Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for participating in the seventh meeting of the Syria Humanitarian Forum. Today’s meeting will focus on access and the best ways to reach the millions of Syrians affected by the ongoing crisis in the country.

The situation is getting worse every day and the widespread violence is having a devastating impact on the lives of ordinary Syrian women, men and children.

On my fourth visit to Damascus in January, I was conscious of the constant shelling – a reality of daily life in the city – and I have seen firsthand the destruction of lives, of infrastructure, and the erosion of services like health and education.

The UN estimates that 70,000 people have been killed. People do not feel safe or secure and as today’s UN Human Rights Commission report makes clear, violations of International Humanitarian Law and human rights abuses continue on all sides.

The number of people in need has quadrupled since June last year. Our estimates are that at least 4 million people require urgent humanitarian assistance, including two million people who have been internally displaced.

Some 400,000 out of about 500,000 Palestine refugees need humanitarian assistance. UNRWA [the United Nations Relief and Works Agency] are in desperate need of support to deal with the ongoing impact of the conflict on Palestinian refugees.

More than half of Syria’s public hospitals have been damaged; those that are open are short of basic supplies: antibiotics, anaesthetics, serums and painkillers. One in five schools has either been destroyed or is being used as a collective shelter.

And the flow of people out of the country continues. Over an eight-week period from mid-December, 255,000 Syrians fled their country. Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are together sheltering more than 830,000 refugees of the 860,000 refugee total. We are all very grateful to the governments and people of these four countries, and all the countries that have kept their
borders open to refugees. But it is clear that this is a crisis which is taking a heavy toll on the countries of the region.

Every effort must be taken to reach more people in Syria needing urgent help and attention and in neighbouring countries to assist refugees and the communities hosting them.

Many of the organizations here today are reaching more people every month with desperately needed aid. The World Food Programme, through its partners, has delivered food to 1.5 million people in areas under both Government and opposition control and plans to scale up to reach 2.5 million people by April. The UN Children’s Fund, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization with their partners have reached more than a million children with vaccination campaigns against polio and measles. UNHCR supplied blankets, mattresses and household goods to more than 400,000 people last year and UNICEF and its partners will provide chlorinated water to more than 10 million people. UNFPA and its partners have provided reproductive health services and psychosocial support to around 600,000 women in areas affected by the violence. I am particularly concerned by the testament of women who speak of the widespread prevalence of sexual violence in the country.

The recent approval by the Government of three additional international NGOs – Merlin, Mercy Corps and the Norwegian Refugee Council – is a step in the right direction, but it brings the total of international NGOs authorized to work in Syria to just eleven. We need more international partners with the staff, supplies and experience necessary to step up our efforts, as we establish humanitarian hubs in Dara’a, Homs, Qamishly, Tartous and Ar-Raqqा.

UNICEF and the WHO are among agencies that are crossing conflict lines, which means dealing with hundreds of uncoordinated armed groups on the ground. This is an urban conflict so control of areas in towns and cities can shift on a daily basis. The operational environment is challenging; for example, late last year we tried to send a convoy to Homs. It had to pass through 21 checkpoints; they negotiated their way through 20 of them and were turned back at the last one. But on average, 40-45 per cent of the areas that WFP has reached with food aid over the last few months are controlled by the opposition or are disputed areas, including Homs, Hassakeh, Ar-Raqqा, Idlib, Aleppo and Deir Ez-Zor governorates.

In the past three weeks, we have assisted about 65,000 people with medicines and household goods through targeted humanitarian convoys to hot spots and hard-to-reach areas. As part of this effort to expand cross-line operations, convoys have carried life-saving assistance to areas such as Talbiseh in Homs, Bab Al Hawa and Karameh in Idlib.

This success was largely the result of our ongoing engagement with the Government and members of opposition groups to improve access. The opposition alliance’s Assistance Coordination Unit, the ACU, facilitated a Joint Needs Assessment for northern Syria with 10 NGOs, supported by ECHO, DFID and OFDA. The assessment showed serious unmet needs in areas affected by conflict, which are extremely difficult for us to reach because of our inability to deliver aid across all of Syria’s borders.

The key principles which underpin humanitarian work, independence, neutrality and impartiality, are important to continually affirm in the Syrian context. To reach all those in need we need to find alternative means of delivering aid. General Assembly Resolution 46/182 which underpins our system of global humanitarian response makes it clear that humanitarian action must be undertaken with the consent of the affected country. The Government of Syria has made it clear
that they will not permit cross border access to those trapped in the north of Syria from Turkey. That is why improving our cross-line operations are so important.

Other factors constraining our work include a shortage of implementing partners on the ground. We are trying to increase the number of our local partners from the current 74. WFP has submitted a request to the Government of Syria to work with 28 new partners. This would bring the number of partners to 102. Other agencies are making similar requests. But local capacity is stretched.

Despite the improved working relationship with the Government on the ground, bureaucratic delays remain a concern. Seventeen humanitarian staff are waiting for visas for Syria. The process for moving convoys is cumbersome, and vital equipment is waiting for customs clearance.

Funding has also been a serious constraint. The fact that so many countries came together at the Kuwait Pledging Conference on 30 January and pledged more than $1.5 billion is a testament to the concern of the international community for the plight of the Syrian people. We are grateful to all those donors who pledged.

Our focus now is on turning pledges into commitments and disbursed funds, so that aid agencies can continue scaling up assistance to meet growing needs.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Syria Humanitarian Forum has played its part in coordinating the response to the humanitarian tragedy in Syria. Its greatest strengths are its inclusivity and its freedom from any political or security agenda. If we compromise on either of these, the forum will lose its independence and its relevance. We cannot let that happen.

To retain its inclusive nature, the participation of everyone involved in humanitarian action in Syria is crucial. This includes the ACU.

I am therefore asking all members to support the inclusion of the ACU at the next Syria Humanitarian Forum. I have discussed this with the representatives of the Government of Syria and they have expressed their opposition to such a move.

I look forward to hearing the views from the floor on this and to working with you to find solutions to the challenges we continue to face.

We all know that humanitarian action can not solve the problems facing Syrians. This crisis requires a political solution. I hope that all who have influence with the parties will succeed in bringing them to negotiations as soon as possible. We are watching a human tragedy unfold in front of our eyes. Eighty per cent of the refugees are women and children. We must do all we can to show them that we, the international community, care. We cannot let them down.

Thank you.