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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

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Mr. President,

I will begin my briefing today with the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in northwest Syria, which continues to demand this Council's attention and action. I will also speak to the importance of the cross-border operation – a critical lifeline into the northwest.

Secondly, I will brief you on the delivery of assistance to northeast Syria following the adoption of Security Council resolution 2504, including the Secretary-General's report on the feasibility of alternatives to the use of Al Yarubiyah border crossing.

Finally, I will touch on the humanitarian situation in Rukban and deepening humanitarian needs in other parts of the country. UNICEF Executive Director Fore will further brief on the impact of the crisis on families in Syria.

Mr. President,

Last week I spoke via video link with 14 Syrian women in Idleb and northern Aleppo. All are humanitarian workers, helping their own communities; almost all have been displaced with their families from other parts of Syria, some multiple times. What is happening in northwest Syria, they said, is beyond imagination. It is not humanly tolerable. They told me of children so traumatized they no longer speak.

One of the women, who works as a midwife in Idleb City, told me she can see how the intensely stressful situation is impacting her patients: early deliveries, miscarriages, and low-weight births are on the rise. Pregnant women are asking her for caesarian deliveries out of fear of going into labor while on the move and without medical care.

Our latest available data indicate that almost 950,000 people have fled the advancing frontlines in the northwest since 1 December. Most have moved into the northwest of Idleb governorate, a small area along Syria's border with Turkey that already hosts hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Many of these exhausted families have moved over, and over, and over again. All amid freezing conditions.

The women from Idleb described to me the day-to-day reality of living in this overcrowded environment. One has found shelter in a basement with 15 other adults and 20 children. There is no privacy. Some women told me they could not change their clothes for weeks. Violence against women, they said, has become "routine."

Mr. President,

The Secretary-General has stated that international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians have been systematically ignored. He warned that fighting is now advancing into areas with the highest concentrations of people.

Hospitals, schools, camps and other sites where displaced families have sought shelter are not being spared. In the last ten days, a camp hosting more than 800 people was hit by shelling in Dana, which is now the most crowded of the sub-districts of Idleb Governorate. Idleb Central Hospital was among several facilities struck this week, with multiple casualties. Operations at the facility had to be suspended, except for emergency medical treatments.

Mr. President,

A massive humanitarian operation is underway in northwest Syria. In January, food assistance for some 1.4 million people was delivered via the cross-border mechanism, as were health supplies for almost half a million people, and non-food items for more than 230,000 people. That is more than in any other month since the cross-border operation was authorized in 2014.

Despite these immense efforts, the women in Idleb told me that simply getting enough food, clean water and heating is a daily struggle.

Mr President, the cross-border modality is absolutely essential to our response in the northwest. People in need in Idleb cannot currently be reached at this scale, in such a timely and direct manner, through any other means. As the Secretary-General has stated, the Security Council has a critical role to play in support of these humanitarian efforts.

I thank donors for generously contributing over US\$ 100 million this month alone towards our US\$ 500 million appeal for the response in the northwest, for the next five months. This includes the release of US\$ 42 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund.

Mr. President,

I would now like to turn to the situation in the northeast. In northeast Syria, civilians remain extremely vulnerable. Over the past weeks, renewed hostilities in and around Tal Tamer district have displaced an additional 1,600 civilians to Qamishli, while another 800 people have arrived in Ar-Raqqa. This adds to the hundreds of thousands of people already displaced in northeast Syria.

Across the northeast, an estimated 1.9 million people require humanitarian assistance. The majority – 1.34 million people – are in areas outside of Syrian Government control.

Mr. President,

In the second half of 2019, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners scaled up the response in the northeast, reaching hundreds of thousands of people with supplies from within Syria and through the Al Yarubiyah border crossing, via the cross-border modality. Nonetheless, significant gaps remained.

Until 10 January, the United Nations provided cross-border assistance into the northeast via Al Yarubiyah crossing – mainly health and medical items that could not otherwise be consistently delivered to people in need.

We briefed this Council on the importance of renewing Al Yarubiyah as an authorized crossing point, warning that any reduction in humanitarian access would cause further suffering.

With the adoption of Security Council resolution 2504 and the removal of Al Ramtha and Al Yarubiyah as authorized crossing points, this Council requested the Secretary-General to report on the feasibility of using alternative modalities to the Al Yarubiyah crossing “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.”

The Secretary-General’s report concludes that, “in order for all humanitarian needs to be met, the Syrian Government would need to facilitate greater crossline access to north-east Syria, particularly for medical assistance. The Syrian Government would also need to consent to the delivery of humanitarian assistance cross-border into north-east Syria, via safe and logistically feasible border crossings, using the most direct routes.”

Should the required steps to enable the delivery of aid from Damascus not be taken, and in the absence of consent from the Syrian Government and neighbouring countries to use border crossings into northeast Syria, the report further concludes that “the Security Council would need to authorize the United Nations and its implementing partners to use additional crossings.” Of the alternatives, in the current context, the Tal Abiyad crossing is deemed the most feasible option.

The report lists four requirements for the crossline modalities to work effectively. They are:

First: the timely approval by the Government of Syria to import all necessary medical supplies into Syria.

The report highlights that expedited approval for some imports has already taken place, with 11 of 36 requests submitted by WHO recently approved.

Second: a simplified, expedited and reliable approval process by the Government of Syria to enable regular and predictable deliveries from Damascus into the northeast, by land.

UNFPA reports that a first road delivery of medical items has been sent to Qamishli. Approval of a specific request by WHO for delivery by land remains pending.

Third: approval by the Government of Syria to access all areas and facilities within the northeast to ensure assistance reaches all people in need, impartially and without discrimination.

While aid has been delivered to the northeast, this assistance needs to actually reach all people in need, regardless of where they live and who is operating the medical facilities they use.

Fourth: the facilitation of aid deliveries by local authorities in northeast Syria to all locations without delay. It is also the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that aid is not impeded.

Mr. President,

Yesterday, in response to our requests for overland access to northeast Syria, we received general approval from the Government of Syria to transfer medical assistance by land to all parts of the country. This is a welcomed development and one which we hope will indeed translate into all types of required medical supplies and equipment reaching all people in need in the northeast, wherever they are located.

Mr. President,

If viable alternatives to Al Yarubiah are not found for medical items, the gap between the humanitarian response and humanitarian needs will increase further. If medicine runs out and medical facilities are unable to carry out life-saving procedures, deaths will occur. The first shortages are expected already by March for medical facilities providing reproductive health care, that were previously supported by cross-border operations. A larger gap in medical items could occur by May.

A shipment of essential medical items intended for transport to northeast Syria via Al Yarubiyah remains in Iraq. The World Health Organization is engaging actively with the Government of Syria to bring this assistance into Syria by air and ensure this vital medical

assistance urgently reaches all Syrians in need in the northeast. The shipment process was initiated today.

Mr. President,

I now turn to the situation in Rukban. Over 19,400 people – almost half of the population – have now left the Rukban area, the vast majority through self-organized departures. In January, the United Nations conducted four inter-agency assessment missions to areas of return in Homs, hosting around 10,000 people who were formerly in Rukban. These families are living under extremely difficult conditions. Almost all are living in makeshift tents. Many are struggling to meet their immediate food needs.

Our information indicates that thousands still wish to leave Rukban. Planning is ongoing to support informed and voluntary departures. I call on all parties to facilitate these efforts, as well as to assist those who remain until durable solutions can be found for all people in Rukban.

Mr. President,

Humanitarian needs across the country remain immense and are worsening. The number of people assessed as food insecure has increased in 2019 by 1.3 million, reaching 7.9 million people in 2020.

As I said at the start of my briefing, the terrible human toll of the situation in northwest Syria demands this Council's attention and action.

I want to close with a message from the Syrian women in Idleb with whom I spoke last week. They said to me: "We are Syrian women, mothers, and humanitarian workers. We are doing all we can to keep working, in spite of the conditions; in spite of what is happening here. We do not want to leave for Europe. We want to stay here, in Idleb, and rebuild our lives. All we are asking, is for the misery to stop; for the killing to stop. We want the right to live."

I echo the Secretary-General's renewed call for an immediate ceasefire to end the humanitarian catastrophe and avoid an uncontrollable escalation.

Thank you, Mr. President.