



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, 23 December 2016

*As delivered to the Council by OCHA Officer-in-Charge, Director of Operations John Ging.*

Mr. President,

I provide this update to the Security Council today on behalf of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr Stephen O'Brien.

As we meet today, the evacuation of the eastern districts of Aleppo may have concluded but the situation in Syria remains catastrophic. Some 13.5 million people within Syria are in dire need of humanitarian assistance, including nearly 9 million who are food insecure.

2016 has been marked by horrific suffering and loss of so many lives, in a conflict characterised by ever increasing inhumanity against the civilian population. Attacks on civilian infrastructure – including schools, medical facilities, settlements for the internally displaced, and public markets – have destroyed institutions otherwise relied upon by Syrians for food, shelter, education and medical care. At least 126 attacks were recorded against medical facilities this year, more than 770 medical personnel have been killed during the conflict and one in four schools has ceased to function with some two million children out of school. And despite calls for an end to besiegement as a tactic of war, we end 2016 with hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians – 700,000 to be precise – still trapped in besieged locations, while humanitarians continue to struggle to access them with aid.

Mr. President,

The conflict in Syria has recently been most devastating in Aleppo, where the near-complete destruction of large parts of the city has subjected its civilian population to unspeakable horror.

The United Nations welcomed the passing of resolution 2328 earlier this week, in the hope that it would finally ensure that civilians in Aleppo were afforded all necessary protection and assistance. The UN role in Aleppo and in supporting the evacuation of the city has four main



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elements: 1) observation of the evacuation itself; 2) support to evacuees once they have left; 3) seeking access to the re-taken areas of eastern Aleppo to provide assistance in those remaining in those areas; and 4) ongoing humanitarian support to those in need across the remainder of the city.

The operation to evacuate people from the eastern districts of Aleppo drew to a close late last night. Overall, more than 35,000 people were evacuated; including some 20,000 people since the adoption of resolution 2328. Those evacuated included civilians and fighters, and their families.. Some 734 people were medically evacuated by ambulances according to the World Health Organization.

To achieve this, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) were in the lead, working to ensure people waiting to leave could do so. Overall, 308 buses, 61 ambulances and 1,231 private vehicles were used in the evacuation, crossing numerous checkpoints from besieged Eastern Aleppo through the western part of the city and into western rural Aleppo and onwards to Idlib.

In parallel, an estimated 1,300 people were evacuated from the besieged villages of Foah and Kefrayeh in Idlib.

Due to lack of approval by the Government of Syria, the UN team has not had access to Eastern Aleppo in recent months – but, since 15 December has undertaken a monitoring and observation function, stationed around the clock close to the Ramouseh checkpoint in the government-controlled part of Aleppo. Additional UN staff were sent from Damascus in support. And in accordance with resolution 2328, the UN team observed the evacuation of buses and ambulances and, to the extent possible, monitored whether anyone was forcibly disembarked, detained or otherwise mistreated as they crossed through the checkpoint area. ICRC and SARC teams were present directly at the evacuation point and accompanied the convoys as they crossed each of the checkpoints. Further, humanitarian organisations were present on the non-State armed group side to receive those evacuated to ensure they received essential assistance.

The evacuation operation was an extremely complex undertaking, and was punctuated by frustrating stops and starts due to negotiations between the relevant parties who were setting the terms and conditions for the evacuations including insisting on synchronising evacuations from eastern Aleppo and evacuations from besieged Foah and Kefraya.

Mr. President,



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Once evacuated from the besieged areas, civilians had the option to go where they wished. The overwhelming majority went to non-State armed group areas. Two reception centers, in Atareb (Aleppo) and Sarmada (Idlib) were set up to receive those evacuated and information centers in Orem al Kubra and Kafr Naha continue to provide basic services and details about additional humanitarian support. While the majority opted initially to go to reception sites, many have subsequently moved on to be hosted by family and friends. Humanitarian organisations have recorded the arrival of 23,615 people to the reception centers and to more than 60 villages. Approximately 1,000 people were reported to have arrived in camps along the Turkish border. Meanwhile a small number of those evacuated also chose to go to the Government areas in western Aleppo city.

Those evacuated from Foah and Kefrayeh were initially moved to IDP reception centers in Aleppo city, while some stay in Aleppo, others have moved on to sites prepared by the government in Tartous, Homs and Latakia. The United Nations teams in Homs and Tartous have been providing humanitarian support.

Mr. President,

Humanitarian needs amongst those evacuees arriving in reception centres have been acute. This is a displaced population who have endured months with little access to food, medical care or other essential items, so many of whom are physically and psychologically traumatised by deprivation and bombardment that they have endured. Children are particularly affected. Families have been separated throughout the evacuation movement and there are reports that at least 75 children being separated or unaccompanied upon departure from eastern Aleppo. Multiple cases of moderate and severe malnutrition have also been reported.

The evacuation process itself was difficult and many times dangerous; a number of security incidents were reported during the evacuations. The UN received credible reports of non-Syrian pro-government forces in Western Aleppo stopping a bus of 800 people on 16 December, detaining and beating 10 and reportedly killing another. Further, 20 buses were reportedly attacked and burned on 18 December by a non-State armed group while en route to the evacuation site [in Foah and Kerfraya]. Other protection issues were reported, including people stranded in buses in harsh security and weather conditions, prevention of evacuations of some civilians by non-State armed groups, sporadic cases of detention of people at checkpoints, and ill-treatment and harassment of some people as they were being evacuated.

Mr. President,



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The United Nations and its partners mobilised a comprehensive response to make sure evacuees have the basic essentials. Over 30 partner NGO organizations are on the ground in Idlib. Evacuees at reception centres are provided basic services to meet immediate needs, including food, winterized shelter and non-food items, as well as hygiene and sanitation products. Medical and psychosocial services are also available. Health partners are serving the reception centres and neighbouring villages through 22 mobile clinics. Specialised services for individuals with specific needs, including women and girls, as well as for separated or unaccompanied children are also available. Some 95 serious medical cases have been transferred to Turkey. The humanitarian teams on the ground will continue to scale up and respond as necessary to ensure urgent and life-saving needs are met.

Mr. President,

I would like to update and notify the Council of the arrangements undertaken pursuant to paragraph 7 of resolution 2328. While supporting the evacuation process was our immediate priority, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria has also submitted a formal written request to the Government of Syria seeking a blanket travel authorization to Aleppo for all UN senior staff in country, as well as humanitarian access to parts of Aleppo retaken by the government yesterday.

There are currently 105 UN staff members in Aleppo. Of these, 34 were fully dedicated to monitoring evacuations from eastern Aleppo within the framework of resolution 2328 while the remaining staff have been carrying out humanitarian response throughout the city. As part of the ongoing surge support to Aleppo, the UN is requesting agreement from the government of Syria today to surge up to 100 additional staff, including up to 30 international staff to strengthen monitoring and response in eastern Aleppo.

Mr. President,

Under the auspices of resolution 2328, we are ready to implement a plan for all districts of eastern Aleppo in the coming days, as soon as we receive agreement from the Syrian Government to deploy. To date, the UN and partners have been able to access nearly all formerly besieged neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo except those retaken by the Government of Syria as of yesterday. A team of 16 UN staff along with four armoured vehicles are on standby to deploy to these last inaccessible areas as soon as government permission is granted.

For all areas formerly besieged, in the first phase, assessments will be conducted of the number of civilians in these areas, their needs and the status of civilian infrastructure, including housing, food, medical care and other essential services. Medical teams are on standby to evacuate all



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remaining critical medical cases and life-saving items are available for those in urgent need. In the second phase, the UN and partners will launch a comprehensive multi-sector response in conjunction with partners and other relevant institutions, as well as the deployment of additional surge staff as needed. This will include emergency assistance to residents including shelter rehabilitation, solid waste and debris removal, and livelihood support as soon as possible, as well as rehabilitation of basic services. Throughout, UN teams would be on the ground in the neighbourhoods as much as possible to monitor and observe the situation and ensure the well-being of civilians, but all of this is subject to consent of and coordination with the Syrian Government, which is pending.

Mr. President,

I take this opportunity to pay particular tribute to the heroic staff of ICRC and SARC, as well, as the NGOs and United Nations colleagues working diligently on providing lifesaving response. All who have been on the frontline of the evacuation operation – we salute their courage, persistence and sacrifice, which inspire us in a common humanity we should all share.

Mr. President,

I turn now to areas outside of Aleppo, where the humanitarian situation is dreadful. In neighbouring Idlib governorate, the towns of Fouh and Kefraya remain besieged by non-State armed opposition groups who otherwise control the vast majority of the territory. As part of the agreement reached about the evacuation of Aleppo, evacuations in these towns is scheduled to resume on a tit-for-tat basis with Madaya and Zabadani in the coming days. As we have seen with the attack on the buses going to Foah, protection concerns are very high for the residents of the enclave.

Mr President,

There are also broader concerns that the civilian population in Idlib are at risk of suffering the same fate as those in Aleppo if it becomes the focus of a new and more intense offensive. Currently, there is an estimated population of around 2 million people, 700,000 of whom are IDPs, including 35,000 from eastern Aleppo this month. The UN and its partners currently access vulnerable communities through its cross-border work out of Gaziantep, and support approximately 700,000 people each month with food, 340,000 with medical treatments, and some 230,000 with WASH assistance each month.

In Al Wa'er, a besieged neighbourhood on the outskirts of Homs city, the situation also remains of critical concern. Immediate humanitarian intervention is required to prevent the besieged



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neighbourhood, which hosts an estimated 50,000 civilians, from facing acute shortages of basic and life-saving items and collapse of already limited medical services. Food stocks are running out as we speak and since 26 November, medical evacuations have reportedly not been permitted. Two critical cases identified by the UN, one involving a pregnant woman, are in need of urgent evacuation.

Mr. President,

We also continue to follow anti-ISIL operations occurring around Al-Bab and Raqqa with concern. The reported intensification of fighting from 8 December around ISIL-controlled Al-Bab town, including through airstrikes, is expected to result in further displacement. Preparations are ongoing in the surrounding areas to receive potential IDPs from the town, while UN partners continue to support the 10,000 IDPs displaced by earlier fighting. In Raqqa, the primary concern is the lack of humanitarian access and protection services. Reports indicate that people are in dire need of health services and food insecurity is a growing problem. In this regard, UN Access to Hasakeh is a major concern, depending on a costly air bridge from Damascus.

ISIL advances in Palmyra and nearby areas in eastern Homs are also a major concern, resulting in displacement of thousands of people to Homs city and surrounding areas. We again commend SARC and other partners for providing assistance to those displaced in such difficult circumstances.

Mr. President,

I am pleased to report that there has been some improvement of the situation at the Berm along the Syrian-Jordanian border. On 22 November, the UN resumed life-saving humanitarian assistance at the Berm through a newly constructed distribution point negotiated in September 2016. Latest figures for the distribution of food and non-food items are 8,404 households comprising 31,094 individuals in Rukban. In addition, distributions started in Hadalat, and a new service facility including a health clinic has been completed enabling the delivery of health assistance. The water infrastructure is projected to be completed by January 2017.

Mr. President,

As has been noted to the Council in the past, the United Nations and partners reach some six million people in need every month through all modalities available. Cross-line inter-agency operations to besieged, hard-to-reach and other priority locations are a particularly vital life-line for civilians in those vulnerable communities. Nearly 1.3 million people have been reached this year in these locations, multiple times.



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Though we continue to operate in an environment of acute humanitarian need, we are hindered by persistent obstacles in delivering much needed assistance. For cross-line inter-agency convoys, ongoing insecurity in many areas, and administrative delays on the part of Syrian Government in the approval of facilitation letters and convoy plans continue to hamper our efforts. What was reduced to a two-step approval process earlier this year has gone back again to being a 10-step process and we have only secured agreement from the Syrian Government for one convoy so far this month, reaching 6,000 people. This is despite receiving initial approvals to reach almost 800,000 people in December.

We need timely approvals and simplified approval procedures. We have immediate capacity to deliver to 300,000 people in besieged and hard to reach areas per week, should the access be allowed by the parties to the conflict.

Mr. President, distinguished members of the Security Council,

We end 2016 at a place where humanitarian and protection needs are as acute and severe as they have ever been amidst continued fighting across the country.

Despite all the challenges, the United Nations, ICRC, SARC and our key humanitarian partners, though their heroic staff on the ground continue to try to reach every Syrian in need, but collectively we are falling unforgivably short in our responsibility at the global level to support them and I therefore call upon all Members of the Council and all parties to the conflict and their allies to redouble their efforts to end this conflict and in the meantime provide more effective support to humanitarian action for the innocent victims of this conflict.

As has been stated so many times, there is no humanitarian solution to this crisis. We welcome the announcement by the UN Special Envoy de Staffan de Mistura on the resumption of political talks in February. As the number of those dying, displaced and suffering continues to rise as we end 2016, a new political commitment to peace will be needed if 2017 is to offer any different prospect than the death and destruction of the past five years.

Thank you.