

**Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria by the
Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief
Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock**

New York, 18 September 2018

As delivered

Mr President,

As you know I was in Damascus three weeks ago for talks with the Government. We had constructive discussions on a range of issues. Across much of the country the situation is now calmer than it was when I last visited in January. But humanitarian needs still remain substantial, and the Government expressed concern to me about the underfunding of the UN's humanitarian response plan this year. I said that in my judgement, addressing that would require improvement in needs assessment and access for humanitarian agencies, including my own office, to assure both current and potential donors that help is genuinely targeted, in a neutral and impartial way, on the people in greatest need – and indeed that such help reaches those same people. Since the visit, of course, we have been totally focused on the danger that the looming Idleb catastrophe may totally upend our humanitarian agenda.

As Staffan has said, we welcome yesterday's news from Sochi. I want to be clear with you about what was at stake.

From the Secretary-General down, we have consistently expressed alarm over the risks of a full-scale military offensive in north-western Syria. It was no exaggeration, merely a statement of fact, that such an onslaught would likely have presaged the worst humanitarian tragedy of the 21st century. Surveys of affected people undertaken last month had shown that well over two million people could have been displaced in the event of a full-scale military operation. It would have meant further untold suffering of vulnerable and terrified people from overcrowded sites in which basic services have been stretched to breaking point for months. There simply is no way for humanitarian agencies to protect and meet the needs of millions of extremely vulnerable people -- including a million children -- in the midst of a massive military onslaught.

So we welcome yesterday's agreement because – if sustained, and implemented in full respect of international humanitarian law -- it may avert the catastrophe we have been warning against.

To succeed, demilitarization requires the agreement of all parties. Short of such agreement, it is foreseeable that force will be used to demilitarize, and thus civilians exposed to the very harm we are trying to avoid. Whether from within or outside the proposed demilitarized area, should civilians deem it necessary to leave, they must be

allowed to seek and refuge elsewhere. In case of displacement, all possible measures must be taken so that affected civilians are received under satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.

It is also important that any screening to distinguish civilians from fighters be undertaken in accordance with international humanitarian law and clear standard operating procedures, ensuring humane treatment and accounting for those who have been screened. Special protection and assistance measures should be in place for civilians – in particular women and children family members – who have been associated with or are family members of fighters.

Regardless of location -- whether within or outside the demilitarized zone -- IHL obligations continue to apply. Warring parties cannot deliberately or carelessly disregard the distinction between civilians and combatants; or between civilian infrastructure and military objectives.

Mr President,

The UN, with other humanitarian organisations, continues to implement a major humanitarian assistance program from across the border in Turkey -- as mandated by your resolutions -- on average we are reaching two million people each month in northwest Syria. This week alone, food for over 260,000 people is being sent cross-border as well as non-food items and tents for over 60,000 people, most of it through the Bab Al Hawa crossing into Idleb. Aid is also being prepositioned to ensure that those in need can continue to receive support in the face of further military escalation. Food rations for one week for more than 350,000 people and non-food items for 400,000 people have already been prepositioned in Idleb. Supplies have also been pre-positioned in Homs, Aleppo and Latakia Governorates, including food assistance for up to one million people and shelter kits and non-food items for up to 300,000 people. Hardly any of this would have been possible had you not renewed the provisions of resolution 2165 in resolution when you passed resolution 2393 last December. The Resolution made a real difference and millions of people depend on the activities it mandates

Mr President,

The humanitarian situation remains difficult in other parts of the country. At Rukban, on the Syria-Jordan border, the UN in cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, remains ready to provide humanitarian assistance through an inter-agency convoy. What we need is:

- Official approval from the Government of Syria for the convoy to proceed and for the teams to accompany the convoy to deliver life-saving supplies and carry out needs assessment and distribution monitoring.
- Deconfliction and guarantees of safe passage from the Government of Syria, the Russian Federation, International Coalition Forces and the Government of Jordan.
- Written guarantees of safe passage by all non-State armed groups controlling the camp and present along the route.

Further to the north, some 153,000 people are now estimated to have returned to Raqqa city since October 2017, although conditions remain uncondusive for returns because of

high levels of destruction and explosive hazard contamination. Efforts have been made to scale-up the mine action response since earlier this year, including mine risk education activities and training. Humanitarian mine action organizations have also been carrying out mine removal operations in Raqqa city since June, focusing on key infrastructure, with a coordination mechanism available to include sites prioritized by the humanitarian community. However, much more needs to be done before the city is safe and conducive for returns.

In Deir-ez-Zor, attention appears to have turned now to the last remaining ISIL enclave in Syria along the east bank of the Euphrates river in the southern parts of the Governorate. This includes the towns of Hajin, Al-Souseh, Al-Sha'afa and Al-Baghouz. There are significant concerns for the safety and security of civilians living in these areas, with more than 20,000 people estimated to be displaced and reports of leaflets being dropped to warn civilians to leave before the start of the offensive. Again, I call on parties to avoid civilian loss by respecting their IHL obligations of distinction, proportionality and precaution, and I call on them to allow civilians who wish to leave to move safely to other areas.

In the south-west of the country, most of the up-to-325,000 people estimated to have been displaced in the area since late June are now reported to have returned to their areas of origin. But thousands remained displaced, and high levels of humanitarian need persist, including among returnees. The UN has continued to provide humanitarian aid in the area, with the agreement of the Government and, in partnership with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and other humanitarian organisations, with efforts ongoing to ensure more sustained access across the area. This is urgently needed to address gaps stemming from the suspension of cross-border activities from Jordan in late June.

Let me just finish with a final word on Idleb. What do we think the 3 million civilians, including those million children kettled in Idleb, make of yesterday's agreement? Well, they have a simple question. Is this merely a stay of execution? Or is it the beginning of a reprieve, the first tiny glint of light at the end of the very darkest tunnel?

Thank you.