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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 Northwest Syria

New York, 19 February 2020

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President,

I would like to start by paying tribute to two of our humanitarian colleagues, staff members of Oxfam, who were killed this afternoon while on mission in Dara'a governorate in southern Syria.

Mr. President,

Yesterday I met Dr. Amani Ballour. She is a Syrian pediatrician who worked for five years in a hospital built underground to protect it against air strikes throughout the five-year siege of East Ghouta. She is the subject of a documentary film, *The Cave*, which was nominated at last week's Academy Awards. If you have not seen it, I recommend you do. Dr. Ballour is a humanitarian heroine.

Here is what she said to me:

“The same children I treated in East Ghouta are displaced again in Idleb. They are still under the bombs. Still afraid. Still without shelter. Still without education. It's not life.” She described the

situation of the newly displaced, sleeping in the streets, in the fields, out in the cold with nowhere to go. “Children are afraid” she said. “They want safety” she said.

Mr. President,

I last briefed you on the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in northwest Syria on 6 February. Since then the horror has multiplied.

At least 100 civilians were killed between 1 and 16 February by air- and ground-based strikes in the northwest, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Thirty-five of those killed were children. More than 90 per cent of these deaths occurred in non-Government controlled areas. As UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore has said, such abject disregard for the safety and wellbeing of children and families is beyond the pale. Blatant disregard for the life and safety of civilians runs contrary to the obligations that all parties must uphold under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

As Geir just told you, frontlines in Idleb and Western Aleppo have moved swiftly. Advancing frontlines have driven huge population movements in a matter of days, as families try to escape the relentless aerial and ground bombardment.

Over this last weekend, from 13 to 16 February, 160,000 people were recorded fleeing mostly from from Atareb and Daret Azza sub-districts, away from advancing frontlines. And again as Geir said, we now believe nearly 900,000 people have been displaced since 1 December; more than 500,000 of them are children.

People are fleeing under horrendous conditions. Many are on foot or on the backs of trucks in below-freezing temperatures, in the rain and in the snow. They are moving into increasingly crowded areas they think will be safer. But in Idleb, nowhere is safe.

Almost 50,000 people are sheltering under trees or in other open spaces. I am getting daily reports of babies and other young children dying in the cold. Imagine the grief of a parent who escaped a warzone with their child, only to watch that child freeze to death.

As the Secretary-General warned yesterday, hostilities are now all around areas densely populated with the terrified people who have fled. Those areas include Dana and Sarmada, in the direction of Bab al-Hawa border crossing.

With the huge number of new IDP arrivals Dana now has a greater population density than the capital cities of many of our countries. And the number of new arrivals is growing by the day. If hostilities reach these areas packed with civilians, the human cost will be instant and huge.

On 10 February a child was killed, and two others were injured, in an airstrike on an IDP camp in Idleb's Kafr Aruq. On 14 and 15 February, ground-based strikes hit two makeshift IDP camps in the Sarmada area of northern rural Idlib, killing a civilian and injuring nine others. As High Commissioner Bachelet said yesterday, no shelter is now safe. The bombing of women and children living under scraps of plastic sheeting and in freezing conditions is cruel beyond belief. We are still trying to count the number of civilians killed yesterday.

Mr. President,

We have today given new maps to all the relevant parties showing all the very large number of locations where we think displaced people who have fled now are. It is incumbent on all parties to protect these people.

The mass-movement of people into ever smaller areas of Idleb and Aleppo is placing immense additional strain on local communities. Most markets have closed and available basic goods are prohibitively expensive. The price of basic goods has increased by 70 per cent over the last six months. Since December, 72 hospitals, primary health care centres, specialized care centres, and mobile clinics have ceased activities, collectively suspending the services of nearly 200 doctors, more than 300 nurses and more than 50 midwives. The maternity and childcare hospitals in Atareb and Idleb city which provide life-saving maternal and childcare treatments have stopped functioning.

As Dr. Ballour told me, with the closure of hospitals and medical facilities, many doctors have nowhere to work even as needs grow greater than ever.

Humanitarian operations continue, cross-border from Turkey, to provide assistance. But the aid effort is overwhelmed. On 6 February, I briefed you on our appeal for an additional \$336 million to help 800,000 newly or potentially displaced people over the next six months. Because of what has happened since then it is now clear that that will be inadequate. In the next few days we expect to publish a revised plan for some \$500 million to assist at least 1.1 million people.

Mr. President,

We are considering all avenues to increase support into the northwest. We are working with the Government of Turkey to expand the opening of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing to seven days a week, in order to increase the number of aid trucks coming in.

We are asking the Government of Syria for permission for a mission from Damascus to areas they have recently taken control of in order to see who is there and to assess their needs.

Mr. President,

Two years ago, almost to the day, the Security Council voted in favor of a 30-day cease-fire in Syria. The Council's vote was unanimous, and the resolution expressed "outrage at the unacceptable levels of violence". Is the violence we are seeing now not an outrage?

I repeat again the Secretary-General's renewed call yesterday for an immediate ceasefire and for international humanitarian law to be upheld.

Let me finish with a message from Dr Ballour.

"We cannot wait. Every minute people are dying. The Security Council can help. The Security Council knows what is happening. They are watching. Yet they do nothing".

Thank you Mr. President.