United Nations

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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

Statement to the Security Council on Syria
New York, 29 June 2015

As Delivered by Assistant Secretary-General Kyung-wha Kang

Mr. President,

Distinguished members of the Security Council,

I have the honour to deliver the following statement that has been prepared by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Stephen O’Brien. He deeply regrets that he is unable to present it himself in person today, due to long-scheduled travel that could not be changed, but assures you that he will do so on the next occasion.

Three years ago, the United Nations expressed deep concern and condemnation over the 1,200 people who had at that time been killed in Syria, and the 10,000 refugees who had fled to neighboring countries. There were already warnings that what was happening in Syria included atrocities that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Today, over 220,000 people have been killed and more than a million injured. Some 7.6 million people have been displaced inside the country, and over 4 million have fled across borders. And the violence continues with utter impunity.

Over the past month, this violence, which is perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, has neither abated nor diminished in brutality. The continued use of explosive weapons in populated towns and cities in Aleppo, Dar’a, Idlib, Damascus, Deir ez Zor, and Hasakeh governorates, among others, has killed hundreds of people, many of them children, and displaced tens of thousands. Indiscriminate attacks on government-controlled areas in Aleppo killed at least 116 people during April and May, nearly half of them women and children. In the past week, the situation has deteriorated significantly in Kobani/Ain al Arab following ISIL attacks to reclaim the city, reportedly resulting in civilian deaths and further displacement.

The use of barrel bombs in populated areas by the Government continues, causing hundreds of civilian deaths and widespread destruction across the country. Some of these incidents are described in the Secretary General’s report, including barrel bomb attacks that killed over 200 civilians in Aleppo, at least 24 of them children. A barrel bomb attack on a Mosque in Aleppo reportedly killed 10 people on 22 June.

Attacks on medical facilities continue in blatant disregard for international humanitarian law and resolution 2139. According to the Physicians for Human Rights, the month of
May was the worst on record since the start of the conflict. During that month, there were 15 verified attacks on medical facilities, all by aerial bombardment, including eight barrel bomb attacks. Ten medical staff were killed.

Intense fighting across the country is displacing tens of thousands more people. In Tabqa, some 50,000 people have been forced from their homes since May. In Dar’a, fighting between Government forces and non-State armed groups began in the early hours of 24 June, displacing at least 40,000 people. In Hasakeh City, an ISIL attack displaced at least 60,000 people in the past week, and in Raqqa, thousands of Kurds were told by ISIL to leave the governorate. Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon continue to bear the lion’s share of the ever-growing burden of caring for those who flee Syria. Turkey, for example, is already hosting 1.8 million refugees, and took in at least 23,000 of those fleeing Tabqa in mid-June. I thank these neighboring countries, and echo the recent comments by the High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres. The rest of the world needs to step up to do substantively more to address the consequences of this conflict. It is crucial that other countries welcome Syrians who are seeking a safe haven.

Despite the extremely challenging environment, humanitarian organizations operating from within Syria and from neighboring countries continue to reach millions of people in need. Each month, WFP is feeding approximately 4.1 million people, WHO is distributing medicines and supplies for around 2.7 million people, and UNICEF is reaching 2.2 million people with water, sanitation services, education and other support. UNHCR continues to provide over 240,000 people with core relief items and protection services, and UNRWA supports around 480,000 Palestinian refugees. This is complemented by the ongoing programmes of non-governmental organizations, which reached over one million people in May.

However, aid deliveries to the 4.8 million people in need in hard-to-reach areas remain a serious challenge, as a result of active conflict, insecurity and deliberate obstruction by the parties to the conflict.

UN agencies and partners are only reaching around 34 per cent of hard-to-reach and besieged areas each month. Of the 48 inter-agency requests made to the Government so far in 2015, 20 were approved following meetings in April and June and 12 have been put on hold because of insecurity, leaving 16 requests awaiting government approval. The recent progress in the approval of access to some locations needs to continue, and we call upon the Government to approve the pending requests and allow rapid, unimpeded and sustainable access to all hard-to-reach locations. We also note the Government’s quick approvals of a number of short term visas in May and June for UN and INGO staff who attended humanitarian meetings hosted in Damascus within the Whole of Syria context, and very much hope this trend will continue.

Parties to the conflict continue to besiege 422,000 civilians. Some humanitarian assistance, including medical supplies, was delivered to Eastern Ghouta, besieged by Government forces, during April and May; and assistance was airlifted into western neighborhoods of Deir ez Zor, besieged by ISIL forces. But the assistance that the UN and partners have managed to get into besieged areas in the past three months has been wholly inadequate.
Aid agencies are working hard to assist the millions of Syrians affected by this conflict. But these efforts require adequate resources. Only a quarter of the appeal for life saving work in Syria and the region is funded today. Food assistance across the region is now in jeopardy. Since January, WFP has had to reduce its food provisions by 30 per cent, and more cuts are anticipated in the next three months due to serious funding shortfalls.

Resolution 2165 continues to be a strong tool for humanitarian organizations to reach Syrians in need. Resolutions 2165 and 2191 have enabled the United Nations and partners to reach people in need who were largely inaccessible before. UN cross-border food and medical shipments have increased significantly over the past six months. The 92 shipments since 1 December have included food assistance for 2.6 million people; basic household items for over one million people; medical supplies and treatments for over one million people; and water and sanitation supplies for over 600,000 people. Active fighting and shifting conflict lines have had an impact on the use of certain crossings. Given the fluid and dynamic nature of the conflict in Syria, it is crucial for UN agencies to be able to use any and every route, across borders and conflict lines, to reach those who require assistance.

The parties to the conflict continue to violate human rights and international humanitarian law with impunity; killing and torturing civilians; blocking humanitarian access; destroying and besieging communities. The sieges on over 422,000 people must be lifted. Those who need protection and assistance in all parts of Syria must be provided with rapid and unhindered access, including to medical services and surgical supplies. The relentless use of barrel bombs by the government must be halted immediately, as must other forms of indiscriminate attacks on civilians, which are strictly prohibited under international humanitarian law. We look to the Council to pressure parties to protect civilians and abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law; and to promote and seek systematic accountability for violations.

For the people of Syria and humanitarians who assist them, it is hard to see an end to this nightmare of violence and destruction. We look to the leadership of this Council to press for a political solution.

Thank you.