



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, 29 September 2016

Checked against delivery

Mr. President,

Thank you very much indeed. Where to start? It is with raw grief, with dismay, intense sadness, frustration, and an unquenchable anger at the excess of sheer and unbridled horror – way beyond even the apex of horror of a fortnight ago – that I report today to you, the Security Council, on the ultimate humanitarian shame that is Syria today, and in east Aleppo in particular. The people of Syria – and most immediately, the people of east Aleppo – are being subjected to deprivation, disease and death in increasing numbers and with increasing ferocity. This is not an unforeseen result of forces beyond our control. This is due to the action of parties to the conflict and it is the direct result of inaction – be it through unwillingness or inability – by the international community, including most notably those present in this chamber.

It is now a legitimate question to ask whether there is any level of disaster and death that can be visited upon the Syrian people that might prompt the parties to this conflict, and by extension the international community, to identify a red line that will not be crossed. This is not a distant conflict in which we as a community have only a passing stake – this is a critical test of the capacity and willingness of those in this chamber to make a decision and take action. To manifestly uphold the words of the Charter of the UN to which all nations are bound: to save the Syrian people from the scourge of war.

Mr. President,

The last seven days have seen an intensification of attacks across the country. From airstrikes in Deir ez-Zour, to airstrikes and ground attacks in Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Idleb and Rural Damascus and other governorates, fighting has intensified despite a one-week lull when the cessation of hostilities was reinstated, albeit with violations on all sides.

Nowhere has the fighting been more intense in the last days than in east Aleppo. Following the announcement by the Syrian Ministry of Defence of an offensive on 22 September, estimates are that some 320 civilians were killed and 765 injured in the first days. Over 100 children have been killed. These are not simply numbers to be added to a tally, these are individuals, family lives that we have collectively failed to save. The alleged use of new



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

“bunker busting” bombs has reportedly caused mass destruction in an area that has already been decimated. This means there are bodies of babies, children, women and men stuck unrecovered in the rubble of basements up to 20 metres down where they had taken refuge – and where they had been safe until the use of these recently introduced weapons. Airstrikes are reported to have hit three of the four civil defence centres in east Aleppo, injuring staff, and severely limiting their capacity to respond. On 22 September, attacks rendered the Bab Al-Nayrab water pumping station inoperable, stopping water to most of east Aleppo. On 24 September, multiple airstrikes struck the Jisr Al-haj area in eastern Aleppo City, reportedly damaging warehouses belonging to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and killing one of the few remaining doctors in east Aleppo, as well as his wife - a senior midwife. Just yesterday, two of the eight remaining hospitals, including two of four surgical units, were attacked and rendered out of service. I echo the words of the Secretary-General who briefed you yesterday: “Those using ever more destructive weapons know exactly what they are doing. They know they are committing war crimes”.

And let it be said, the evidence is being collected, the eyewitnesses’ accounts recorded – even if not today, one day there will be no hiding place for the individuals and institutions callously, cynically perpetrating these war crimes: that is as much our UN responsibility on behalf of all the worlds’ Member States, as it is the UN’s duty to preserve that evidence to point the finger at any one or more Member States and their leaders and officers, come the day. The only remaining deterrent it seems is that there will be real accountability in the court of world opinion and disgust – goodness knows, nothing else seems to be working to stop this deliberate, gratuitous carnage of lives lost and smashed.

Let me be clear, east Aleppo this minute is not at the edge of the precipice, it is well into its terrible descent into the pitiless and merciless abyss of a humanitarian catastrophe unlike any we have witnessed in Syria, with no access by the UN since 7 July; and the health sector in east Aleppo is reportedly on the very verge of total collapse. Hundreds of critical medical evacuations are urgently required. I have received alarming reports of patients being turned away or treated on the floors of the few remaining health facilities. What little intensive care unit (ICU) capacity there was, has now been completely overwhelmed. Four people (three of them children) who did not have access to ventilators died as a result. There are also reports of severe shortages of surgical items, blood bags, anaesthetics and other critical medical items. As a result, the priority for assistance is as acute for medical items as it is for food.

Because of this state of siege, food remains scarce, with rations only sufficient to feed 40,000 for one month. Despite the presence of limited food stocks, the impact of limited food access is already being felt. Deaths have been reported from malnutrition, disease, and poisoning by those scavenging for food. Fresh water is also now in short supply, and waterborne illnesses and preventable killer diseases are expected imminently to rise dramatically –as unnecessary as that is tragic.



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

There are more than 100,000 children trapped in east Aleppo, and it is they who are among the most vulnerable, who suffer first and who suffer the greatest. The images of Alan Kurdi, Omran Daqneesh and now Rawan Alowsh might have captured fleeting global attention and be seared into our consciences, but they are neither isolated nor exceptional cases, but emblematic of the horrific murder and abuse of children by the parties to this conflict. Rescue teams are finding children every day under piles of rubble amid the inferno and choking dust of east Aleppo. Meanwhile, indiscriminate attacks are also being launched by non-state armed groups into western Aleppo, so of course this is not just one-sided, but the overwhelming weight of forces is against the people pinned down in east Aleppo. We must end this nightmare.

We have been ready, and we remain ready to deliver assistance to eastern Aleppo through cross-border and cross-line support. Despite the distraction - as it sadly turned out - in the attempt to get a full cessation of hostilities, which crowded out negotiations for a shorter humanitarian pause, but as I have been calling for since July, a minimum of 48 hours weekly humanitarian pause must be urgently implemented to allow humanitarian aid to enter, to let medical evacuations take those in critical condition out, and to provide civilians respite from the barrage of bombs and attacks causing untold suffering. Now is not the time for political grandstanding or protection of one's political or, indeed, military position. Now is the time to recognise the horror unfolding before our eyes, agree upon our common humanity and restore the cessation of hostilities to protect civilians and save lives. That is the best for humanitarian action. And at a minimum, the weekly 48-hour humanitarian pauses. Anything less will leave this Council today on the wrong side of history, on the wrong side of avoidable deaths. It is the responsibility of the parties to the conflict, but it is the united will of each and every member of this Council that will unlock the chance to make this happen.

Mr. President,

As you heard me say before, there are few words left to describe the horrors for people living under siege. Theirs is a daily struggle for survival as they remain trapped and beyond our reach, subjected to collective punishment. This revolting situation in east Aleppo must, please, be the SOS, the Mayday call, to the international community, that they meet the criteria for besiegement, including: (1) being militarily encircled; (2) a lack of humanitarian access; and (3) lack of freedom of movement for civilians is clear. They now do - it is now besieged east Aleppo.

This is not based on conjecture, but the facts on the ground that I have just reported to you. The area is militarily encircled by Syrian forces. In addition, armed opposition groups continue to conduct military operations from within the city, placing those trapped within the city at greater and continued danger. Despite all our collective efforts which have been discussed in great detail in this Council, there has been virtually no humanitarian access through cross-border or cross-line actors since early July. It should be noted that this is as result of constraints



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

by both the Syrian authorities and non-state armed groups. Furthermore, despite the assertion of there being “corridors” available, civilians wishing to travel in and out of eastern Aleppo are unable to do so in any significant numbers. You’d do the same, you just don’t do it if you have nowhere to go voluntarily, and if the sniper is likely to take the shot any way. As we have long said, civilians cannot move when there are such levels of insecurity. We have also assessed this lack of movement based on the military presence at entry and exit points and specific security concerns, not just about sniper fire and detainment when traveling through humanitarian corridors that were established by the Russian Federation. The status of another 275,000 people besieged in Syria is truly unconscionable; we all must do everything possible to bring this medieval practice to an end once and for all. This means the number of people besieged in Syria has grown from 586,200 to 861,200, even after deducting the 4,000 who were required to leave Darayya as of late August. This is in addition to the millions of Syrians in hard-to-reach locations today.

Mr. President,

Besiegement is not a weapon of war; it is a flagrant, unjustifiable breach of the law – the law which the besieging parties have signed up to. As the Syrian people struggle for survival and a political solution remains out of reach, the best that communities under attack can immediately hope for is the indiscriminate attacks to stop and that humanitarian assistance can reach them. The role of humanitarians is not to be part of a political solution, but to provide food, shelter and the tools of survival to those in need, while that solution is sought. Those efforts – to protect the vulnerable, to deliver to communities in need, to step in to fill the gap where no alternative exists – were dealt a cruel blow last week.

After half a decade of conflict, it should not be necessary to explain to any party that the laws of war afford protection to humanitarian aid workers. In 2016, I should not have to brief this chamber on violence committed against those who are aligned to no side in this conflict, those who are willing to enter the most challenging environments imaginable to help those suffering beyond imagination. Yet last week, while leaders from around the world met to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Syria, we suffered a devastating attack on a humanitarian convoy.

Mr. President,

In the early evening of 19 September, as 31 trucks delivered lifesaving assistance just kilometers west of Aleppo city in Urum al-Kubra, humanitarians came under attack in yet another shocking example of the disregard parties have for civilian life and humanitarian space. Over the course of two hours, the area around a clearly marked UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy became a killing zone. 18 humanitarians: 12 volunteers, 5 drivers, and Omar Barakat – the head of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in Urum al-Kubra – brutally killed. Another 15 drivers were wounded, many civilians were killed and injured, and the



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

warehouse where the supplies were being unloaded as well as a nearby medical clinic were both severely damaged. The local population has been further traumatized by witnessing what happens to those who try to help them. And of course, they didn't receive the desperately needed life-saving help – a double jeopardy defined.

I have passed my deepest condolences to the families, colleagues, and loved ones of those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice, and pledge to do my utmost to ensure that their deaths were not in vain. I call on all of us to take hold of this moment, I call on this council to urgently act to protect the humanitarian actors, be they UN staff or our NGO partners who face violent responses almost daily. I also call on you to push against all blockages and delays that are hindering the deployment of assistance, and ensure the rapid, safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid to all those in need. Most importantly I call on you to end the bloodshed.

Mr. President,

The humanitarian convoy to Urum al-Kubra was a meticulously organized movement, as are all deployments of humanitarian aid. When crossing a conflict line to deliver assistance, the UN and its partners first receive authorization by the Syrian authorities. Advanced notification is given to all sides, and ongoing updates of the convoy's location and status is provided throughout its movement. These UN humanitarian aid convoys include informing all actors on the ground of the humanitarian delivery being undertaken. Such de-confliction is done to ensure that the delivery is safe from attack.

We do not yet have all the details. However, it is not too early to make clear the consequences of this shameful attack. If the attackers knew of the humanitarian convoy and intentionally directed an attack against it, they committed a war crime. Regardless of the reason and regardless of the party responsible, these people must know that they will be held to account. Accountability is important for the sake of justice, but it is also necessary to end the culture of impunity. This is as much a matter of practicality as it is of principle. If there are no guarantees that humanitarian convoys will be safe, the ability of humanitarians to deliver assistance will be jeopardized and those in need will continue to suffer. As I have said before, those on the front lines delivering aid are brave, but they are not suicidal. Sufficient security guarantees for the delivery of aid must be in place. Yes, that means engaging with all parties impartially, even to the distaste of some – those are the humanitarian principles in which I and others in the UN and beyond involved in humanitarian action rely upon to give us our license to operate – for us access is everything, without it, as we go far and wide across Syria we can't make the difference that the world's citizens call on us to make. The Secretary-General has called for a vigorous investigation to ascertain the facts of the incident and for accountability for those responsible. And the Secretary-General is currently reviewing options for the most effective format of this investigation, and I call on all parties to stand up, demonstrate their desire to protect



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

humanitarian space and support the investigation process, with full transparent accountability, and to banish impunity.

Mr. President,

While it is true that the UN and its partners support millions of people with assistance each month through regular programming and cross-border activities, those who are in the most acute need are often those who cannot be reached through either modality. While we focus much of the attention on ensuring humanitarian access via cross-line convoys, this is not to take away from other modalities which do most of the actual aid delivery, but to ensure attention is focused on the locations we cannot otherwise reach.

In both hard-to-reach and besieged locations we have continued to reach communities in need through inter-agency cross-line convoys in September. On 19 September, we reached 84,000 people in Talbiseh; on 22 September, we reached 35,000 people in Moadamiyeh; on 24 September, we reached 70,000 people in Al Waer in Homs; and the following day we reached some 60,000 people in the Four Towns – Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya. And we continue to reach people through the air – both by airdrops and air-bridges. We have now completed 126 air drops to Deir ez-Zour since April, dispatching food, nutrition, health and WASH to people in need. This includes two full rounds of food distribution, each reaching a total of 110,000 people in need. A third round began on 12 August. We have now completed 90 airlifts to Qamishly, providing a combination of food, WASH, nutrition, education, shelter and NFI assistance, including over 50,000 full food rations. As for the berm along the Syrian-Jordanian border, which I have stood on and visited earlier this month, we have received positive indications from the Jordanian authorities that humanitarian organizations may be able to resume aid operations to reach those stranded there by early next month, so we look forward to all the security and other arrangements being put into place so that can happen, until longer-term solutions are found. And I am grateful to all those working hard to achieve this.

While we welcome these deliveries which provide a lifeline to people largely trapped beyond our reach, these last weeks have been especially frustrating to see pass without access improving, particularly since the re-instatement of the cessation of hostilities should have provided an opportunity to extend our reach. Instead, the delays in cross-line deployments are becoming commonplace. The first inter-agency cross-line convoy in September deployed on the 19th of this month. The first cross-line convoy in August only deployed on the 23rd of the month. This means that no aid reached many of those most in need through inter-agency cross-line convoys for the first three weeks of each of the last two months.

The delivery of assistance to the Four Towns, the first after the five months since aid was last admitted on 30 April, occurred only after numerous hurdles and delays caused by the last-minute removal of medical items, which required an additional set of negotiations with the



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

parties to reach a final agreement. Beyond the Four Towns, medical supplies have continued to be removed from humanitarian convoys, with more than 200,000 items having been removed this year alone. And linking humanitarian assistance of any kind to the tit-for-tat provisions of the Four Towns agreement remains unconscionable.

As I have said many times, the UN has been and continues to be ready to deploy. Our requests are submitted and trucks are ready to move, but they have been delayed by the same bureaucratic tactics: late responses, lack of facilitation letters, negotiations over the number of beneficiaries. While such problems are being faced with alarming regularity, this month also brought further delaying tactics to deny aid to those in desperate need, such as the slow clearance by Syrian security forces in the warehouses, and in the case of Moadamiyeh, the damaging of items by security forces, trucks had to be re-loaded in the presence of Russian officers to ensure the cooperation of Syrian security personnel. Just yesterday, a convoy intended for Douma, despite having received all necessary guarantees and approvals, was denied access at the last government checkpoint. After waiting over eight hours at the last Syrian checkpoint, it was forced to return to the warehouse.

Of course, insecurity has also continued to be a significant factor in limiting deployment. Just two days ago, on 27 September, a convoy to ar-Rastan was cancelled by the UN, when the trucks were at the last checkpoint of Syrian armed forces, due to airstrikes over the town that the UN and its partners were attempting to reach. This is yet another convoy where all sides were informed of the movement, and all sides provided assurances of security, but failed to deliver safe passage. Surely you can imagine the hell for the civilians, who woke up that morning hoping to finally receive life-saving aid, but finding themselves instead under relentless attack.

Mr. President,

We are now awaiting the response from the government to the October inter-agency convoy plan, submitted on 19 September. The UN has requested to reach 962,800 people in 29 besieged, hard-to-reach and priority cross-line areas. A response is expected in the next day, and I call on the Syrian authorities to respond positively and on time to this request, and to see the request response implemented in a timely manner. We cannot allow another month to go by where we wait three weeks before the first cross-line convoy. As insecurity increases, civilian suffering does as well. Sustained and safe access must be granted, based on the UN's assessment of need.

Mr. President,

Syria is bleeding. Its citizens are dying. We all hear their cry for help. As humanitarians we are doing all we can. Last week world leaders came to New York, sat around this very table and met in ministerial level meetings, all with no tangible results. Instead, while the world leaders were meeting, violence actually increased – more civilians and more

United Nations



Nations Unies

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

humanitarians were killed. It is time to place blame. It is time this Council stops tolerating the utter disregard for the most basic provisions of international humanitarian law.

So I call on the Council to act now, to do right by those who sacrificed their lives, and take whatever steps necessary to end this violence. The alternative simply does not bear considering. The depravity we see will only get worse. If the parties to this conflict won't, then the world's only hope is you: the collective, united will and measures of this Security Council. It is up to you to turn the tide, to create the conditions for aid to reach all in need. To end the sieges. To restore political dialogue. And to bring an end to the war.