

United Nations



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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

New York, 29 January 2019

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President,

I want today to:

First, express my alarm about the dire and deteriorating humanitarian situation affecting women and children in particular in the northwest of Syria because of the intense bombing, shelling and other fighting we are all seeing;

Second, update you on the humanitarian response in the northeast following passage of your Resolution 2504;

Third, update you on the situation in Rukban; and

Fourth, draw attention to the impact of economic challenges on humanitarian suffering in Syria.

First, Mr. President, hostilities have escalated in recent days in the Idleb area, especially around Ma'arat al-Numan, Saraqeb and western Aleppo. The fighting in these areas appears to be more intense than anything we have seen in the last year.

As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet has said, civilians continue to be subject to intense bombardment and shelling. On 11 January, at least 20 civilians in Idleb Governorate were reportedly killed in airstrikes. On 21 January, eight civilians were reportedly killed in Kafr Taal in western Aleppo, after an airstrike landed near their home. Overall in the week of 15-23 January, OHCHR documented incidents in which at least 81 civilians, most of them women and children, were killed as a result of airstrikes and ground-based strikes. This total is in addition to the more than 1,500 civilian deaths that OHCHR has verified since the escalation began in late April.

The most alarming reports, Mr. President, have come from southern Idleb, where hundreds of airstrikes by the Government of Syria and its allies have been concentrated.

Meanwhile, non-State armed groups continue to shell Aleppo city, killing or injuring dozens of civilians.

Routes to the north and west of Saraqab, including around Ariha and other locations along the M4 highway are clogged with vehicles, as people seek to flee the bombing and the frontlines in search of safety. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are at risk, and so they are running away.

Most of the affected people – more than 99 per cent of them – have been moving from southern Idleb to other locations in non-government-controlled areas. Our assessment is that least 20,000 people have moved in the last two days. Some 115,000 have left in the past week. Nearly 390,000 have fled in the past two months.

Many families are moving multiple times. They arrive in a place thought to be safe, only for the bombs to follow, so they are then forced to move again. This cycle is all too familiar in northwest Syria.

On 12 January, Turkey and the Russian Federation announced a ceasefire. But it did not hold. The Government of Syria opened three crossing points to facilitate the movement of civilians into government-controlled areas. Initial reports from the Russian Federation suggest that 400 civilians crossed through those crossing points.

Mr. President,

The violence in northwest Syria is deplorable. As High Commissioner Bachelet has warned, “Women, men and children simply carrying out everyday activities at home, the workplace, in markets and at schools are being killed and maimed in senseless violence.”

It is imperative that all parties agree to an immediate cessation of hostilities in and around the Idleb de-escalation area.

Amid the ongoing fighting, humanitarian organisations have in recent weeks provided food assistance for more than 1.4 million civilians and health supplies to treat almost 200,000 people.

This has all come in through the cross-border operation, as re-authorized under your Resolution 2504. That remains the only way to assist the more the 2.8 million people in need in northwest Syria.

Efforts by humanitarian organisations within Syria to provide assistance cross-line, including those by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent – with whom I discussed the issues last week and whose work I continue to support – have not yet been facilitated by the parties in control.

The cross-border humanitarian operations have staved off a massive humanitarian catastrophe in the northwest, but let us make no mistake about it: civilians are still suffering terribly.

Under current conditions, humanitarian responders do not have the capacity to meet the level of need we are seeing. We are receiving reports of tensions mounting because of the inadequate humanitarian response. Families recently displaced and currently sheltering on roadsides or under thin sheets of plastic or in makeshift shelters and in unfinished buildings have been making desperate appeals for more support.

I talked to Syrians in Idlib again last week. Other UN staff continuously have similar conversations. People feel increasingly under siege as the bombardment follows them from place to place. They are traumatized and feel totally abandoned by the world. They don't understand why this Council is unable to stop the carnage amongst a civilian population trapped in a war zone. Their message to you is essentially the same one I relayed when I briefed you on 30 July: "We are afraid. Please help us. Make it stop."

The most urgent need is to protect the civilian population and to scale up the humanitarian response. In order for that to be possible, I call on all parties to facilitate safe and unhindered access for humanitarian workers and supplies to address civilians' essential needs.

Humanitarian organisations are also trying to help civilians get out of harm's way. On 25 January, NGOs helped relocate 1,800 civilians who asked for help to move to areas under less imminent threat. Following negotiations with the United Nations, the Russian Reconciliation Center has provided assistance with a 'humanitarian pause' along specific routes to facilitate the safe passage of civilians and humanitarian staff.

Such lifesaving operations are necessary and of some value, but fundamentally they underscore the basic requirement, which is for the fighting to stop.

My second point, Mr. President, concerns northeast Syria.

The humanitarian situation in the northeast remains difficult. Some 70,000 people are still displaced following the military operations we saw in October. An additional 90,000 people are living in IDP camps, including more than 66,000 in the Al Hol camp.

These vulnerable populations are among the 1.8 million people in the northeast who need humanitarian assistance.

An average of 850,000 people in need received assistance on a monthly basis in 2019 from within Syria, and that number increased significantly during the course of the year.

Nonetheless, with the removal of the Al Yarubiyah crossing point, the World Health Organisation forecasts a reduction in the medical services available and a growing shortfall in medical supplies.

Some 400,000 medical items planned for delivery are stuck on trucks in Iraq and unable to cross. The Secretary-General has asked members of this Council for your support in getting agreement that these items can be brought in. As of today, they do remain in Iraq.

The United Nations continues to advocate with all stakeholders, including the Government of Syria, to ensure reliable and adequate supply lines and humanitarian capacity in the north east. In this regard, an agreement between relevant parties to reopen the M4 highway remains crucial.

No United Nations convoys containing medical supplies have gone from Damascus to the northeast this month. There were three airlifts in December. There have been none so far in January.

In the so-called Operation Peace Spring area, a cross line assessment mission to Ras-al-Ain, originally planned for earlier this month, has not yet materialized due to conditions imposed by all parties regarding the composition of the mission.

Mr. President,

Experienced UN humanitarian staff are not surprised by any of this. The difficulty of crossing lines with essential aid, or moving goods and staff through contested areas, is something we have become all too familiar with over the course of the nine years of the conflict.

As you requested in Resolution 2504, the Secretary-General will report to you by the end of February on the feasibility of using alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al Yarubiyah in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reaches people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes and in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Third, Mr. President, Rukban. Based on available estimates, nearly 20,000 people, some 50 per cent of the population, have left the Rukban camp in the past months.

Reports indicate that several thousand more people still in Rukban wish to leave. Efforts by the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to facilitate voluntary departures have not been successful. In the meantime, the United Nations continues to advocate for relevant parties to find durable solutions for all Rukban residents.

This brings me to my fourth and final point.

The economic situation in Syria poses increasing hardship on civilians across the country. In January, the Syrian Pound continued to depreciate on the informal market. In some areas, it traded at more than SYP1,100 to the US dollar. That is half the value of six months ago.

Syrians going out to buy food are finding fewer items in their markets, including those looking for basics like rice, oil and sugar. Most available items cost more than ever - the price of bread, for example, has increased by more than 50 per cent in some areas in recent months.

Analysis suggests that food security in Syria has worsened over the last year. Aid agencies try to ensure that the most vulnerable populations have adequate nutrition. The World Food Program supports 4.5 million people across Syria on a monthly basis with general food assistance. I am grateful for the voluntary contributions from donors which make that possible.

Any further deterioration in the Syrian economy will leave even more people vulnerable and in need of assistance in the year ahead. So continued support from donors is vital.

Mr. President,

Let me return, finally, to my initial point about northwest Syria. Parties to the conflict, and those with influence, must stop the fighting.

Unless the current hostilities stop, we will see an even greater humanitarian catastrophe. I hope you will take every step to avoid that.

Thank you.