



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
NEW YORK, 22 AUGUST 2016**

Checked against delivery

Mr. President,

I would like to begin by saluting the life of Khaled Omar Harrah, a member of the White Helmets, killed on 11 August, by airstrikes. You all remember him, I am sure. You remember him in that video you saw, brushing aside debris and reaching through a hole in the wall to pull out a ten-day-old baby from the rubble of a collapsed building in 2014. How could you not? How could one forget those searing images of rescued children, carried by young men and women barely visible through clouds of smoke and mounds of rubble? The haunting images, for example, of five-year old Omran Daqneesh, a silent face covered in blood and dust, after being pulled from the rubble caused by an airstrike. In Omran's case, there is even a video - if you can bear to watch. Just pause for a moment and imagine this was your child, a child that has known nothing but horrific war. And his brother is dead. Omran was the 'lucky one' according to a local doctor. Lucky! What a word in such a context! That is the reality of what is at stake this morning here in this chamber - not the politicking and posturing, the power games and defensiveness - all we need is for the guns to fall silent.

Mr. President,

Aleppo is being bombed every day - every single day. Just this morning we have received reports of dozens of new attacks. The entire city is affected by fighting causing hundreds of civilian casualties: airstrikes in the east and rocket and mortar attacks in the west, destroying civilian structures, forcing yet more people to flee for safety, their houses destroyed, others trapped by fighting and unable to move due to fear and insecurity. As we sit here round this safe table, humanitarian rescue workers are risking their lives in search for those buried under the debris. The risk of rescue workers is always immense, but it is particularly so in much of Syria, with reports of these so-called "double tap attacks", where a helicopter or a jet bombs a building, then waits some time - just enough for rescue and medical workers to arrive - before attacking again. It is estimated that more than 130 White Helmets volunteers have lost their lives since 2013 - and that most killings were due to these heinous "double tap attacks". Most rescue workers know that the helicopters are still circling, but they also know that people are trapped, dying under the rubble. They still go in, risking their lives. Doctors facing shortages of supplies



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must decide which patients to treat, even as the hospitals they work in are being attacked and they're all crammed into the basement. Rescue workers must decide which neighbourhoods to send ever-dwindling crews to after an airstrike or mortar attack having destroyed yet another home, school or hospital.

Khaled and his colleagues have been saving thousands of lives. Their humanity provides hope in a place where there is scarcely any left. They represent the very best of what it means to be a humanitarian. We have just last Friday commemorated World Humanitarian Day, where we took time to pay tribute to Khaled, and to all the brave men and women who have died in humanitarian service in Syria and around the world. Let us together honour them here today as well, and all of those who continue to risk their lives every day for the benefit of others. And the best way of honouring them is to make the politics round this table work by collectively agreeing to stop the guns, the shells, the airstrikes, and the bombs. With your collective will that can be done now. And now, immediately, I can assure you the humanitarians are ready to go in.

Mr. President,

I have briefed this Council numerous times already on Aleppo. Aleppo has become the apex of horror at its most horrific extent of the suffering of people. I did so during an emergency session, in early May. I briefed this Council in June, in July, and as recently as last week. I have underscored that up to 275,000 people in eastern Aleppo have been almost entirely cut off from vital supplies, including food, water, medicine and electricity for over a month now living in constant fear of total besiegement, while access also remains extremely difficult to the estimated 1.5 million people in western parts of the city. Depending on military developments, either or both parts of the city could become besieged. Earlier this month, I stressed that the UN had developed an emergency response operational plan and stood ready to send truckloads of life-saving supplies across Aleppo if access and security was granted. I repeatedly called for a pause in fighting to allow us to secure a life-line to those in need. I urged for a ceasefire or at a minimum a 48-hour pause. The Secretary-General reiterated these calls; and so has the Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, as well as others, including ICRC President Peter Maurer. This is not a negotiating tactic – this is what is needed to put confidence into the hundreds of truck drivers to jump back in their cabs, load their trucks, and set off on the slow journey over shell-cratered roads, all the time wondering whether the sniper will take the shot, or an IED will catapult you into the air.

So, I welcome the announcement by the Russian Federation on 18 August to support the call for a 48-hour ceasefire. We are clear that anything shorter would not allow us to respond meaningfully to the size of the need we are facing either in Eastern or Western Aleppo today. While this statement is positive, this cannot be a one-sided offer. I have consistently said that any pause also needed to include the clear security assurances from all parties to the conflict, as the



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German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, said the other day – “You can’t have a unilateral ceasefire.” It has to be UN led as the humanitarian access has to be to all those in need, whoever and wherever they are. So I and my office are working with all sides to seek to ensure that should the announcement by the Russian translates into a comprehensive pause, that will enable aid to safely make its way to those who so desperately need it and that we can move as quickly as possible.

We are continuing to provide support into western Aleppo. Over the weekend we completed an assessment of an alternative route into western Aleppo that these trucks would follow, following the closure of the main thoroughfare into Aleppo from the south. The new route which goes around the east of the city and enters into west Aleppo from the north has been cleared for movement. Through this route we have been able to provide assistance through our regular programming to those in western Aleppo, but have at the same time been pre-positioning aid in western Aleppo for movement into eastern Aleppo. We have the stocks, have identified the route, and are ready to move 50 trucks of assistance from western Aleppo into the east, as soon as we receive the necessary security assurances.

We are also preparing for the cross-border movement of assistance into eastern Aleppo. The plan is largely business as usual for our cross-border operation – it uses the same mechanisms that are currently in place, and utilizes the same routes that had been used prior to the 7 July cutting of the Castello Road. We are preparing for an initial movement that would send 20 trucks with much needed food into eastern Aleppo during the first pause. This would then be scaled up as appropriate for future pauses, and include additional humanitarian assistance based on assessed need. The plan would see the loading of items monitored by the UN Monitoring Mission, which would then seal the trucks so that any tampering would be evident on arrival. All trucks will include UN identifying markers. Once cleared, the trucks travel across the border into Syria along the same routes as used prior to 7 July. They travel along the Castello Road and into eastern Aleppo city directly to the warehouses of our partners. Once at the warehouses, trucks will be confirmed as not having been tampered with, and then the seals would be broken and assistance off-loaded.

As I have said, we are ready. Once we have the green light we can start to move assistance within 48 to 72 hours. Plans are in place, but we need the agreement of all parties to let us do our job.

This is a race against time, as fighting rages on, with ever-more shocking reports of bombed hospitals and wrecked schools. Electricity is out, water is scarce, and movement is restricted. Civilian infrastructure continues to be relentlessly attacked, collectively punishing hundreds of thousands of civilians. These include attacks on countless hospitals and medical facilities, in Aleppo and elsewhere. The few staff that remain are overstretched and working in shifts. And the lack of health workers is compounded by the inability of many health workers to make the



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daily journey to work due to insecurity and moving front lines. In July alone, 44 attacks on medical and health facilities have been reported throughout Syria, including attacks against five out of the nine hospitals in eastern Aleppo. We have received further reports of hospital attacks these past few weeks, including last Friday – on World Humanitarian Day. In besieged Darayya, for example, the last remaining civilian hospital was reportedly hit as a result of shelling and attacks on the area. In western Aleppo, a mobile clinic was attacked in the Al Hamdaniya neighbourhood, a facility supported by UNICEF and providing health care to IDPs from the 1070 apartment complex.

Mr. President,

To help put things in perspective: Physicians for Human Rights has documented 373 attacks on 265 medical facilities since the adoption of Security Council resolution 2139 in 2014. 336 attacks were by Syrian government and allied forces, 14 by non-State armed groups, 10 by ISIL and Jabhat al Nusra, one by coalition forces, and 12 by unknown forces. At least 72 attacks were with barrel bombs. According to PHR, these attacks have caused the deaths of 750 medical personnel. What is more, these numbers do not even include figures for June, July and August, which appear to have been among the deadliest since the start of the conflict more than half a decade ago. In late July, for example, airstrikes repeatedly hit the Al-Hakim hospital, and according to reports, a two-day-old baby died in his incubator due to oxygen interruptions following the attack. Three more babies reportedly died the next day due to respiratory problems caused by the fallout of the bombardment. This is obscene and unconscionable.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn to cross-line inter-agency operations to besieged, hard-to-reach and other priority locations. Progress has been made this year, with a net total of 1,275,750 people reached in besieged, hard-to-reach and priority locations. As I reported to you last month, we have reached each besieged location at least once, including 401,650 of the 590,200 people living in these locations, including through almost 100 airdrop rotations to Deir-ez-Zor city since 10 April. Significant progress was made on approvals by the Government of Syria for the July inter-agency convoy plan, with 34 out of 35 locations approved for convoys, including all requested besieged areas. Moreover, following my last open briefing to this Council on 25 July, we managed to deploy, during the closing days of the month, a number of inter-agency convoys to Hajeb and Banan, as well as Talbiseh, Ar-Rastan and Al-Houla, reaching over 270,000 people in need.

That being said, as I informed this Council on 9 August, we unfortunately appear to be – once again – in reverse gear. In fact, on 19 July, the UN submitted its August inter-agency convoy plan to the Syrian authorities, which included 24 requests to 32 locations, including all besieged



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locations, aiming to reach 991,050 people including 523,550 people in hard-to-reach and 467,500 people in besieged areas. In its response - due on 28 July but received on 3 August and amended twice thereafter - the Syrian authorities affirmed that the UN and its partners could deliver multi-sectoral assistance to 505,750 of the 991,050 requested people in 23 of 32 initially requested locations. The Syrian authorities also requested that 41 other locations be reached in August outside the plan. All in all, the UN was denied access to more than 50 per cent of requested beneficiaries. This includes locations such as Darayya and Kafr Batna sub-district in Rural Damascus as well as eastern Aleppo. The Four Towns – Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya, even though approved under the August Plan, have not received UN assistance since 30 April 2016 because of tensions amongst parties to the agreement, fuelled by heavy aerial bombardment in Idlib, and shelling on Foah and Kefraya. Moreover, active conflict and insecurity elsewhere, as well as numerous delays in getting the necessary facilitation letters required to load and move convoys, have been limiting factors in reaching other locations these past many weeks. As a result, no inter-agency convoys have moved in August. Not a single one. And we are just one week away from September, and have already submitted next month's inter-agency convoy plan. This plan, which was submitted to the Syrian authorities yesterday, aims to reach 1.19 million people in need across 34 besieged, hard-to-reach and priority cross-line areas. A response from the Syrian authorities is expected around 30 August, as per the agreed review process.

Mr. President,

The UN has made numerous appeals in recent weeks and months for the medical evacuation of people with urgent needs from all besieged locations, in particular the besieged towns of Foah, Kefraya, Madaya, and Zabadani, where over 62,000 people are and continue to be besieged.

I welcome the news received last Friday and over the weekend of the evacuation by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent of 39 people, including children, from both Foah and Madaya, requiring urgent medical assistance. These evacuations follow the evacuation of a ten year old girl from Madaya on 13 August and the well-publicised evacuation from Eastern Ghouta of conjoined twins on 12 August. These evacuations would not have been possible without the approval of the Syrian authorities. While I would like to express my appreciation to all who have been involved in this operation, similar actions are needed in order to evacuate all Syrians in need of medical assistance. As I have said countless times before, medical evacuations are not a question of politics or military advantage, but of basic humanity. They must be immediately available wherever needed. This also includes the delivery of humanitarian and medical assistance into besieged locations, in particular into the four towns, which have remained without any UN assistance in over 110 days.

Mr. President,



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This is the greatest crisis of our time and Mr President that is saying something, with Yemen, South Sudan, Lake Chad Basin, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and that's not even mentioning those which are not man-made conflicts: the natural disasters like we saw in the Philippines, Nepal, Fiji and Ecuador. The Syrian people have faced an onslaught of unspeakable violence. The reports are endless: barrel bombs, hellfire cannons, cluster munitions, chemical weapons, thermite bombs, napalm, suicide bombs, mortars and rockets, snipers, bombs landing on schools, hospitals and civilian neighbourhoods, rape, illegal detention, torture, child recruitment, sieges of entire cities, starving people to death deliberately. All when you have the power with a pen – a simple pen stroke – to allow food to people. It is a chilling thought that these actions and levels of sufferings have been tolerated, with only limited international interference.

When hospital attacks have become the new normal, when medieval sieges of entire cities and neighbourhoods have become a lasting reality for hundreds of thousands of people, this Council cannot look the other way. It needs to act and ensure the full implementation of its resolutions. For as long as there is impunity, this unprecedented scale of abuses and violations will simply not decline.

In Aleppo we risk seeing a humanitarian catastrophe unparalleled in the over five years of bloodshed and carnage in the Syrian conflict. Once again, I cannot stress strongly enough the need for a 48-hour pause in fighting to be approved by all sides and come into effect, so that safe and sustained humanitarian access is opened to all areas of Aleppo. I urge all parties to the conflict to heed the call for a cessation of violence in all its forms, first and foremost for the sake of the Syrian people. I urge all Member States: all Member States with influence over the parties, all Council members, all ISSG members, and in particular the two ISSG co-chairs, the United States and the Russian Federation, to rapidly reach agreement on the security guarantees and operational modalities for a cease-fire to the fighting in Aleppo, and elsewhere. Not only would such an agreement ease the suffering of the Syrian people, it could also facilitate a more conducive environment for the resumption of the intra-Syrian talks.

Mr. President, Council members,

Before I close today, I would like to make a final note. The Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Yacoub El Hillo drove out of Damascus today, ending a three year appointment in one of the most difficult and dangerous positions that exist in the UN. His tireless work, his bravery, and his exceptional diplomatic skills have saved countless lives. He is not just an exemplary humanitarian, but he has been the bedrock of our humanitarian response in Syria – one that many others have been able to build on. I would like to take the opportunity to sincerely thank him, on behalf the entire UN and wider humanitarian ecosystem, for all he has done. We owe it to the Syrian people he has served and saved to capture the spirit and practice of his brave,

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professional legacy.

Finally, Mr President, I'm not going to pretend - I'm angry, very angry.

As the UN's humanitarian chief, this callous carnage that is Syria has long since moved from the cynical, to the sinful. What is happening in Aleppo today and throughout Syria over the last five years is an outrage against every moral fibre in our being as human beings, as fellow human beings, with every Syrian caught up in this unending cataclysm. And it is the failure of politics, of all of us; you know this as members of the Security Council. So please: now is the moment this instant to put differences aside, come together as one and stop this humanitarian shame upon us all, once and for all.

I thank you, Mr. President.