



**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MARK LOWCOCK**

Statement to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

29 November 2017

As delivered

Mr. President,

Last week we released the United Nations 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria. It lays out the continued plight of the Syrian people after almost seven years of conflict. 13.1 million people urgently need humanitarian assistance and protection. Of them, some 5.6 million people are in acute need. Syria remains the world's largest and most dynamic displacement crisis, with half of all Syrians displaced from their homes. More than 6,500 people have been displaced on average every day in the first nine months of 2017, while some 2,500 people have gone back home.

The crisis continues to affect the vulnerable most severely. An estimated 1.75 million children, or almost one school-age child in three, are out of school. One third of schools are damaged or destroyed. Fewer than half of Syria's health facilities are fully operational, leading to thousands of preventable deaths from injury or disease.

Nearly 3 million people continue to live in besieged and hard-to-reach areas throughout Syria, including close to 420,000 in 10 besieged areas. The vast majority of them, 94 per cent, are in eastern Ghouta. The remaining six per cent are in Foah and Kefraya in Idleb governorate, and in Yarmouk in Damascus.

Mr. President,

I want to touch upon specific issues of concern, and then I will update you on the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Fighting has escalated in eastern Ghouta and Damascus. The World Health Organization [WHO] reports that from 14 to 17 November, 84 people were killed and 659 people were injured,



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including hundreds of women and children. Earlier this week, airstrikes on Duma and other areas reportedly resulted in further civilian deaths. Over the same period, more than two hundred mortar shells and rockets have reportedly been fired on residential areas in Damascus resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries.

Against this background, news over the last two days of a ceasefire in eastern Ghouta would be – if true and if sustained – important.

But I am extremely worried about the food crisis in eastern Ghouta. Despite efforts made to reach them, only 100,000 people out of an estimated population of 400,000 in the enclave have received food assistance this year. And those people are only getting occasional one-off deliveries.

The closure of the only crossing point into the area on 3 October together with the increase in air and ground strikes has resulted in a rapid deterioration of the situation. The World Food Programme [WFP] reports that agricultural areas in eastern Ghouta are difficult to access because of fighting, and that their output is poor because of lack of water for irrigation.

I am also deeply concerned about a growing number of people, including children, with complex medical cases, now reaching nearly 500, who require urgent medical evacuations.

Mr President,

The available evidence suggests severe acute malnutrition rates among children in eastern Ghouta have increased fivefold in the past ten months. UN staff have seen this first hand, through assessments made during convoys to Kafr Batna and Duma over the last two months. Children dying from malnutrition is preventable if we get more, and more regular, aid convoys in. I had constructive discussions on this in Moscow and Tehran last week and I hope that these will result in meaningful progress.

The situation in north-east Syria also remains a cause for concern, as fighting continues down the Euphrates river towards the border with Iraq. Since the beginning of the anti-ISIL offensive in November last year, airstrikes and clashes have displaced more than 436,000 people from and within Raqqa governorate.

Another 350,000 people have been displaced from and within Deir ez-Zor governorate since August 2017.



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The risk from explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices continues to hamper humanitarian access throughout the north-east, including to the cities of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. This is reportedly resulting in trauma incidents and deaths as civilians return to Raqqa city.

New restrictions on humanitarian access and delivery in the north-east are limiting access to a number of people we had previously been able to reach with help. Since 9 November, the UN has faced a series of bureaucratic impediments imposed by the parties in the area. As a result, the delivery of humanitarian assistance was curtailed for much of the past month. That occurred as needs continue to rise, with 125,000 displaced people moving north in Deir ez-Zor governorate so far this month.

Mr President

At least 30,000 Syrians remain stranded in dire circumstances on the ‘Berm’ along the Syrian-Jordanian border. Following my visit to Amman last month, I remain hopeful that we can find a sustainable solution for those people, while at the same time enabling immediate life-saving assistance for them.

I am also concerned about increasing displacement in north-western Syria. Nearly 70,000 people have been displaced to Idleb governorate in recent weeks, while over 27,000 people were displaced within different parts of the governorate in the same period.

As previously, Mr. President, I repeat the Secretary-General’s call on all parties to the conflict in Syria to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure as required under international humanitarian law and human rights law, and to allow unimpeded humanitarian access to those in need.

Despite the constant challenges that are inherent in operating in the midst of a violent conflict, the UN and its partners continue to provide life-saving assistance to millions of people across Syria every month. In September, UN support ensured 4.3 million people received food baskets, 1.7 million people benefitted from water and sanitation assistance, and some 1.7 million medical procedures were undertaken.

Mr. President,

I will briefly update you on UN aid delivery: firstly to areas controlled by the Government of Syria, secondly, cross-line deliveries, and thirdly, cross-border assistance.



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Assistance to areas under the control of the Government of Syria continues to represent the majority of the UN response. In October, some 2.8 million people in these areas were reached with food assistance, delivered through some 1,500 WFP convoys. WHO treated over 123,000 patients with medical conditions. UNICEF provided nutrition assistance to 183,000 people. Other agencies, including UNHCR, IOM, FAO, UNFPA, UNDP and UNRWA, all provided life-saving assistance through their humanitarian programmes in areas under the control of the Government of Syria.

Second, cross-line convoys continue to be heavily restricted. On average, just over a quarter of the beneficiaries planned to be reached in the bi-monthly plans receive aid. This limited response is despite an agreement with the Government of Syria on bi-monthly access plans and the creation of the de-escalation zones that cover two of the main areas we attempt to access: eastern Ghouta and northern rural Homs.

So far in November, only four cross-line convoys have got through: two to northern rural Homs, reaching just over 200,000 people, and two to besieged eastern Ghouta, Duma and Nashabiyeh, in rural Damascus, reaching just 28,000 people. The convoy to Nashabiyeh, serving about 7000 people, only reached its destination yesterday, at the second attempt, after having to turn back on Monday because of fighting. Airstrikes were reported in the vicinity, despite security assurances from all sides.

Medical items continue to be removed from convoys. As the Secretary-General has said, improved access through cross-line convoys is critical to ensure that the severe and worsening situation of civilians, including children, is improved.

Third, the United Nations continues to deliver life-saving assistance to those living in north-western and southern Syria via cross-border deliveries. This month, some 800,000 people have received food assistance. In addition, medicines, educational supplies and other non-food items are regularly delivered to hundreds of thousands of people, cross border.

UN cross-border assistance is checked and verified by the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism at designated border crossing points (Bab al-Hawa, Bab as-Salam and Al-Ramtha). Every truck is checked to ensure it only contains humanitarian supplies.

Deliveries are confirmed by UN-contracted third-party monitors upon arrival at warehouses inside Syria. They check the items being off-loaded against the waybill. Then there is post-distribution monitoring, including by independent third parties and incorporating community



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feedback. UN cross-border assistance is also subject to the normal accountability mechanisms between the donors and the delivery agencies and that too includes a verification system.

In the first 10 months of 2017, over 750,000 people on average each month were reached through UN cross-border activities. This sustained assistance is essential for those in need.

So, Mr. President, it is clear that each of the three modes of delivery by the UN is critical for the people of Syria, and that there is complementarity between them. As needs remain high, it is important to preserve all means of access.

Civilians in areas not under the control of the government are reached in much larger numbers, with much greater consistency, and with much more comprehensive support through cross-border operations than they are through cross-line operations.

It is for that reason that the Secretary-General has called for a renewal of resolution 2165. As I have told you before, the renewal of the resolution is essential to save lives.

Finally, Mr President, I want to let you know that following consultations with the authorities, I plan to visit Syria in early January to assess the situation, and to discuss how we can improve assistance to those in need.

Thank you very much.