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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY BRIEFING ON SYRIA**

**New York, 21 June**

*Checked against delivery*

Mr. President,  
Excellencies,

I wish to thank the President of the General Assembly for calling this meeting and taking this comprehensive approach to a briefing from the political, human rights and humanitarian perspectives and providing the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs the opportunity to brief on the humanitarian situation in Syria. I thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his detailed briefing and ASG Ivan Simonovic for his coming briefing on the human rights aspects.

In Syria, a conflict that started off as civil unrest in March 2011 has since transformed into an ugly and brutal war characterized by extreme levels of violence committed against civilians in a climate utterly devoid of protection in many parts of the country. A climate in which civilians have endured relentless attacks; mass displacement from their communities; the decimation of their homes and critical infrastructure; and despicable, medieval besiegement tactics, for years.

In the Syria crisis, the facts speak for themselves: hundreds of thousands killed; and well over a million injured. Life expectancy in Syria has dropped by wait for it – imagine this – 20 years. Approximately half of the population has been forcibly displaced, 6.5 million of them inside the country, in addition to the half a million Palestinian refugees. Overall, 13.5 million people are left in urgent need of humanitarian and protection assistance.

The conflict in Syria has destroyed the country's social and economic fabric, eroding development gains made over several generations: 80 per cent of Syrians now live in poverty, nearly nine million Syrians are food insecure amidst rising prices and food shortages, and two million children have been forced out of school altogether.

We should never lose sight of the immeasurable human impact of this crisis; the trauma and emotional toll on civilians, particularly young people, too long exposed to living in a

climate of violence and fear. A generation lost to the normalcy of violence and hatred, and no access to education which is the only route out and to hope.

Warring parties have displayed a brazen and brutal disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law, their use of indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks including the use of barrel bombs and other explosive weapons in populated areas, these are the primary cause of civilian deaths and injuries.

Civilian infrastructure and basic services – including people’s homes, health clinics and hospitals, schools, markets and settlements for internally displaced people – are relentlessly attacked even now, collectively punishing hundreds of thousands of civilians. Medical facilities, in particular, have been targeted in attacks, with Physicians for Human Rights recording some 365 attacks on 259 medical facilities and the death of 738 health workers attacked since the start of the conflict.

Amid this onslaught of violence, thousands of civilians in Syria are forced to face impossible choices each day: whether to flee to uncertainty and possible danger, or risk being killed at home. Run to where you can get a possible education for your children after years of no chance, no hope – just as any of us in this room would, faced with such an impossible choice. Almost 5 million civilians have made this choice, fleeing to neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey – some to Iraq, and relatively few, but nonetheless over 1 million, to Europe. My deepest gratitude goes to the local authorities, to the Governments, and to the host communities in these neighbouring countries for the generosity their hospitality and their solidarity, which they have shown their neighbours in need.

Mr. President, Excellencies,

Nonetheless, desperation means that more and more people are prepared to literally be taken for a ride by unscrupulous traffickers and make the perilous journey to Europe across the Mediterranean, where far too many continue to die. In 2016 to date, more than the rate in 2015 with an average of two full passenger jets per month of people drowning in the Mediterranean, right in Europe’s backyard. For the sake of humanity as well as security, we need to find a better, more sustainable way forward for the wider international community to share the responsibility in hosting Syrian refugees.

Mr. President, Excellencies,

While the conflict inside Syria has shown us some of the worst in humanity, it has also in some ways brought out the best in many people. In my visits to Syria and the region, I have spoken to dozens of Syrians who have retained hope despite their desperation. I have witnessed the deep generosity of families in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and beyond who are sharing their modest accommodation with displaced families. I have met volunteers and staff of Syrian NGOs and grassroots organizations; of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent; of civil defence teams, and the staff of hospitals, clinics and schools throughout the country who live and all too often die by their commitment to ensure the

survival of their fellow citizens. And I have seen it in the thousands of United Nations staff and humanitarian partners on the ground, who risk danger every hour of the day to get help to people who need it most. And I thank the Russian Federation, especially their Damascus diplomatic mission, for their good offices in facilitating many of the channels of communication with the Syrian Government which enable negotiations to be safely concluded for access.

Aid agencies are working day and night to assist millions of Syrians affected by this conflict month after month, whether from within Syria or cross-border assistance. This year alone, we have reached up to 5.8 million people with food assistance per month and delivered over five million medical treatments.

We are doing all we can but we require the resources to keep up our efforts. Today only one quarter of the appeal for the UN and its partners' life-saving work in Syria is funded. I do thank donors for the generous contributions so far – many of which were made at the London Pledging Conference for Syria and the region – but I urge them and others to step up their financial support to the humanitarian response. Pledges are one thing – but frankly it's your cash that matters. It's that which buys the programmes and services that actually save and protect innocent lives; and following London we're heavy on pledges and promised words, but frankly light on cash, hard real cash i.e. we need your pledges to convert to cash now.

Mr. President, Excellencies,

As for the courageous efforts of humanitarians, let me pay tribute to those on the ground they are there to help people in desperate need, should not hide the fact that insecurity, widespread fighting, bureaucratic obstacles and other restrictions put in place by all parties continue to significantly hinder the delivery of aid across Syria. Over 90 humanitarian workers have been killed since the start of the conflict while 29 United Nations Staff members continue to be detained or are missing, as I speak.

A staggering 590,000 civilians inside Syria are besieged, the vast majority of them by the Government of Syria. Civilians in Darayya, Duma, Foah and Kefraya, Deir-ez Zor and other besieged areas continue to face barrel bombs, sniper fire, and shelling. The barbaric use of medieval siege tactics is morally reprehensible and has no place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The UN and partners have reached over 330,000 people in besieged areas in the first half of this year, and each month we reach around a third of the total number of besieged people, compared to just a small fraction of that last year. This does represent a small degree of progress, but it is a long way from the sustained and unconditional access that we require. Malnourished babies, the chronically ill, require sustained support over time, not one-off deliveries.

Over three quarters of people who are stuck in hard-to-reach areas remain beyond our reach due to the combination of factors just mentioned. People are trying to survive in these areas, day by day, without the basic necessities of life. Parties to the conflict,

principally non-State armed groups and listed terrorist groups repeatedly cut services, collectively punishing entire villages and cities in the process. We are particularly concerned for those people living in ISIL-held areas, who live under daily oppression, human rights abuses and terror, as you will hear no doubt in a second.

Even when we do gain access, over 650,000 life-saving medical supplies have been excluded or removed from convoys over the past two years, including over 150,000 in 2016. The vast majority have been removed by the Syrian authorities. The range of removed items frankly defies belief – from infant malnutrition treatment, baby milk powder – what dual use is that, for goodness' sake, to medicines to stop women bleeding after childbirth. Medicine and other relief must not be turned into a cynical political bargaining chip. International humanitarian law is very clear on this: The sick and wounded must be given the medical care they require, medical personnel and medical facilities must be protected in all circumstances. There is no justification to break these laws.

The bottom line is that the current levels of access throughout the country still leave many civilians starving and without proper medical care. Medicines, food and water are not and must not be made into bargaining chips or favours that the parties to a conflict can grant or deny at will; they are basic necessities that lie at the essence of survival and the right to life. It is simply unacceptable that parties to the conflict continue to impede and frustrate our efforts to reach people. The political track and talks do not and cannot make conditional the provision of humanitarian access and relief, but safe, full, unimpeded access does give an enabling confidence-building, not least as the brave negotiations by the HC and colleagues can stick. As Staffan de Mistura had rightly said we the humanitarians must, as a matter of law, have safe unimpeded access to all those in need and we have the right to act independently, impartially and neutrally - no stop-go, no conditionality, and full and sustainable. We are a long, long way from that, from compliances by the Syrian Government, to this law it has signed up to.

Mr. President, Excellencies,

The efforts of the Security Council, International Syria Support Group, individual Member States, as well as many Syrians, have shown what can be achieved when there is the political will to resolve problems. Our collective engagement must remain steadfast to bring the prolonged and bitter suffering of the Syrian people to an end. The international community must demonstrate its collective leadership in the following areas to help bring about a long overdue end to this crisis:

1. Ensuring the protection of civilians; and civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities;
2. Bringing an end to the sieges and ensuring freedom of movement for civilians;
3. Ensuring that the parties to the conflict abide by their international legal obligations - and by Security Council Resolutions - to facilitate humanitarian access to all people in

need without discrimination;

4. Considering all possible avenues to ensure accountability to show perpetrators of violations that the international community will not tolerate such action in Syria or elsewhere;

5. Stepping up financial support to the humanitarian response;

6. Respecting the non-political nature of humanitarian aid.

We remain committed and ready to deliver humanitarian aid – through any possible modality – for civilians in desperate need. However, let me be clear that humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political action: only a negotiated political settlement will and can resolve this crisis.

We must show the people of Syria that the world has not forgotten them or their plight and indeed of their country. Not through more words of solidarity, but through immediate and concrete political action that brings an end to this futile cycle of violence and misery. And hard cash for meeting immediate needs – humanitarian needs – is now needed. The future of this and coming generations is on the line. The credibility of the international community is at stake.

Thank you.

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