



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, 27 October 2015

As delivered

Mr. President,

The members of this Council unanimously adopted resolution 2139 in February 2014 in recognition of the magnitude of the human cost this conflict carried. The purpose and intent of the resolution was clear and unambiguous: to seek protection for civilians caught in the midst of the fighting, to ensure that civilian facilities and infrastructure were not attacked, and to compel the parties to enable unimpeded access for humanitarians trying to reach people in desperate need of assistance. The twenty Secretary-General's reports submitted to the Council since the adoption of the resolution highlight the parties' contempt - month after month - of this Council's resolution and their minimum legal obligations under international law.

The failure of the parties to uphold the basic tenets of international humanitarian and human rights law has propelled the Syrian people to levels of tragedy and despair than could barely have been imagined five years ago. By any measure, the situation in Syria has worsened since the beginning of the year. We now estimate that some 13.5 million people in Syria are in need of some form of protection and humanitarian assistance throughout the country, an increase of some 1.2 million in just ten months. More than six million of those in need are children.

This is one of the largest displacement crises of modern times. Fighting and violence has forced over half of the people in Syria from their homes in a period of just over four years, many of them multiple times. There are now some 6.5 million people displaced inside Syria. In addition, nearly 4.2 million have fled the country, with neighbouring countries in the region bearing an enormous burden. An increasing number of Syrians fleeing the war and violence are willing to risk everything aboard unseaworthy boats and dinghies to reach Europe: of the 680,000 arrivals by sea in the Mediterranean in 2015, over 50 per cent are Syrian. They have a right to seek asylum without any form of discrimination.

Rising levels of fighting and violence over the last few weeks have had an enormous humanitarian impact, resulting in large-scale death, injury and displacement to civilians, particularly in northern Syria. Indiscriminate attacks on civilian-populated areas continue with impunity. In Aleppo city, for example, pro-Government forces and non-State armed opposition groups have continued mutual shelling inside civilian-populated areas of Aleppo city, with hundreds killed and injured in September. Meanwhile, clashes erupted in the city in late September between the Kurdish People's Protection Units, the Nusra Front, and non-State armed opposition groups, resulting in multiple civilian deaths and temporarily impacting humanitarian access to eastern Aleppo city. On 23 October, the main access route from Hama to western Aleppo city was cut due to an offensive by ISIL. We are very concerned at this development, which places at further risk some 700,000 people living in the western part of the city.

Latest estimates indicate that over 120,000 people have been displaced in northern Syria since early October as a result of aerial bombardment, as well as ground offensives among the parties. This includes some 45,000 people displaced from the southern outskirts of Aleppo city to relatively safer areas to the west and south following a Government forces offensive over the last week. Meanwhile, approximately 80,000 people have been displaced from northern Hama and southern Idlib governorates to relatively safer parts of these governorates since early October following an offensive by Government forces. Elsewhere in Syria, thousands more have been displaced in Homs, Rural Damascus, and Deir ez-Zor governorates over the past few weeks.

The pace of displacement in Syria remains relentless. Well over 1.2 million people have been displaced so far this year, many for the second or third time. Further displacement is expected to continue at a similar rate unless there is an end to the fighting.

Attacks on health facilities and health workers also remain relentless. The UN and partners have recorded attacks on five hospitals in Hama, Idleb and Aleppo governorates since the launch of recent offensives, leading to a number of casualties and their immediate closure due to severe infrastructural damage exacerbating an already dire situation for civilians living in these areas. Since the start of the conflict, Physicians for Human Rights has documented attacks on at least 313 medical facilities and the death of 679 medical workers. Such attacks should cease immediately; parties to the conflict must ensure respect for, and protection of, health facilities, workers and patients under international humanitarian law.

While we know where those considered most vulnerable are located, humanitarian organisations are still not able to get sustained, unimpeded access to millions of affected people. Latest estimates indicate that some 4.5 million people are living in hard-to-reach areas. Despite our best efforts, we have only been able to reach a small fraction of people living in these areas in 2015 as a result of active conflict, shifting front-lines, bureaucratic hurdles, and conditions imposed by the parties.

The parties to the conflict continue to use siege as a weapon of war in Syria. Following a comprehensive review, we now estimate that some 393,700 people are living under siege in Syria, including some 200,000 people in Deir-ez-Zor city by ISIL; some 181,200 people by the Syrian Government in various locations in eastern Ghutah, as well as Darayya and Zabadani in Rural Damascus; and some 12,500 people by non-State armed

opposition groups and the Nusrah Front in Foah and Kefraya in Idlib. The 26,500 people in Nubul and Zahra, in Aleppo governorate, are no longer considered besieged following consistent and credible reports that access to and from the enclave for people and commercial goods have significantly improved over the last three months, although access remains challenging and protection concerns acute.

Access to besieged areas remains pitiful and wholly insufficient. So far in 2015, the United Nations has only been able to reach 3.6 per cent of people with health assistance and only 0.5 per cent of people with food per month in besieged areas.

Last week, humanitarian operations begun under the framework of the Zabadani, Madaya and Foah and Kefraya and neighbouring towns ceasefire agreement reached in Istanbul on 22 September, 2015 with the facilitation of the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria. On 18 October, 31 trucks delivered medical and humanitarian supplies simultaneously to 29,500 people in Madaya, as well as the besieged areas of Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya. A joint UN/SARC/ICRC convoy accompanied twenty-three SARC trucks to rural Damascus, where two trucks crossed into Zabadani and 21 more entered Madaya and Bquine, hosting many people displaced from Zabadani. Eight trucks delivered a proportional amount of health, food, nutrition, NFIs and WASH supplies to Foah and Kefraya via a UN cross border operation through Turkey's Bab al-Hawa border point, with the support of SARC-Idleb branch. The United Nations and its partners stand ready to immediately implement the remaining points covered under the agreement, including the delivery of additional humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of the critically wounded.

This complex mission shows once again that when there is the political will, there is a way to improve the situation for civilians trapped in conflict in Syria.

Even as the political and military situation evolves, the immediate priority for humanitarian organizations remains to reach all people in need wherever they may be found in Syria. To do this, we must have sustained, predictable and unimpeded access throughout the country. While I welcome the continued progress made on visas for United Nations staff members by the Syrian authorities, this must be followed by urgent and significant progress in other areas. So far this year, only 23 of the 85 convoy requests made by the United Nations have been approved in principle by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and less than half of those approved have been able to actually proceed due to a combination of lack of final security clearances from Syrian authorities, lack of safe passage from non-State armed opposition groups, and insecurity.

I once again call upon the Syrian authorities to urgently approve the 46 currently pending inter-agency convoy requests and allow convoys previously agreed in principle which are awaiting their clearance to proceed. I also call on Non-State Armed Groups, as well as listed terrorist groups, to allow the deliveries they are preventing. We would be able to reach an additional 1.5 million people in dire need of assistance in hard-to-reach and besieged locations through these inter-agency convoys if approvals and safe passage was granted.

We all need to guard against becoming numb to the impact of this conflict given the vast numbers and sense of political impasse. Yet, recent developments in Syria are a telling

reminder that it is ordinary women, men and children who continue to bear the brunt of this conflict. Living conditions in all areas of the country continue to deteriorate sharply. Entire neighbourhoods and communities at risk from explosive weapons; over 11 million in need of health assistance, including 25,000 trauma cases per month; nearly nine million people unable to meet their basic food needs; 70 per cent of the population without regular access to safe drinking water amid continuing water cuts; schools and hospitals attacked; rampant poverty and unemployment amidst rising prices. Winter is fast approaching and is likely to further exacerbate the situation for many families.

The United Nations and its humanitarian partners will continue to respond to the growing needs to the best of their ability. While we are reaching millions of people per month, we continue to try and find ways to scale-up life-saving assistance throughout Syria in an extremely complex and insecure environment. Humanitarian workers are putting their lives on the line, but remain undeterred. I strongly encourage donors to maintain, and where possible, increase their generous support for life-saving humanitarian operations, as well as recovery and resilience activities, in 2016.

As I have said to this Council before, the crisis urgently requires a political solution which addresses the root causes of the conflict and meets the aspirations of the Syrian people who have suffered for far too long. In the absence of such a solution, I sincerely hope that the Council and relevant Member States will continue to use their influence with the parties to the conflict to remind them to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and to take all feasible precautions to avoid further civilian injury and loss of life.

Thank you.