President,

The intensity of attacks on eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods over the past few days has forced thousands of civilians to flee to other parts of the city. In the last four days, numerous civilians have reportedly been killed. Just today we received a report that scores of people were killed in a single airstrike this morning. It is estimated that up to 25,000 people have been displaced from their homes in eastern Aleppo since Saturday. This includes some 13,500 people (60-70 per cent of whom are women and children) in a collective centre and cotton factory in Jibreen, a Government-held area to the east of eastern Aleppo city; 500 with family members in western Aleppo; 8,500 in collective shelters in Sheikh Maqsoud, a Kurdish enclave north of eastern Aleppo city; as well as thousands displaced within eastern Aleppo itself.

As fighting continues unabated, the situation is fluid and these figures are changing by the hour and day. It is likely that thousands more will flee should fighting further spread and intensify over the coming days.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent, known as the SARC, and local humanitarian partners, supported by the UN, are responding to the needs of internally-displaced families in Jibreen, Sheikh Maqsoud and elsewhere. This includes preparing hot meals and bread to families, ensuring medical assistance to the sick and injured, providing potable water; distributing sanitation and hygiene kits and other basic relief items such as blankets and mattresses.

The UN has prepositioned stocks to support the response including non-food items for 45,000 people, WASH and nutrition supplies for 80,000 people and food for 150,000 people. These stocks can be replenished within 48 hours from the UN hub in Homs and elsewhere as necessary. It is vital that the Government of Syria enable us to deploy in safety, without undue restrictions,



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all essential international and national staff to Aleppo to increase our capacity to respond effectively to growing needs, and address protection concerns for civilians.

Mr President,

We must recognize that even though some people have been able to flee the fighting, many have gone from one terrifying situation to what they consider to be another. Aside from the dangers associated with attempting to flee across active front-lines, we have received reports that non-State armed groups are preventing civilians from leaving areas under their control. There are also deep protection concerns that upon reaching Government-controlled areas, civilians perceived to have links or connections with non-State armed groups, including humanitarian workers, potentially facing arbitrary arrests and detention or worse. Trapped in Aleppo are also dozens of humanitarian staff who have heroically assisted civilians and are now equally losing lives. In the last week, according to WHO, three health staff were killed, in addition to the many other Syrian doctors, health-workers and civilians.

As we have seen before, across Syria and throughout the conflict, men, women and children, have been routinely arrested at Government-controlled checkpoints, before being transferred to one of dozens of official or secret Government-run detention facilities. They are often held incommunicado and indefinitely, facing the risk of being subjected to torture and ill-treatment, extra-judicial killings or being disappeared.

I call on all parties to the conflict to adhere to and respect international humanitarian law. I remind all parties to the conflict that civilians and those *hors de combat* must be respected and protected at all times.

Any evacuation of civilians must be safe, must be voluntary, and must be to a place of their choosing. Parties must allow humanitarian organizations safe and unimpeded access to bring life-saving help to those displaced and identify and respond to protection threats. And finally, it is imperative that all those displaced are allowed to return voluntarily, in safety and in dignity, to their homes as soon as the situation allows it.

Mr President,

I am extremely concerned about the fate of the remaining civilians in the besieged areas of eastern Aleppo city. These people have been besieged for nearly 150 days now and most simply



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don't have the means to survive for much longer. Intensified fighting and aerial bombardment continues to occur resulting in civilian casualties and injuries

As of today, as a result of the bombardment and shelling, all hospitals have been directly hit several times and there is no properly functioning hospital in eastern Aleppo city, only a trauma unit. All other primary medical facilities are operating at minimum capacity and do not have trauma treatment capabilities, leaving most wounded civilians unable to get the most basic treatment. With few, if any, ambulances available, we are receiving reports of wounded civilians being rushed to medical facilities on vegetable carriages. Access to clean water is scarce. People have resorted to scavenging as UN humanitarian food stocks have been exhausted, while prices of scarce basic food and fuel supplies have dramatically risen to levels that most remaining civilians are unable to afford. People are trapped and terrified. They are running out of time.

Just as we are ready to respond to all those displaced, the UN and the UN partners also remains ready to provide immediate assistance and medical evacuations for civilians inside besieged parts of eastern Aleppo in line with the Four-point UN humanitarian plan that we have been seeking to implement since early November. In addition, truckloads of humanitarian supplies stand ready to deliver humanitarian assistance to eastern Aleppo from Turkey and western Aleppo.

For the sake of humanity, we call on, we plead, with the parties, and those with influence, to do everything in their power to protect civilians and enable access to the besieged part of eastern Aleppo before it becomes one giant graveyard.

Mr President,

Indiscriminate shelling also hits civilian-populated areas of western Aleppo, killing and injuring civilians. Civilian infrastructure, including schools and medical facilities, have also been destroyed, as I reported to you last week. Since July, some 70,000 people have been displaced within western Aleppo as a result of fighting and indiscriminate shelling.

Overall, the UN estimates that up to 400,000 IDPs now live in western Aleppo. The UN, SARC and partners continue to respond to the needs of pre-existing IDPs in western Aleppo, as well as the wave of new displacement from eastern Aleppo in recent days.

Mr President,



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While the world is watching events in Aleppo, another 700,000 people are in other besieged areas across the country, mostly in Rural Damascus surrounded by Government forces. They are trapped, they are petrified -- winter is approaching and they are watching the chilling events in Aleppo unfold and asking: will I be next?

It may be too late for many of the people of eastern Aleppo, but surely this Council can come together, stop the brutality and also prevent a similar fate befalling other Syrians. What they and we need to see above all is three things: (1) *real* respect and protection of civilians (and civilian infrastructure); (2) safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access; and (3) an end to brutal sieges once and for all. These are neither new nor complicated demands, but common threads of humanity that we all have a responsibility to rally around. And those parties that can't or won't live up to their basic obligations should know that they will one day be held accountable for their actions.

And I should add what I am often asked: why on earth can't the Security Council come together and stop the suffering of the people in Syria?

The people of Syria have suffered far too much and for far too long. UN humanitarian agencies, SARC and our NGO partners are doing everything we can to meet those needs, but, as we have repeatedly said, the solution to this crisis does not rest with us. More than anything, I urge you all for political solution so that we can give some semblance of hope to the many millions of Syrian families who will not sleep tonight, but will be hungry, sick, and fearing for their lives.