Thank you very much, Mr. President,

My briefing today will focus on four areas:

First: the COVID-19 crisis and the potential implications including for humanitarian operations in Syria;

Second: the situation in the northwest, where we are delivering record volumes of assistance cross-border, but are not close to meeting the vast and growing humanitarian needs;

Third: the situation in the northeast, especially on medical supplies;

And fourth: an overview of the humanitarian situation as we now see it.

Mr. President,

As of this morning, ten cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in Syria, including one death. Judging from other places, that is the tip of the iceberg. The virus has the potential to have a devastating impact on vulnerable communities across the country.

Syria’s health services are extremely fragile. Only around half of its hospitals and primary healthcare centers were fully functional at the end of last year.
As in other countries the WHO-led response advises a focus on prevention and preparedness. That includes preparing front-line humanitarian workers, most of whom are Syrians, to interact safely with communities.

UN supported surveillance and early warning systems have been reinforced across the country, in joint efforts with the relevant authorities. Preparedness and response plans have been developed and the pre-positioning of equipment and supplies, the rehabilitation of the Central Public Health Laboratory, the upgrading of available isolation units, and community engagement programmes are all underway.

But all efforts to prevent, detect and respond to COVID-19 are impeded by Syria’s fragile health system, by high levels of population movement, challenges to obtaining critical supplies, including protective equipment and ventilators, and by the practical difficulties of implementing isolation and protective measures in areas of displacement, with high population density and low levels of sanitation services.

I reiterate the Secretary General’s appeal for the waiving of sanctions that can undermine countries’ capacity to respond to the pandemic.

Mr. President,

The pandemic is already further restricting our ability to access affected communities. Airport and border closures – including in the northeast – along with other movement restrictions add to the long-standing difficulties humanitarian staff face in travelling to where they are needed.

While the COVID-19 response requires restrictions on movement, it is important that there is appropriate facilitation for movements of humanitarian workers and supplies and for medical evacuations so that local health and broader humanitarian responses can be supported.

I reiterate the Secretary-General’s call, which I know Geir Pedersen will also be talking about, for a complete and immediate nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria to enable an all-out effort to suppress COVID-19.

Mr. President,

It is clear that this crisis can only be overcome by a truly global response.

Last week, together with the Secretary-General, UNICEF Executive Director Fore and WHO Director-General Ghebreyesus, I launched a $2 billion global humanitarian response plan to fight COVID-19 in the world’s most vulnerable countries, including in Syria. I thank donors for the
pledges already made and urge them to do more. As the Secretary-General has said: the pandemic has shown that we are only as strong as our weakest health system.

Let me turn now, Mr. President, to north-west Syria.

Again, Special Envoy Pedersen will speak about this, there has been a significant decrease in violence following the 5 March agreement.

Humanitarian needs remain enormous. Our data show clear evidence of deteriorating conditions since December. We are for example seeing increased rates of stunting – a consequence of child malnutrition, from which it is rarely possible fully to recover. Almost three out of every ten displaced children in northwest Syria under the age of five are stunted. They will live with the consequences for the rest of their lives.

A United Nations inter-agency mission to Idleb, on 2 March, saw conditions there first-hand. The mission assessment was clear: people are afraid; needs are vast and complex; local aid workers are delivering tirelessly under near-impossible conditions; but the response is overwhelmed.

The team saw hillsides dotted with tents. Overcrowding is forcing some families to take turns in sleeping outside. The team was struck by the large number of very young children among the displaced. They were told by community members that child marriage, child labour, recruitment of child soldiers, and domestic violence are all on the rise.

A scale up of assistance to the northwest is underway, thanks to donors’ rapid response to our $500 million appeal to meet the most urgent needs of almost a million civilians displaced since December. Some $340 million has been received or pledged to date. More is needed.

Mr. President,

Cross-border operations into northwest Syria provide a lifeline for millions of people who cannot otherwise be reached.

Deliveries are being scaled up in response to growing needs. In January and February, more than 2,150 trucks carrying aid crossed from Turkey into northwest Syria – more than double the number that crossed during the same period in 2019. We expect that almost 1,500 trucks will cross in March – a new monthly record since the start of the UN operation in 2014. But needs are far from being met and it is essential that travel restrictions put in place as a result of COVID-19 do not have the effect of reducing deliveries.
Alongside the UN cross-border operation, efforts continue to establish crossline delivery into the northwest. They have yet to bear fruit. I call on all parties to support these efforts and to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access for crossline missions.

Mr. President,

I commend the work of all humanitarian organizations whose work continues despite immense challenges. On 14 March, offices of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) in Idleb city and Ariha were occupied by armed individuals. Personnel were detained and harassed, and items were stolen and destroyed. I join humanitarian colleagues in condemning this incident. SARC has also faced recent interference in its work in the northeast, including confiscation of a medical facility in Raqqa City earlier this month. Such interference is unacceptable. I call on all parties to protect humanitarian workers and assets.

Mr. President,

You have seen the Secretary-General’s February report on the feasibility of alternatives to the use of Al Yarubiyah border crossing.

According to WHO, continuity of health services in the northeast has already been affected, leaving people even more exposed to the COVID-19 crisis.

Many medical facilities and individuals in northeast Syria who depended on medical supplies via Al Yarubiyah have not received these supplies through alternative channels.

Work to address this continues. But in the meantime we are receiving reports of significant shortages. At least seven primary health centres in rural Ar-Raqqa have gaps in their reproductive health and nutrition supplies. Other facilities report critical items in danger of immediate stockout, including emergency medicines, anesthetics and insulin. The Al Hol field hospital is also reporting low levels of some medications and supplies. One primary health centre in Ar-Raqqa may be forced to close in the coming weeks. The facility treats over 3,900 patients per month, more than half of whom are children.

I therefore urge rapid action to get essential medical supplies to everyone who needs them in the north east.

Mr. President,

We have also seen further disruptions to services at the Allouk water station. Allouk supplies water to half a million people in the northeast, including Al Hol and Areesha camps. I call on the
parties to find a sustainable agreement covering water pumping as well as electricity supply for Allouk and other areas that have recently had electricity cut off.

Mr. President,

In southern Syria, insecurity has continued since my briefing to you last month, in which we paid tribute to two Syrian humanitarian colleagues from Oxfam who were killed in Dara’a that day, when their vehicle was attacked by an unidentified armed group. It is with great sadness that I report the death of another colleague in Dara’a. Ali Husein Mohammad, a science teacher and UNRWA staff member, was killed earlier this month in violence in Jilin Town in Dara’a.

Mr. President,

This month marks a grim anniversary. The conflict in Syria has now entered its tenth year. Over half the population has been forced to flee their homes. More than 11 million people inside Syria require humanitarian assistance, including nearly 5 million children.

Nearly eight million people do not have reliable access to food. This number has increased by more than 20 per cent since last year. Half a million children in Syria are chronically malnourished.

At the same time, people all over Syria – including in areas where hostilities have subsided – are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet. An economic crisis, mostly a result of the war but in part also a consequence of developments elsewhere in the region, have led to price hikes for several staple goods, including bread and fuel, and reduced purchasing power, forcing people to resort to ever-more negative coping mechanisms.

The economic situation will also be affected by measures taken to stem COVID-19.

Mr. President

The UN-supported humanitarian response operation continues to respond to needs throughout the country, reaching six million people each month on average last year. That includes support for 26 million medical procedures, monthly food assistance to 4.5 million people, emergency water, sanitation and hygiene support to almost 8 million people, and education support to almost five million students and teachers. I again thank the donors who pay for all this.

As the Secretary-General has said: We cannot allow the tenth year of this conflict to result in the same carnage, the same flouting of human rights and international humanitarian law, the same inhumanity.
Thank you Mr. President.