

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

Statement to the Security Council on Syria
New York, 28 April 2016

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Mr. President,

It does not require me to say to each and every member of the Security Council, that the impact of five long years of conflict in Syria defies understanding, let alone its description. The human toll and suffering is sickening in this senseless fight where there is nothing is much left to gain. Hundreds of thousands are dead. Millions have been displaced. Countless families torn apart. Towns decimated. Basic infrastructure destroyed. For many who are merely surviving, life is miserable. Deliberately deprived of food and medicine, many face the most appalling conditions of desolation, hunger and starvation. We must all be ashamed that this is happening on our watch.

The recent Cessation of Hostilities has provided a much needed moment of respite for some of those who are suffering in this terrible conflict. Yet, the recent developments on the ground show a substantial and worrisome deterioration, not least with increase of violence reported in Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Latakia and rural Damascus. Just this morning Syrian Government forces are reported to have restarted using aerial bombardment in Dar'a Governorate for the first time since the start of the Cessation of Hostilities.

It is the duty of the Security Council to ensure that every possible avenue is explored to end the violence. I reiterate the call for sustained, safe, unconditional and unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance. The parties to the conflict, the Security Council, and the co-chairs of the ISSG must exert every effort to revive the Cessation of Hostilities. You must not squander the opportunity presented by talks in Geneva and by the cessation in hostilities to put an end to the massive human suffering in Syria. The world and the people of Syria need this. They need your action.

Mr. President,

It is civilians who continue to bear the brunt of the fighting. So, just the other day, an increase in fighting in Aleppo City since 22 April with reported airstrikes on eastern parts of the city and improvised mortar rounds and artillery shells impacting in western parts has left dozens of civilians dead and wounded. Civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals has also been damaged. Yesterday, airstrikes in eastern Aleppo City struck Al Quds hospital killing at least 20

people, including two doctors. Another hospital in western Aleppo has also reportedly been hit. It is horrific that the presence of a hospital or health facility is now perceived by neighbours to be a threat to their safety. As the chairman of the Humanitarian Task Force, Mr. Jan Egeland, said, this is a catastrophic deterioration.

On 19 April, a marketplace in Marat Al Numan in Idlib governorate was hit by airstrikes, killing more than 40 people and injuring some 145. A further 10 people were killed in a similar strike on a market in nearby Kafr Nubl. The killing of civilians, including five young children is further evidence of a grotesque want of humanity by those carrying out the attacks.

Fighting between ISIL and non-State armed opposition groups in northern Aleppo governorate continue. I am very concerned about recent reports of ISIL advances east of Azaz, which threaten several IDP camps. In this area, near the border with Turkey, some 40,000 people are displaced – again – with many struggling to find adequate shelter. In Atareb town, multiple airstrikes hit the compound of the White Helmets – the Syrian Civil Defense. Five brave men who dedicated their lives to saving others, were themselves tragically killed.

Violent clashes on 6 April between ISIL and the Nusra Front in the Yarmouk Palestine refugee camp have prevented people from leaving, and have significantly limited the community's access to much needed aid. While between 13 February and 7 April, UNRWA was able to provide people in Yarmouk camp with food and medical aid, the Agency has been unable to deliver additional supplies since.

Mr. President,

Despite the enormous challenge, through the sheer courage of our United Nations people on the ground and our humanitarian partners, we continue to deliver lifesaving assistance and support to millions of people across the country. The World Food Programme has reached 3.7 million people with food aid in March. UNICEF and WHO held a nation-wide polio campaign in March reaching over 2.1 million children. This week, UNICEF, WHO and partners began another immunization campaign to reach two million children in besieged, hard-to-reach and under-served areas.

Moreover, humanitarian cross-border convoys this year are reaching nearly twice as many people compared to the same period last year. In March alone, convoys provided food aid to over one million people, as well as medical supplies, non-food items, WASH and educational supplies to tens of thousands. Since cross-border convoys began in 2014, they have provided sustained assistance to many millions.

Humanitarian relief also continues to reach civilians through cross-line inter-agency operations. 21 convoys deployed in March, and 24 operations have proceeded already in April. Since January, assistance has been provided to 778,175 people in need in besieged, hard-to-reach and other priority cross-lines locations. This week, the UN reached Rastan, the third largest city in Homs governorate, for the first time since April 2015 - a year ago. 122,500 people received vital assistance, including nutrition, WASH, health, education and other basic relief items. In a sobering reminder of the risk our colleagues face, a mortar struck in front of one of the vehicles in the convoy to Rastan, injuring the driver and killing a civilian. Let me condemn such attacks

on humanitarian workers in the strongest, most uncompromising terms, and call again on all parties to allow unfettered and safe access to those in need.

Since 10 April, WFP has led and carried out 14 high altitude airdrops to those cut off by ISIL in Deir ez Zour city, meeting the immediate needs of some 100,000 people. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) is now distributing the assistance on the ground. While airdrops are only used as a last resort, with the support of many Member States, WFP is able to continue the operation to send food as well as other humanitarian supplies, such as medicine, nutrition, water and sanitation supplies.

Evacuations have taken place as part of the Four Towns Agreement. On 20 April the evacuation of over 515 people from the besieged towns of Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kafraya, including 80 medical cases, was successfully completed. This is the largest medical evacuation in Syria undertaken to date. But too late, sadly, for some. We should not forget the tragic deaths of two children and a young man in Madaya, whose requests for medical evacuation were rejected.

While I welcome the evacuation, I underscore the call on parties to the conflict to ensure that medical evacuations are timely and never tied to political agreements or issues of reciprocity. The provision of humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance to civilians in dire need must not be a political question. It must never be a bargaining chip in the war.

Mr. President,

International humanitarian law is very clear on medical treatment. The sick and wounded must be given the medical care required by their condition. Medical personnel must be protected in all circumstances. And attacks against medical facilities are prohibited.

Despite this, the withholding of medical treatment continues to be used as a weapon of war in Syria. We continue to receive reports of parties to the conflict ignoring these basic tenets of international humanitarian law. In March, Physicians for Human Rights reported one attack on a medical facility in Latakia, and that four medical personnel were killed, while OHCHR reported that a medical facility in Deir al-Asafeer in Damascus was destroyed by an airstrike. As I highlighted earlier, further attacks on medical facilities and personnel in Aleppo in recent days have destroyed another hospital and even another two.

The removal of medicines and medical supplies from aid convoys continues. Last week, surgical as well as basic health supplies such as antibiotics and pain killers were not allowed onto the Kafr Batna convoy. This week, on the convoy to Rastan, the Syrian authorities removed medicines from supplies, and scissors and anaesthetic medicines from midwifery kits. This inhumane practice directly leads to unnecessary suffering and loss of life. We must continue to press the Syrian Government to allow the delivery of medical supplies. This is not idle [talk] – it can be proved – and be in no doubt it will be when one day there is no more fighting and those responsible are held to account – and they will be. There can never be impunity for this behaviour.

Mr. President,

While the delivery of humanitarian aid and the capacity of the humanitarian community to overcome deplorable conditions and limitations are inspiring, it is important to remember that they are also stark reminders of the ultimate failure of parties to the conflict to uphold their fundamental responsibility to protect the people of Syria and respect international humanitarian law. The continued failure to do so will result in more death and suffering.

I remain particularly concerned about reaching areas where complete access has been regularly denied. The UN has submitted the inter-agency convoy request for May to reach 35 towns in critical need, and I call on access to be granted without delay, including to Darayya and Douma. As has been reported many times, these areas are in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

Following the 16 April needs assessment visit of the United Nations which did manage to get into Darayya, the first since 2012, the world has seen that both access is possible and that the need is acute and desperate. The town has been 80-90 per cent destroyed, there has been no electricity since 2012, and water, sanitation and waste management infrastructure are beyond repair. Households are unable to consume more than one meal per day and are giving priority for eating to their children. In the most severe cases, families are enduring entire days without eating, sending children into the streets to beg and being reduced to eating grass and wild vegetation. Following the visit to Darayya, the UN submitted a specific request to deploy aid to the city. Intensely frustratingly that has yet to be granted. While access continues to be denied, the population of Darayya remains trapped, hungry and – let’s be clear: starving. A word I never use unless it’s true.

As I noted in my report last month, I welcomed the simplification of procedures to request cross-line convoys. However, application of these simplified procedures has not been consistent. The Government did respond within the agreed seven working days to our April cross-line plan – approving 7 out of 11 locations. Syrian authorities also agreed to provide facilitation letters within three days so that convoys can safely proceed. However, delays in receiving the facilitation letters within the specified three-day timeframe have delayed many convoys, depriving civilians of much needed assistance. For the new process for inter-agency convoys to be effective, the timely issuance of facilitation letters simply must be met.

Mr. President,

We don’t just need sustained, unimpeded, and unconditional access, but real and enduring protection for civilians and an improved humanitarian situation for the millions in need. Access cannot be a one-off, or even an occasional event, and it cannot limit or prevent certain types of aid. The current levels of access still leave civilians starving, and without medical care. Even in places reached this year, the needs are complex and require a comprehensive and consistent humanitarian response, one which is currently often denied by parties to the conflict. Just as the humanitarian community relentlessly and bravely presses forward in efforts to reach more of the people in need in Syria, so too must the parties to the conflict grant that safe, unimpeded access. And they, all of us, and especially you, must work towards a sustainable political solution that can allow for humanitarian aid to respond most effectively.

The people of Syria cannot afford to see the situation move backwards again. If the international community fails to maintain political momentum, with a sustained Cessation of Hostilities, and

without full humanitarian access, the situation can and will only spiral further out of control. The international community simply must not let the chance we have today slip away. Frankly, I am not sure just how many more days or weeks or months the long-suffering people of Syria can endure this protracted humanitarian catastrophe.

Thank you.