

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Statement to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

New York, 24 April 2019

Mr. President, distinguished Council members,

In eight years of conflict, Syrians have lived through a litany of horrors. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, many more maimed physically and psychologically, and Syrians in the northeast and northwest remain in constant fear of yet another humanitarian catastrophe unfolding. Today, more than eight in ten people live below the poverty line and nearly 12 million people in Syria continue to depend on humanitarian assistance.

I would like to highlight three key areas of concern:

First, on Idlib, where escalation of hostilities since February is reportedly causing civilian death and injury, as well as significant destruction of infrastructure. Well over 200 civilians have reportedly been killed since February as a direct result of increased military clashes and attacks, with many more injured. Fighting has also caused more than 120,000 people to flee to areas closer to the Turkish border.

Civilian structures – particularly schools and hospitals – continue to be hit. There were 11 attacks on schools in February and March alone and we have heard reports that, on Monday, two schools were impacted by airstrikes, resulting in three children being killed. In addition, many schools in the area have been shuttered indefinitely due to the hostilities.

We count on all parties, especially Turkey and the Russian Federation, as guarantors of the de-escalation agreement, to rein in the current escalation, and press all parties to the full implementation of the 17 September Memorandum of Understanding. In addition, it is as critical as ever for all parties to respect international humanitarian law and take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize civilian harm. As the Secretary-General has said many times before, any large-scale military offensive in Idlib would come at an unacceptable cost in terms of loss of human lives and suffering.

Across northwestern Syria, an estimated 2.7 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance, including more than one million children. This includes 1.7 million internally displaced persons, many of whom have been displaced multiple times and have been living in camps for years. Some 40 per cent of children are out of school. Two million people rely on water trucking for most of their clean water. Humanitarian partners continue to respond to evolving needs, with thousands of those most recently displaced receiving food and other assistance. Each month, some 1.7 million Syrians are reached with critical assistance through cross-border operations out of Turkey. Ensuring this sustained humanitarian access is critical.

Mr. President,

Second, I would like to highlight the situation in Al Hol camp. We have frequently reported to this Council about the plight of those tens of thousands of civilians at the Al Hol camp – 92 per cent of whom are women and children. Most have been exposed to extreme violence and trauma under ISIL. They are now living in extremely difficult conditions where they face a range of protection challenges, and an uncertain and disconcerting fate. This includes the risk of being denied repatriation, rehabilitation and re-integration or a fair trial, or even the risk of becoming stateless despite having citizenship or a claim to citizenship. It also includes family separation and not knowing the whereabouts of family members, given the notable absence of adult males and adolescent boys over the age of 15 in the camp.

All children, including those suspected of being associated with armed groups or terrorist groups, are entitled to special care and protection under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They must be treated first and foremost as victims. Solutions for foreign nationals need to be urgently found, and we call on all Member States to take all measures necessary to ensure that their nationals are repatriated for the purposes of prosecution, rehabilitation and/or reintegration, as appropriate, and in line with international law and standards.

The camp at Al Hol currently hosts more than 73,000 civilians. Almost two-thirds of them -- two-thirds -- are children under the age of 12. Approximately 43 per cent of the camp population are Syrians, 42 per cent are Iraqis and 15 per cent are foreign nationals. There are 458 unaccompanied and separated children, including 121 who remain in interim care centres awaiting family tracing and reunification. The humanitarian community in Syria is ensuring that all those in need at the camp receive humanitarian assistance, without discrimination, according to humanitarian principles. This includes assistance to the foreign nationals in the annex part of the camp. However, access to the annex remains constrained, particularly for health, nutrition and protection partners who require a permanent presence inside the annex in order to provide continued care and services.

The UN also continues to advocate with the Syrian authorities for the deployment of surge staff from Damascus to support the teams operating in northeast Syria, who have now been responding uninterruptedly to successive crises for the past many months.

Further south in Deir Ez-Zor Governorate, an estimated 150,000 people along seven villages between Hajin and Sawsan -- east of the Euphrates river -- are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The Syrian authorities recently approved the deployment of an inter-agency convoy to the area to bring assistance for up to 50,000 people as a first step. Aside from the SARC convoy deployed earlier in the year, this would be the first inter-agency convoy to reach the area. Preparations are ongoing to conduct the necessary assessments, obtain relevant security assurances and finalize logistical arrangements for the convoy to proceed in the coming period.

Mr. President,

My third and final point will be on Rukban. As you may know, over 7,000 people have left the site in recent weeks, including nearly 2,000 just yesterday. Those who already left organized their own transportation to the 55km border area, from where they have been transported to four collective shelters in Homs Governorate through a combination of private and Government vehicles. Many are quickly leaving the shelters to stay with relatives in towns in Eastern Homs Governorate. Some people – mostly men – remain in the shelters for a longer period while they settle their status with the authorities.

Colleagues in Damascus have reiterated the UN's willingness to be directly involved to ensure that core protection standards are met and movements are conducted in a voluntary, safe, well-informed and dignified manner. Today our teams accessed the shelters for the first time. The UN is ready to engage further, but we must be fully engaged, from start to finish. We continue to advocate for full, unimpeded and sustained access to shelters, as well as areas of origin and destination, and to people en route, to adequately support the humanitarian needs of those leaving Rukban.

Mr. President,

Whilst efforts to pursue durable solutions – guided by the needs, rights, security and dignity of the people in Rukban and based on their informed and voluntary choice – are underway, additional and sustained assistance for those who remain in Rukban is just as necessary. Food, medicines and other life-saving supplies delivered in February are running low. The UN has requested access to provide life-saving assistance, but on Monday was informed by the authorities that such a convoy would not be possible. People are exhausted. The number of children who reportedly died at the settlement from preventable causes since January now stands at more than a dozen. The deployment of a third humanitarian convoy to Rukban remains urgent – to avoid the deaths of more children.

Mr. President,

As I have said at the beginning of my statement, the Syrian people have suffered a litany of horrors. Among those people who suffered the most – and are still suffering today – are those with disabilities. Those disabled before the start of the crisis often face heightened challenges. And many more become disabled as civilians have been heavily impacted through years of conflict, including those injured due to explosive remnants of war.

In these settings, persons with disabilities are often excluded and highly vulnerable. Many lack access to health care and education, and experience difficulties in meeting their basic needs. They also face specific protection and psycho-social challenges, including heightened risk of violence and abuse. We must do our utmost to support and protect persons with disabilities, and to ensure that their specific and diverse needs are addressed, ensuring accessibility of activities and services, training of staff and collecting disaggregated data.

We – and I include OCHA's important role in this – must do more to include persons with disabilities into our work, making sure that they, and their representative organizations, take an active part at every step of planning and decision-making processes. Nujeen Mustafa will speak to you in just a moment. She is not just an incredible advocate for those with disabilities in Syria, but she is an advocate for all those with disabilities in conflict settings, for women and for young

people. She is an advocate for inclusive humanitarian action, and she is carrying with her an important message that we will all benefit from hearing.

Thank you, Mr. President.