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

STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA

New York, 21 November 2016

Checked against delivery

Mr President,

As we meet again this month, the suffering of civilians in Aleppo and across Syria rages on unabated. Horror is now usual – it is a level of violence and destruction that the world appears to consider normal for Syria and normal for the Syrian people. Month after month I have reported to this Council that the level of depravity inflicted upon the Syrian people cannot sink lower, only to return the following month with hideous and, with shocking disbelief, new reports of ever-worsening human suffering.

Mr. President,

I am more or less at my wits' end as a human being – but I'm here, like my colleagues, to be professional, to be objective. I had hoped to say today that last month I put it all on the table and frankly, it's still just as terrible and leave it at that – shame on us all for not acting to stop the annihilation of eastern Aleppo and its people and much of the rest of Syria too. All the facts and reports I gave last month have, not one of them, been changed, qualified, denied or proven wrong, by any one of you or anyone beyond this room.

My statement then detailed the objective reality of what was taking place in Aleppo, and it was hoped that the advocacy undertaken by me and by others – demands that sanity and humanity prevail, and reporting based on clear and undisputable facts, even though sometimes unpleasant to hear and maybe even an inconvenient truth – could have an impact. And there was a glimmer of hope. A unilateral Russian and Syrian pause on aerial bombardment over eastern Aleppo, instituted on 18 October for an initial 72 hours, was maintained beyond the stated end. We last met on 26 October when I welcomed the then continuing pause in airstrikes from the Russian Federation and the Government of Syria – although you will recall my welcome was not heard that day in all quarters of this Council. Day by day, even week by week, the pause held over eastern Aleppo. The same was not the case for western Aleppo, as non-State armed groups launched hundreds of mortars into civilian areas in the western part of the city. Had all parties had the fortitude to cease all attacks over Aleppo, today's may have been a different briefing. But I can't leave it at that because, you can scarcely believe it, it is even worse now.



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Regrettably, over the last week, we have seen an intense unleashing of military aggression in Aleppo and the surrounding rural area with truly devastating consequences for civilians. The pause over eastern Aleppo was shattered, returning the city and its inhabitants to death and destruction once again. Reports of a high tempo of airstrikes and shelling across non-State armed group-held areas of Aleppo city reportedly by Syrian Government forces began again on 15 November. And for the sake of accuracy and completeness, let me report here that the Russian Federation have repeatedly asserted that their air force and airstrikes have resumed only in Idlib and Homs, and not over Eastern Aleppo. Since last Tuesday, the bombing of eastern Aleppo has not stopped. Over the past days, reports indicate that hundreds of civilians have been killed, injured or otherwise affected by the relentless attacks on eastern Aleppo. Entire families were reported to have been buried under rubble in the al-Sokkari district as first responders searched for survivors. Fires raged from incendiaries and household gas breaches in residential buildings following the attacks, which stretched throughout eastern Aleppo. Deaths were reported in at least 10 neighbourhoods. As of yesterday, there are barely any functional hospitals left in eastern Aleppo able to treat those who have escaped death, as all the hospitals are being bombed into oblivion.

In parallel, more than 350 mortars and rockets have been reportedly launched by non-State armed groups indiscriminately into western Aleppo since 1 November, killing over 60 people, including women and children, and injuring more than 350 more. Over the weekend, an attack on a school in the Al-Furqan district in western Aleppo with mortar shells and rocket projectile by non-State armed groups reportedly killed eight children and injured several others, while the local university was also hit. Overall, some 25,000 people have been displaced in western Aleppo in the last few weeks as a result of shelling by non-State armed groups.

Let me be clear: we are not just seeing a resumption of violence in Aleppo, this is not business as usual. What has been unleashed on civilians this past week is yet another low in an unrelenting inhuman onslaught, and it is as heart-breaking as it is not inevitable. These parties to the conflict are - all of them - choosing to do this. It is civilians who pay the price.

Mr President,

Since July, 275,000 civilians have been trapped in eastern Aleppo due to the siege tactics placed on them by the Syrian Government and its allies. Russia and Syria have opened corridors for civilians to leave, but they are reportedly unsafe or perceived as unsafe to traverse. There have also been reports that non-State armed groups inside eastern Aleppo prevented those wishing to leave the city from doing so.

Humanitarian conditions in eastern Aleppo have gone from terrible to terrifying and now barely survivable by human beings. On 13 November, the last of the available WFP food rations were



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distributed. Prepositioned before UN access was cut off in July, rations were drawn out as long as possible but now they are gone. Only a handful of rations from local NGOs remain, food in markets is scarce, and prices have sky-rocketed. Fuel and gas to cook food is reportedly unavailable in most neighbourhoods. This is resulting in negative coping strategies, reducing meals and restricting diets to feed children.

And along with limited food and medicine, there has been growing discontent, with protests against corruption and a monopoly on goods reported last week, some of which did turn violent, indicating the extreme desperation of the trapped citizens. And to add to the humanitarian crisis, they will shortly face a harsh winter without heating or the bare essentials for life.

The UN has employed significant and tireless efforts to deliver lifesaving aid. I yield to no one in saluting the undiluted, selfless bravery of all humanitarian aid workers across the United Nations, the INGOs, the NGOs locally, first responders and people in their communities and families – time and again, if not themselves a victim this time, out they go – even at risk of the cynical second follow-on air strike or shell or sniper’s bullet deliberately aimed at them – searching for life and saving life. Let us repeat – they are not a target. And I urge the Government of Syria to give the Secretary-General’s Board of Inquiry into the attack on the humanitarian convoy, which resulted in the death of aid workers on 19 September at Urum al-Kubra, full access in Syria to conduct its investigations. Our teams in Damascus and Gaziantep have presented plan after plan to all sides, working to ensure delivery of medical supplies and evacuation of the most urgent medical cases. We stand ready to move, the moment security guarantees by all parties are granted. The UN four-point plan presented last week to all parties includes critical medical evacuations and delivery of medical supplies. It includes the provision of food and other essential relief items. Finally, it includes the rotation of doctors to provide assistance to those in need. The 30 medical doctors left in eastern Aleppo city, exhausted from their heroic efforts and non-stop work from July continue to serve in unrelentingly traumatic circumstances.

All parties have the plan, and we have been engaging in unremitting discussions to obtain their agreement to proceed, but the restart of intense fighting is a clear setback to our goal of reaching agreement and delivering to those in need. Yet, we are not deterred. Despite the bombing, and whatever the difficulty, we are determined to follow through. The UN’s humanitarians and our partners will not give up on the people of Aleppo. We will continue to insist on the parties’ obligations to respect international humanitarian law and human rights law, and to see sustained humanitarian assistance delivered to those in eastern Aleppo and all who are in need throughout Syria.

I call on all with influence – that’s the phrase I am diplomatically required to use, but you know around this table and beyond who you are – to do their part to end these senseless cycles of violence once and for all and put an end to the slaughterhouse that is Aleppo. All sides, and those



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with influence over them, must immediately provide the necessary guarantees for the humanitarian four point plan to move ahead.

Mr President,

While it defies comprehension, the citizens of eastern Aleppo are not alone in the depths of horrors being faced by civilians in Syria today. I remain seriously concerned about the fate of all those living in besieged locations. Aid deliveries and medical evacuations to the towns under the “Four Towns Agreement” – Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya – have been unable to deploy due to the tit-for-tat nature of the agreement. The gruesome deaths by starvation in Madaya shocked the world in January, and dragged the parties to the conflict to allow the delivery of aid. February, March and April this year all saw aid deliveries to the Four Towns. However, since then the situation has deteriorated.

Only one convoy has reached the four towns in over six months (on 25 September). In addition to no supplies getting in, those in need of medical attention are dying because they are not being allowed to leave. Since I last reported to you, at least three people have died due to the denial by parties to the Four Towns Agreement to enable the evacuation, people who could have been saved but for this punitive application of the tit-for-tat approach. More will die soon in each of the Four Towns if this travesty is not resolved. Those with influence over the parties to the agreement – notably Jaysh al Fatah and Iran – must do all they, I urge them, all they can to see that aid is delivered immediately and that those requiring medical care are able to evacuate.

Mr President,

I have long called for a lifting of all sieges, which have become one of the most prevalent and insidious aspects of this merciless conflict. Yet, this past year we have seen the opposite, of a massive increase in the use of besiegement and on the overwhelming numbers of people, particularly by the Government of Syria. This time last year, the number of besieged people stood at 393,700. Six months ago it stood at 486,700. Today, I have to report to you that, following a comprehensive review, we estimate that a total of 974,080 people – nearly one million Syrians – are living tonight under siege. New locations include Joubar in Damascus, and Hajar Al Aswad, Khan al-Shih, and multiple areas in the enclave of eastern Ghoutah in Rural Damascus.

There is nothing subtle or complicated about the practice of besiegement. Civilians are being isolated, starved, bombed and denied medical attention and humanitarian assistance in order to force them to submit or flee. It is a deliberate tactic of cruelty to compound a people’s suffering for political, military and in some cases economic gain, to destroy and defeat a civilian population who cannot fight back and perpetrated monstrously by the one party, above all, who should be defending and protecting their own citizens – all of them, yes even those who do not



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like and disagree with the state and its leader and his Government.

Those maintaining the sieges know by now that this Council is apparently unable or unwilling to enforce its will or agree now on steps to stop them. The besiegers give us crumbs – an occasional convoy here and there around the time of Council briefings – to tick the box that we are all trying our best. But the near one million Syrian trapped in besieged locations cannot live on crumbs. The real question is this: how can we prevent now nearly a million people being subject to a cruel form of collective punishment that gets more severe and intense month after month across the country? If the Council can't come together to bring an end to sieges, then you and we must all ask ourselves: why are we having this session here this morning?

Mr President,

Attacks on civilian infrastructure, most notably hospitals and schools, have become so commonplace it takes your breath away. Such attacks are violations of international humanitarian law, some have been called out as war crimes by the Secretary-General including again yesterday, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights has indicated that some may even amount to crimes against humanity. They are senseless, unconscionable acts, with no purpose other than to punish civilians, including women, children and the infirm, and deny those left behind with the means to survive or rebuild.

Millions of Syrian children have had their childhoods ripped away by calculated and reckless attacks on schools. In the last two weeks of October alone, the lives and dreams of 30 children were stolen during attacks on five schools. On 26 October the very day of my last briefing when denials were screeching through the air, twenty-two children and six of their teachers were killed when their school compound was repeatedly attacked in Haas, Idlib governorate - but the facts are that the kids and their teachers are dead – death, a dead body, warm to cold blood – however hard anyone may try, death is an undeniable fact and there is always a cause of death. Imagine the terror of those children. Imagine those who may have survived the first strike, some hysterical, some frozen in fear, only to see another round coming in. This year, UNICEF has documented 84 attacks on schools, killing at least 69 children and injuring many more.

And what of those who survive such attacks, those children that dream of becoming a doctor? To become a healthcare worker in Syria is to take on a dangerous profession and to even to go to a medical facility is to risk your life. This Council has passed a resolution protecting health care professionals and facilities, but this has resulted in scant protection to those in Syria. From 1 to 18 November, 13 attacks have been verified and there are reports of many more attacks. Hospitals, health centres, blood banks and ambulances have all been hit. The fact is, since Security Council Resolution 2286 which was passed on 3 May 2016, over 130 attacks on medical facilities have been documented. The Syrian war has already killed more than 750 medical personnel. It is a disgusting and blatant disregard for the special protected status of



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health-care facilities under international humanitarian law; a clear ‘spit in the face’ defiance of your resolution, as my WHO colleague will expand on after my briefing.

Mr President,

Despite the challenges and hardships, the UN and our partners continues regularly to reach nearly six million Syrians in need across the country per month. This assistance is delivered through regular programming and cross-line activities from Damascus, and cross-border assistance from Turkey and Jordan.

Let me touch briefly on cross-border activities which have become a vital part of the response. Since cross-border operations began over two years ago, the UN has conducted 420 cross-border convoys, or nearly four a week on average, delivering health assistance sufficient for 9 million people (including vaccinations for two million people), food for 3 million people, many on a monthly basis, NFIs for almost 3 million people and WASH supplies for over 2.5 million people. Assistance has been delivered to various parts of Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia and Hama governorates from Turkey, and Dar’a and Quneitra governorates from Jordan. Our efforts complement the critical role played by international and Syrian NGOs who provide assistance and services to millions more from neighbouring countries.

We also continue to reach people via air. Since operations started several months ago, WFP has completed 153 airdrop rotations, dispatching 2,815 MT of food, nutrition, health and WASH supplies over Deir Ez Zor city. The United Nations has also completed 159 airlifts to Qamishly, delivering 5,660 MT of food, WASH, nutrition, education, shelter and NFI assistance on behalf of humanitarian actors, including 61,500 full food rations.

At the berm along the Syrian-Jordanian border, which I visited in early September, the UN and its humanitarian partners have worked ceaselessly, together with the Jordanian authorities, to ensure the resumption of sustained aid operations to the many tens of thousands of women, men and children amassed at the border and in need of urgent lifesaving assistance. I am pleased to announce today that security and other arrangements have been finalised, and aid operations are set to commence tomorrow. I pay tribute to the cooperation I have personally had with the Jordanian state at the most senior levels to help enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance in the most challenging circumstances.

Mr. President,

Unfortunately, I must report to this Council that since the last reporting period none, not one of our inter-agency convoys were able to deliver aid cross lines. Cross-line access requires detailed access negotiations with all sides to ensure security and allow aid to be delivered. Though our main interlocutor is, of course, the Syrian Government, we also work with the other parties to the



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conflict and the Member States who have influence over them – through the Humanitarian Task Force as well as bilaterally – but our efforts are increasingly met with delays, blockages and rejections. Every month we encounter new bureaucratic challenges that need to be navigated. We have dealt with late approvals, approvals with restrictions on the number of beneficiaries, delays in clearing trucks at the warehouse, negotiations over routes, medical supplies removed or not approved, and additional clearances beyond the agreed two-step process.

So far this month we have three times navigated these hurdles, three times deployed convoys to reach those who are in need. Two of these convoys, both to Wadi-Barada on 9 November and en route in Rural Damascus, to Duma on 17 November, reached the final Government of Syria checkpoint before being forced to turn back when Syrian security forces, believed to be the Syrian Republican Guard, demanded the cleared containers be opened and searched. This is in clear breach of agreed protocol and a possible security threat for our convoys and aid workers. An earlier third convoy to Harbnafseh (rural Hama), scheduled for 1 November, was blocked by pro-government armed elements while underway and also forced to turn back. Just yesterday, 20 November, an inter-agency convoy to Rastan in northern rural Homs could not proceed due to delays at the check point in terms of approval to proceed, as well as shelling in the area once approval had finally been received.

As a result as I said earlier, no inter-agency cross-line convoys have been able to deliver aid yet this month. We have now gone four months without delivering aid to anyone via an inter-agency cross-line convoy before the 19th of the month. The result is that we are once again unlikely to reach more than a small portion of those whom we do receive formal approval to access.

Mr President,

Syrians have also been impacted by a series of anti-ISIL operations. This has resulted in initial displacement of 8,000 people in the north of Raqqa governorate. We are foreseeing the need to support over 400,000 people as operations progress further. In al-Bab, anti-ISIL operations are taking place just a kilometre outside the city and planning for a more immediate response for the over 100,000 people estimated to be in the city and surrounding area is in its final stages. Let me be clear: when people need our support, we are working and will continue to work day and night to try to reach them no matter who or where they are - and that's not being virtuous, that's our job providing you give the funds for us to do it, and if we can get safe access.

Mr President, Members of the Council,

I have had little positive to report on the implementation of the resolutions of this Council as regards the humanitarian situation in Syria. Airstrikes and shelling kill and injure more and more civilians, and protected civilian infrastructure is destroyed with implications that will resonate for years to come. Besiegement is increasing, people are going hungry. Schools and hospitals are



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being bombed. The United Nations is increasingly blocked from delivering to those most in need. And most frustratingly, this human suffering is all unnecessary. There is no amount of suffering that will result in an end to the conflict. There is no amount of military operations that will see an end to the conflict. The only solution, as has been said countless times before, is a political solution.

There are people here at this table and beyond with the influence to tell the Syrian Government we are not prepared to take no for an answer. If you are a petrified civilian patient in Aleppo tonight, you don't need to hear your own Government pray national sovereignty in aid to justify using that sovereignty to bomb its own people – and that patient.

Mr. President,

I am mandated to report to you, the Security Council, every month on the implementation of Council resolutions relating to the protection of civilians and the humanitarian situation in Syria. It is worth, for the record and at the risk of being accused again of preaching, reiterating what this Council has demanded of all the parties nearly three years ago in resolution 2139, including:

- 1) to immediately put an end to all forms of violence;
- 2) to immediately cease all attacks against civilians as well as the indiscriminate employment of weapons in populated areas;
- 3) to immediately lift sieges of populated areas;
- 4) to promptly allow rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for UN humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners, including across conflict lines;
- 5) to respect the principle of medical neutrality, and facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment, transport and supplies, including surgical items;
- 6) to protect civilians; and desist from attacks directed against civilian objects;
- 7) the immediate end of the practices of arbitrary detention and torture of civilians.

This is neither a long nor exceptional list. More importantly, this is a list of neither unreasonable nor unattainable demands. These are the basic elements of how parties to a conflict must operate under international humanitarian law. They are based on the most basic concepts of universal decency and humanity as enshrined in the UN Charter to which the Member States who are parties and proxies have signed up, and international humanitarian law, which applies to all parties, States and non-State actors alike. Except, it would seem, in Syria. In Syria – contrary to international humanitarian law and in blatant rejection and defiance of the resolutions of this Council – death, deprivation, violence, starvation, siege tactics and attacks on civilian-populated areas and civilian infrastructure continue, and they continue without penalty to the perpetrators.

I have called over and over for strong action from this Council. Strong action to back up your resolutions; to take action when they are ignored, day in, day out. Without such backing, words and resolutions have proven to have little meaning for Syrians. Without strong backing from

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each of you, red lines will be crossed again and again; international humanitarian law will be trampled on; war crimes will be committed. And until there is action by you, there will be no accountability.

It is high time to act. The UN humanitarians and our partners will continue to do our part. The UN will push at all angles to reach those in need. As is my job, I will report the facts, advocate and give voice to those suffering without respite; those whose lives have been shattered, time and again. I will do so until you decide to unite once again to do your collective part, and resolve to bring this Syrian horror to an end. I hear the argument that this Council should not pass a resolution because it would be “premature”. Mr. President, it is never, never too premature to save a life. It is never too soon for you to find a solution to this conflict and end the suffering of the Syrian people.

I thank you, Mr. President.