

United Nations



الأمم المتحدة

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance

مكتب تنسيق الشؤون الإنسانية (أوتشا)

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

STATEMENT TO THE PRESS ON SYRIA

Damascus, 17 August 2015

As delivered

Good morning everyone.

Thanks for joining us here so early.

As you know, I have been in Syria for the last three days. I arrived on Saturday and I have seen for myself the shocking devastation wrought by the brutal conflict and the impact this has had on ordinary people.

It is my first visit to Syria and I wish it were not under such terrible circumstances.

Sadly, the conflict continues to escalate.

Last week we heard of shelling of Damascus by armed groups. While I have been here, we have heard appalling reports of new airstrikes on the besieged area of Douma.

Yesterday's airstrikes – on the central market area – caused scores of civilian deaths and hundreds of people were injured. Hospitals are scrambling to treat them.

I am absolutely horrified by the total disregard for civilian life by all parties in this conflict.

Attacks on civilians are unlawful, unacceptable and must stop. I appeal to every party engaged in violence and fighting to protect civilians and to respect international humanitarian law.

In the last two days I have visited Homs and Damascus.

In Homs I saw with my own eyes inestimable human suffering. In the Old City, I saw that almost every home had been completely destroyed.

Behind the broken windows of each destroyed home, I was sharply conscious that there had been people whose lives have also been shattered.

I sat with Ahmed, who told me his harrowing story amid all this violence and destruction. Above all, he said he wanted peace in his country. Despite the destruction and daily challenges, he and his family are glad to have been able to return to their home at last.

It is civilians who have borne the brunt of this conflict for over four years. At least a quarter-million Syrians have been killed, more than a million injured and almost half of the population have been displaced from their homes.

Due to cuts imposed by armed groups, at least five million people in Damascus have been without water for three days. This is the third time they have suffered this, this year.

Elsewhere in the country, two million people in Aleppo have also been deprived of their water supply – now for 17 days - while 300,000 people in the Dara'a area have endured water cuts seven times this year.

It is unacceptable for those engaged in conflict to use access to water and other services as a weapon of war.

Here in Damascus I met Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister al-Moallem, Deputy Prime Minister Ghalawanji and Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Dr. Faysal Mekdad, and other key officials.

We had constructive discussions on ways to strengthen humanitarian aid operations, and I hope that concrete steps will now be taken so that more people have a chance to receive vital aid.

I told them that the United Nations and our partners are providing assistance to millions of Syrians in need, including by crossing conflict lines and international borders, and we are ready to help many more.

I also expressed my deep concern for the welfare of the 4.6 million people stuck in hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

Freedom of movement of, and for, all people trying to flee the violence and conflict must be ensured by all parties.

However, we cannot scale up our operations to reach more people if we do not have adequate resources. I am very concerned by the lack of funding for humanitarian aid in Syria and the region.

Today - nearly three quarters of the way through the year - the humanitarian appeal for 2015 is less than 30 percent funded.

I ask the members of the international community to step up and provide us with the resources for our essential life-saving and protection work. People across Syria are counting on it.

This conflict - now in its fifth year – severely affects not only the lives of millions of people in Syria, but also continues to undermine the security of the region and beyond.

Later today I will return to Lebanon to see for myself the consequences for the 1.2 million Syrians who fled there for safety, but also for the Lebanese communities hosting them.

I will meet senior officials and brief the press in Beirut, after I visit communities in the Beka'a valley.

Before I leave Syria, I want to express my admiration for the courageous humanitarian workers who are staying and delivering despite the numerous challenges that they face. Their commitment is remarkable and their sacrifice humbling.

Above all I hope for a political solution that can be found soon so that we can give hope to the many millions of Syrian families who tonight are hungry and fearing for their lives.

Thank you.