I am deeply concerned for the safety of civilians behind ISIL lines in western Mosul.

Although the UN is not present in the areas where fighting is occurring, we have received very disturbing reports of families being shut inside booby-trapped homes and of children being deliberately targeted by snipers. Families in the city still lack access to clean water and medicine and many have only limited access to food.

When humanitarian agencies developed their contingency plan for Mosul last summer, we estimated that as many as one million civilians might flee the city and that 750,000 people would need assistance in a worst case scenario. Seven months into the fighting and almost 760,000 people have already fled their homes.

Yesterday, the Government asked civilians in districts surrounding and inside the Old City to leave and seek safety across government lines. We don’t know for sure how many civilians are still in ISIL-held districts, but as many as 200,000 additional people may try to leave in coming days.

I remind all parties to the conflict of their obligation under international law to protect civilians against all forms of violence and to ensure people in need have access to the assistance they require. Those who choose to flee their homes to access assistance must be free to do so without hindrance. In the context of Mosul, where ISIL fighters are known to be using human shields in densely-populated neighbourhoods, parties to the conflict must take all feasible precautions to protect civilian lives.

International law is unambiguous. The protection of civilian lives is a legal and moral duty that stands above all other objectives.

New York, 26 May 2017