

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

**STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA**  
**Geneva, 27 May 2016**

*Checked against delivery*

Mr. President,

I returned yesterday from a town called Reyhanli, in Turkey, just across the border from Syria. What I saw there was harrowing – orphaned Syrian girls and boys ranging from toddlers to young teens with no family left to look after them. I went to a hospital and met Syrians who had been injured after the IDP camp they had fled to in Syria to escape violence was itself recently bombed. I sat down at Dr. Mazin's bedside as he struggled for life with appalling and severe brain, abdominal and facial wounds after he was struck by an airstrike on Al Quds hospital in eastern Aleppo on 27 April, as he was himself bravely saving lives. A bare whisper is all he could muster: "please, peace". I met refugee families traumatized by the effects of five years of constant war who dream of nothing more than returning to Syria to live a normal life.

I promised to carry their stories to this Council. I promised to highlight – once more – the tragic and ever-worsening situation in Syria. But truth be told, I have run out of words to fully explain how the actions of the parties to the conflict have led to the devastation of a country and its people. As the war continues, it is innocent civilians and children who continue to be subjected to even greater levels of suffering and misery than could ever have been imagined five years ago.

Mr. President,

I remain particularly concerned at the upsurge in violence across various parts of the country and its impact on civilians. Indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure – including schools and hospitals, mosques and public markets – continue with impunity and total disregard for international humanitarian law.

In early May, scores of civilians were killed and injured by strikes hitting two IDP settlements in Sarmada, Idlib. These were places where displaced people had sought sanctuary from the conflict. One of the strikes reportedly hit a school tent, resulting in the death of eight children.

Just this week, several terrorist attacks claimed the lives of over 100 civilians in the coastal cities of Jableh and Tartous. Over 40 patients and accompanying family members were killed and 35 people injured when a suicide bomber walked into the Jableh hospital and detonated an explosives belt. An emergency doctor and two nurses also died in that explosion, with another 11 health workers wounded..

Similarly, ‘Ziad Al-Buqaay’ – Khan Elshih’s last operational hospital – serving people in Khan Elshih, Zakia and surrounding areas - was reportedly struck by barrel bombs on 17 May. This hospital provided medical services to 4,200 patients daily, and served about 100,000.

Mr. President,

The continued use of siege and starvation as a weapon of war is reprehensible. We are continually monitoring the situation on the ground throughout Syria, and based on the latest information, we now estimate that some 592,700 people are currently living in besieged areas. This includes 452,700 people besieged by the Government of Syria in various locations in Rural Damascus as well as in the Al Wa’er area of Homs city, an area I visited myself just a few months ago, but which has been closed off since March. Elsewhere, 110,000 people are besieged by ISIL in Deir ez-Zor city; 20,000 people by non-State armed groups and the Nusra Front in Foah and Kefraya in Idlib; and 10,000 besieged by the Government of Syria and non-State armed groups in Yarmouk in Damascus.

These figures are shocking as they underscore the sharply deteriorating situation for civilians even while the Cessation of Hostilities is in place. In the most recent Report of the Secretary-General, the number of people in besieged areas was 517,700, up from 486,700 due to more accurate numbers of people emerging from Deir ez- Zor, Foah and Kefraya, and Yarmouk, as the facts on the ground have changed. But I must reinforce that these figures are really shocking: Today 592,700 people are living in besieged areas because of the appalling deteriorating situation in Al Wa’er on the other side of the very line I myself crossed last year, as reported to you in detail.

The punishment of civilians through besiegement tactics must stop immediately. The primary responsibility lies with the party who maintains the siege, and routinely and systematically denies people the basic necessities of life and freedom of movement. However, other parties that conduct military activities in or from populated areas, endangering their safety, also bear their share of responsibility for the immense suffering in besieged areas. And we cannot ignore the fact that many on all sides are profiting handsomely at the expense of innocent civilians from controlling the goods which enter through irregular and unofficial channels.

Mr President,

The humanitarian and protection situation in many hard-to-reach areas also remains critical, including in some that are on the brink of besiegement. I remain extremely concerned about the conditions for the hundreds of thousands of civilians in northern Rural Homs, specifically in the towns of Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldo, as well as in the adjacent area of Habarnafse in rural Hama. People in these areas have limited freedom of movement and diminished access to clean water, medical care, and food. The recent humanitarian convoys to northern rural Homs were vital but must be followed up by greater access if we are to alleviate the suffering of civilians.

The situation across Aleppo governorate also remains alarming for civilians. In northern Aleppo, just across the border from Turkey, the situation for tens of thousands of people is precarious, with many displaced multiple times this year alone as a result of heavy fighting between non-State armed groups

and ISIL. That fighting is ongoing as of today and is likely to fuel further displacement and vulnerability along the border areas.

In Aleppo city, fighting has continued to affect civilians over the past few weeks and also impacted humanitarian operations. The UN hub in the western part of the city has repeatedly been hit by shelling, while access for cross-border aid to assist 300,000 people in eastern Aleppo city along Castello Road, the last remaining route into the area, has been repeatedly cut due to air strikes and heavy fighting.

Mr. President,

The current reality in Syria is not something that we should, or can accept. There should never be impunity for behaviour which shows complete disregard for international humanitarian law, flouts the resolutions of this Council, and causes such immense human suffering. One day all those responsible must and will be held to account.

Mr. President,

Despite the extremely challenging environment, UN agencies and NGO partners continue their tireless efforts to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the Syrian population. Millions of people were reached with assistance in April, while UNICEF and the WHO began another nationwide immunization campaign to reach two million children. And cross-border shipments provided food aid to over one million people, as well as other types of assistance to tens of thousands more.

Cross-line inter-agency operations to besieged, hard-to-reach and other priority locations have continued, with over 800,000 people reached this year in these areas, and many more than once. We have recently gained access to besieged East Harasta with food and other humanitarian supplies for 10,000 people – a first since March 2013, over three years ago. In addition, since 10 April, the WFP successfully carried out 44 high altitude airdrops over the besieged city of Deir-ez-Zor. These airdrops mean that 762 metric tons of urgently needed food assistance – distributed by SARC on the ground – reached approximately 100,000 people. But several weeks of air drops have brought an amount of food equivalent to only one convoy. And be in no doubt about the challenges our partners are facing to distribute assistance by air. Airdrops are an option of last resort; they are costly, dangerous and technically very challenging.

However, as I have said before, the gravity and scale means that the UN must consider such options, but as a last resort, and not forgetting that the UN would require the approval of the Government of Syria.

Mr. President,

Deliberate interference and restrictions by the parties, most notably the Syrian Government, continue to prevent effective aid delivery. For example, on 20 April, the UN submitted its inter-agency convoy plan for the month of May that included requests to reach 904,750 people across 35 besieged, hard-to-reach, and priority cross-line locations. The Syrian authorities granted approval in full to only 14 locations with 224,000 people and conditional approvals on the type and amount of assistance to another

eight locations, for some 306,000 people; effectively leaving more than 40 per cent of the planned target population – including in Aleppo, Al Wa’er, and Talbiseh - without access to basic necessities and food. And that leaves me extremely concerned, of course.

We recently submitted our plan for June, requesting to reach 1.1 million people in 34 besieged, hard-to-reach and other priority cross-line locations, including all those places we could not reach in May. I call on the Syrian Government to approve this plan in full and to remove any and all conditionalities, not least as to the amount or type of aid that can be delivered.

Mr. President,

Even for the locations that were approved for deliveries for the month of May, the Syrian Government has severely curtailed the UN’s ability to reach those in need.

A convoy and assessment mission to Darayya – where 4,000 civilians have been besieged for almost four years – scheduled for 12 May had to be aborted due to unconscionable last-minute restrictions imposed by Government security forces. At the last check-point, Government forces removed all basic supplies, including nutritional items for infants. No other conclusion can be drawn other than that this was simply an effort to further punish civilians – and this time, infants.

Similarly, an inter-agency convoy that was supposed to reach Madamiyet on 14 May was unable to deploy. Security forces representatives never turned up to the warehouse to monitor the loading of trucks as previously agreed, despite constant outreach at various levels. As a result, the convoy was never given permission to depart.

At the same time, non-State Armed Groups continue to prevent a UN assessment mission from proceeding to the besieged towns of Foah and Kefrayah in Idlib governorate.

Moreover, the removal of life-saving medicines and medical supplies such as surgical kits, midwifery kits, and emergency kits has continued unabated, with supplies for an estimated 150,000 treatments removed from convoys since the beginning of the year. Since the adoption of resolution 2139, medical supplies for over 650,000 treatments have been removed from aid convoys.

These restrictions are not only violations of earlier guarantees and approvals obtained from the Syrian Government and other parties, they are actions deliberately and cynically designed to inflict more unnecessary suffering on civilians living in besieged and hard-to-reach locations.

Mr. President,

As you know, the international community came together for the World Humanitarian Summit, called for by the Secretary-General, in Istanbul earlier this week. There, I emphasized that we must all live up to our responsibility, collectively and individually, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people and make a real difference for the people who need our help the most. Syria is a stark example of why the Secretary-General called for the Summit. As the Secretary-General has said, we are ‘one humanity’, with a shared responsibility, not only to keep people alive, but to give people a chance at life

in dignity. The bottom line is that politically we continue to fail the people of Syria dismally in this regard.

On 17 May, the ISSG called on all parties to the Syrian conflict to immediately comply with the terms of the cessation of hostilities. It further called for the lifting of all sieges and urged the Syrian Government to swiftly approve UN delivery requests in their entirety. Frankly, the parties to the conflict, and those with influence over them, urgently need to turn this into decisive, positive action directly impacting Syrian lives positively on the ground.

However, let me be clear: protecting civilians and granting access should never be dependent on political negotiations or a bargaining chip for ad hoc deals on the ground. These are fundamental tenets of international humanitarian law and must be respected by the parties and all who support them.

There needs to be access to those in need; not just to a third of those in need, but to all; not just one-off deliveries, but sustained, immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout the country; not just access to deliver vaccines, but the full package of supplies, including medical and surgical items, delivered on the basis of the needs assessments made by the UN.

Sieges need to be lifted once and for all – and immediately. They only exist today because of a lack of will to end them.

Millions of women, men and children – and as I referred to in the very first paragraph of my statement, Dr. Mazin lying in that hospital bed in Reyhanli - and across Syria, depend on your action; and as soon as now.

Thank you.