Opening remarks to the Brussels IV Conference

30 June 2020

As delivered

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for participating in today’s event.

The Secretary-General’s words speak to the magnitude of this crisis. The numbers are really unfathomable.

The Syria crisis is in its tenth year; approaching the length of the combination of World Wars I and II.

The crisis has wreaked havoc across the region. I want to start once again by thanking the neighbouring countries, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt for their generosity in supporting Syrians who fled, and by urging the international community to provide more generous support for the refugee hosting countries. The economic strain is acute across the region.

Syrians inside the country and in the region are now being confronted with new challenges.

The Syrian economy is in a dramatic downturn. Prices of essentials – food, medicines, fuel – are soaring. The Syrian pound fell to a record low against the US dollar this month.

We are seeing food insecurity rise to unprecedented levels. The World Food Programme estimates 9.3 million people in Syria now to be food insecure. Almost half a million children suffer from stunting due to malnutrition.

I in particular want to echo the Secretary-General’s remarks last week, when he expressed full solidarity with the Lebanese people during the enormous challenges their country is facing. Costs of basic goods have tripled, and unemployment is increasing. In Jordan, recent survey data show
that, at the peak of the lockdown, two-thirds of families had less than one week of financial resources to draw on.

And now we have COVOID-19, which has the potential to cause much more suffering and loss, with preparations to tackle it inside Syria wholly inadequate in the light of the degrading of the health system through the years of crisis.

Let me tell you about some of the things we are doing to help address the crisis.

The UN’s Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan for 2020, for which we are seeking a little more than $6 billion today, will provide food assistance, medical services, better access to water and sanitation and education for millions of Syrian refugees.

Inside Syria, humanitarian operations in the first quarter of 2020 have reached more than 5.5 million people in government-controlled areas and through cross-line deliveries to the north-east.

That includes food assistance for more than 3.2 million people; nutrition support for half a million children; critical water and sanitation for 1.3 million people; 4 million medical procedures.

In addition, the cross-border operation into north-west Syria is delivering at unprecedented levels, providing a lifeline for 2.8 million people in need in the area.

Yesterday, I briefed the Security Council on the critical importance of extending the authorization for cross-border assistance, which the High Representative has just referred to, provided to the United Nations under Security Council resolution 2504. It expires in 10 days.

The humanitarian assistance we provide across Syria and in the region depends on the generous support of the States and constituencies represented here.

Your financial support saves lives and helps prevent the situation spiraling out of control. It is critical that this support continues.

Let me also note the public assurances by the United States and by the European Union that their sanctions programs relating to Syria neither ban the flow of humanitarian supplies, nor target medicines and medical devices. I welcome their commitments to fully and expeditiously apply humanitarian exemptions.

Our Humanitarian Response Plan and COVID-19 Response plan for inside Syria requires $3.8 billion for 2020, to assist nearly 10 million people across the country.

They include 438,000 Palestine refugees, who are among the communities most affected by the crisis.
Excellencies, ladies and gentleman

One of the most tragic consequences of the horror story of the last decade has been the robbing of millions of children of their right to a decent education. This will have major long-term consequences - by which I mean we will see the results for more than fifty years.

Inside Syria, an estimated 2.45 million school-age children are out of school while another 1.6 million are at risk of dropping out.

Despite the current socio-economic challenges, refugee-hosting countries continue to generously provide access to education services. An estimated 1.2 million school-age Syrian children in refugee hosting countries are enrolled in education programmes. But 800,000 more remain out of school, and many of those who are enrolled are at risk of dropping out.

One of the major challenges is funding.

So, I want particularly to urge the donor countries here today to give greater priority in your pledges to the education of these children – in your own interests, but most importantly in theirs.

Thank you.
Closing remarks to the Brussels IV Conference

Thank you for your participation, for the rich dialogue throughout the past week, and for your pledges today.

Let me reiterate the importance of this support. The conflict in Syria has lasted almost as long as the First and Second World War combined. A generation of children has known nothing but hardship, destruction and deprivation.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed – the added tragedy is that no one knows for sure how many. By any measure, Syria remains a humanitarian catastrophe.

Today we have counted USD X billion in pledges for the humanitarian response in Syria. These contributions will save lives.

In addition to raising funds, your statements and interventions today have sent a clear message of your continued commitment to the Syrian people.

I want to acknowledge the extraordinary solidarity and contributions of Syria’s neighbours, who remain committed to hosting millions of refugees while confronting unparalleled challenges of their own.

I also want to acknowledge the tireless work and commitment of our NGO and civil society partners, who are at the forefront of what remains one of the largest and most complex humanitarian operations in history.

Thank you.