

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

STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA

New York, 30 March 2016

CHECKED AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. President,

After five years of senseless and brutal conflict, we have all been longing for a glimmer of hope that the suffering of the Syrian people might finally be coming to an end. The past few weeks have brought such a glimmer, with far fewer civilians killed and injured since the Cessation of Hostilities came into effect one month ago. In some parts of the country at least, it has given a respite for people who have told us loud and clear that all they want is to be safe and for their families to be protected from violence. There has also been progress on humanitarian access, with the UN and partners reaching some additional besieged and hard-to-reach areas; some of which for the first time in many months or even years. However, much more is required, and we must continue to seek access to all those who need help. There remains no substitute for the process of permissions and careful negotiations with all parties for safe access to areas where vulnerable people are in order to meet their humanitarian needs.

I very much welcome the resumption of the political talks last week led by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. All of us must rally behind his tireless efforts to find a political solution that brings an end to the conflict and meets the aspirations of the Syrian people. After a chronicle of missed opportunities, this is the time for the various parties to come together and bring an end to this horrendous chapter in Syria's history.

Mr. President,

I will focus this briefing on the latest information on humanitarian access. I am pleased to report that we have seen some signs of progress over the past few weeks. Humanitarian access has opened up to some besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Since the beginning of the year, we have reached 150,000 people in 11 of the 18 besieged areas in Syria through inter-agency convoys. Some of the places, such as the Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya, collectively known as the Four Towns, have been reached each month this year. Efforts are also ongoing in order to reach safely the 200,000 people besieged in parts of Deir ez-Zor city through high-altitude WFP-led air drops.

Furthermore, through inter-agency convoys, we have reached some 199,000 people in hard-to-reach locations, including Al Wa'er and Al Houle in Homs governorate and Bludan in Rural Damascus governorate, as well as around 50,000 people in other priority cross-line locations where needs are dire. And, since mid-February, UNRWA has also been able to provide assistance to an estimated 19,000 Palestine refugees in Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahn, including to an estimated 6,000 civilians from the besieged area of Yarmouk.

I also emphatically welcome the recent commitment by the Government of Syria to simplify the administrative procedures for cross-line convoys and to answer our requests within seven days of submission and to ensure that the necessary facilitation letters are issued in three days. I am pleased to report that the Government of Syria provided a response to our inter-agency convoy plan for April within the specified timeframe. Last year, over 75 per cent of requests were not answered at all.

I also take note of the recent approvals from the Syrian authorities to reach over 20 hard-to-reach, besieged and other priority locations across conflict lines. Based on approvals received to date, the UN is currently working to deliver assistance before the end of April to over 800,000 people with acute needs in these locations. In addition, should the parties facilitate access, and security conditions allow, UNICEF and WHO aim to implement a nationwide vaccination campaign that would target some one million children.

Mr. President,

Even as we acknowledge the recent progress on humanitarian access, we must also recognize that it is only a first step to what is required. Truth be told, we are a long way from the sustained, unconditional and unimpeded access that is required of the parties under international law and was and is demanded by this Council in its resolutions. Humanitarian conditions remain dire throughout the country, with some 13.5 million people remaining in need across the country, and we are still facing daily obstacles to reach those who need our help the most. Details of these obstacles we have shared with Member States with influence on the parties, to see what more they can do to break these barricades to speedy, safe and unimpeded access, relief and evacuations of the sick and wounded.

Many of the 4.6 million people in need in besieged and hard-to-reach areas still remain outside our reach due to insecurity and obstructions by the parties. Even where we receive responses, these are often not approved. In 2016 so far, we have only reached some 30 per cent of people in besieged areas and less than 10 per cent of people in hard-to-reach areas.

Despite recent approvals for some, the Syrian authorities continue not to give approval to certain locations. From the recently submitted plan for cross-line convoys in April, only 6 of 11 locations were approved by the Syrian authorities and for some locations they specified the delivery quantities that would mean we could cover only a portion of the population in each area. We are still without approval to three besieged areas mere minutes' drive away from UN warehouses in Damascus: Namely Duma, East Harasta and Darayya. The situation is dreadful in these areas, particularly in Darayya where we continue to receive reports of severe shortages of food, clean water, medicines, electricity and basic commodities, with the food security and nutrition status

thought to be disastrous, with reports of people even forced to eat grass. The daily misery in these areas shames us all.

The humanitarian situation in many hard-to-reach areas also remains critical. For example, I remain deeply troubled about the conditions for the more than 210,000 civilians in northern Rural Homs, specifically the towns of Rastan, Talbiseh, Houla, Termallah, and Taldo, as well as 15,000 people in the adjacent area of Habarnafse and surrounding communities in rural Hama. People in these areas have essentially no possibility to move in or out of the areas and have diminishing access to clean water, medical care, and food. The recent convoy to Houla was vital and approvals for convoys to the other parts of northern rural Homs give hope that we will be able to alleviate some of the suffering, but we remain extremely concerned about the situation facing civilians in these areas.

We should also not forget the situation for the estimated nearly two million people living under daily oppression and terror in ISIL-held areas. We have little to no access to them and continue to receive reports of widespread human rights abuses.

Mr. President,

Even when we do gain access, serious concerns remain about the ongoing exclusion and removal of medical supplies and treatments from convoys. Over 80,000 treatments have been excluded or removed from convoys in 2016, the vast majority by the Syrian authorities. The range of removed items is scandalous – from items to treat child malnutrition to medicine for preventing bleeding after child birth. There can be no possible justification for the removal of these or any other basic medical items. I call on all parties, particularly the Syrian authorities, to allow for all necessary medical items and equipment, including surgical items, to be allowed onto the convoys.

Medical evacuations from besieged and hard-to-reach areas are also not being facilitated by the parties to the extent that they should be. While the UN and partners continue to do their best to follow-up on individual cases, this is clearly not enough. People continue to die unnecessarily as a result. I am not in a position to put a number on that but clearly this is unacceptable. Similarly, medical workers are not getting the access they need to undertake proper medical assessments and treat patients. Having a few hours with patients on the day of a convoy is simply not enough; we need regular access for medical and humanitarian workers for as many follow-up visits as are required.

Mr. President,

While the situation is acute in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, we must remember that this is a conflict that has affected nearly every Syrian. The destruction of essential infrastructure including schools and hospitals, the devaluation of the currency, the impact of sanctions, rising food prices, shortages of fuel and electricity, as well as lack of clean water has exacted a high toll on the majority of Syrian families and communities throughout the country.

We have to find ways of doing better and reaching all people in need, and to ensure they have access to basic and essential services, wherever they are located.

Mr. President,

As you know, as humanitarians, our objective is not political and it is not military. It is about providing emergency aid and protection to people in desperate need and precarious circumstances, wherever they are in Syria.

For that to become reality, however, the recent opening of access to some locations must only be the start of a step change in access. Access has to go beyond allowing more aid convoys to deliver limited supplies. We need to move beyond the notion that one-off, ad hoc distributions of assistance to a given besieged or hard-to-reach location is somehow sufficient and acceptable, because it is not and never will be.

To even begin to address the full range of humanitarian and protection needs in these areas, what we need is a permanent stop to the fighting, an end to the sieges, and safe, sustained, unconditional and unimpeded access so that we can meaningfully reach all those in need as often as is required and by whatever route is necessary. We also need civilians to be able to move freely in and out of areas to access basic services and assistance. And we need it now, before it is too late.

Mr. President,

I want to pay tribute to the courageous humanitarian organizations and workers who collectively come together to help millions of people each month through all available routes. In February, the World Food Programme, for example, delivered food for 3.8 million people; UNICEF provided water, sanitation and hygiene supplies for over 1.5 million people; WHO delivered over 800,000 treatments; and UNHCR delivered support for almost 500,000 people. Our NGO partners also continue to assist hundreds of thousands of people each month – both from within Syria and across borders.

Over the past weeks, the United Nations and partners have scaled up assistance to people in need, including cross-border assistance from Turkey to meet the needs of the over 60,000 people newly displaced close to the Turkish border due to the heavy fighting and aerial bombardment in Aleppo governorate throughout February before the start of the Cessation of Hostilities.

Mr. President,

Our challenge now is to scale up assistance further to reach the level required. We are ready to take advantage of any opportunity to assist people in need. On 15 March, five years into the conflict in Syria, 102 humanitarian agencies called for immediate and sustained access in Syria. I repeat that call today, particularly for the parties to the conflict and Member States with influence to guarantee:

- Full access for humanitarian and medical workers to assess the wellbeing of civilians in all communities and treat those who are sick and injured without obstacle or restriction;

- Allowing all humanitarian aid, as required by international humanitarian law, to reach, unimpeded, those who urgently need it – including medical supplies, surgical equipment, and nutritional necessities; and
- Support for an urgently needed nationwide immunization campaign for children.

These are practical and immediate actions that would mean the difference between life and death for many people. All parties to the conflict can agree on, and implement them, now.

The Cessation of Hostilities should also be the catalyst that finally brings an end to the indiscriminate use of weapons on civilians, residential areas, aid supply routes and other civilian infrastructure protected under international law. Already this year, far too many civilians have been killed or injured in direct or indiscriminate attacks by all parties, due to the continued use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including through barrel bombs and other aerial weapons, shelling and car bombs. It is time to say enough is enough.

Mr. President,

The lessons of history should tell us that peace cannot wait any longer in Syria. The consequences of failing to resolve the Syrian conflict – in Syria, in the region, and beyond - are now lamentably clear. The last few weeks have shown, however, that when there is the right amount of political will, the parties and the international community can come together to find ways to reduce the suffering of civilians and engage in talks to bring an end to the conflict. It is the sincere hope of all humanitarians that these talks pave the path to peace in Syria.