

**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, 19 May 2020

Thank you, Mr. President.

I will focus my briefing today on two areas.

First: the impact of COVID-19 in Syria and the preparedness and response measures underway.

Second: the humanitarian response across Syria and the findings of the Secretary-General's Review of Cross-line and Cross-border Operations, which you received last week.

Let me start with the latest update on COVID-19 cases.

Syrian government authorities have confirmed 58 cases in Syria to date, including three fatalities. Another six cases have been recorded in the north-east, including one fatality. No cases have been confirmed in the north-west.

Building up the limited laboratory and case investigation capacities remains a major priority, and the United Nations is reinforcing this effort across Syria.

This includes considerable support from the World Health Organization to the progressive expansion of testing capacities in Damascus, Aleppo, Lattakia and Homs – from conducting repairs to providing essential equipment, reagents and on-site training of laboratory technicians.

Testing capacity is not yet sufficiently established for epidemiological evidence across the country, including in the north-east, where further efforts are underway with support from national and international partners. The United Nations including World Health Organization stand ready to

further support expansion of testing capacities across Syria in accordance with the epidemiological situation and needs.

Support is also underway for infection prevention and control – from risk communication and community engagement to isolation centres. Some \$23 million has already been allocated from the Syria Humanitarian Fund, which my office runs, to support COVID-19 preventative measures. Thank you to the donors whose contributions have paid for that.

But there remain significant shortages of personal protective equipment and other medical items across the country.

Let me echo what Geir Pedersen said to you yesterday, further to the Secretary-General's global call for the waiver of sanctions that can undermine the capacity of countries to ensure access to food, essential health supplies and medical support to respond to the pandemic. Like Geir, I note the public assurances by relevant States that their sanctions programs relating to Syria neither ban the flow of humanitarian supplies nor target medicine and medical devices. I welcome their commitments to fully and expeditiously apply humanitarian exemptions. I continue to follow this issue closely.

As in many other countries, we are seeing the economic impact of the pandemic before we see infections peak: after an initial jump at the end of March, the average price of the national reference food basket for April is 15 per cent higher than the March average, and more than double the average recorded in April 2019. It is now higher than at any time since the crisis began.

In the north-west, which relies heavily on imported goods, the Syrian Pound continues to lose value against the US Dollar. Local sources report that, as of this morning, the exchange rate in some parts of Idleb has fallen as low as 1,950 SYP to the US dollar. That's a depreciation of 54% since the end of April. The cost of a dollar has more than trebled in the last 12 months: the rate was 570 SYP to the dollar in May 2019. The consequences of this for local communities' purchasing power are severe.

In early 2020, before the economic impacts of COVID-19 were felt in Syria, an estimated 80 per cent of people already lived below the poverty line.

The added impact of the pandemic is now driving food insecurity to record levels: the World Food Programme announced last week that an estimated 9.3 million people in Syria are now food insecure – up from an estimated 7.9 million people six months ago.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, warned this month that killings of civilians across Syria are increasing, and various parties to the conflict, including ISIL, appear to view the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to regroup and inflict violence on the population.

Mr. President, I now turn to humanitarian operations in the north-west, where aid deliveries continue at record levels.

In April 1,365 trucks crossed from Turkey into the north-west through the Security Council-authorized border crossings at Bab al Salam and Bab al Hawa. This is an increase of over 130 per cent on April 2019.

There are three main reasons for the scale up.

The first is the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation since December, which continues to demand increased levels of assistance.

The second is the need to prepare for the impact of COVID-19. As I have said before, the north-west is considered at extremely high risk of an outbreak

The third pressure stems from the uncertainty we are operating under.

The authorization of cross-border assistance under Security Council resolution 2504 represents the sole channel for the United Nations to deliver life-saving assistance to millions of people in north-west Syria. It is up for renewal in less than two months.

You have received the Secretary-General's review of cross-line and cross-border operations. In paragraph 1, the Secretary-General highlights that he has submitted the review ahead of schedule to allow the Council to take a timely decision and avoid the disruption of aid.

The findings of the review are clear: meeting the enormous humanitarian needs in the north-west requires a renewal of the cross-border authorization for the Bab al Salaam and Bab Al Hawa border crossings for an additional 12 months. The United Nations Monitoring Mechanism should be extended for the same period.

This decision cannot be left to the last minute. Too many lives are at stake.

Sustaining pipelines in this massive operation requires weeks and often months of lead-time. An environment of uncertainty risks the continuity of aid. It undermines the ability of humanitarian organizations to save lives.

In the meantime, our colleagues involved in the operation – from the loading staff to the drivers to the UN coordinators and monitors – are at the border every working day relentlessly, during Ramadan, amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, to scale up deliveries.

Mr. President,

I now turn to the north-east and the ongoing efforts to increase cross-line deliveries of medical supplies following the removal of Al Yaroubiya as an authorized border crossing.

I am pleased to report that on 10 May the World Health Organization was able to deliver a 30-ton consignment of medical supplies to Qamishli by road. A second consignment of 23 tons is expected to arrive in the coming days.

This is the first overland delivery of WHO supplies to the north-east in two years. WHO is committed to respond to the humanitarian needs of all Syrians in the northeast by the most direct routes – especially to reach the most vulnerable.

While this overland delivery is a very welcome step, let me be clear that much more needs to be done to bridge the gap in medical assistance for the north-east.

At present, medical supplies delivered cross-line to north-east Syria are reaching 31 per cent of facilities that previously depended on Al Yaroubiya border crossing for these supplies.

The findings of the Secretary-General's review of cross-line and cross-border operations are also clear with regard to the north-east.

A combination of more cross-border and cross-line access is required to sustain, and preferably increase, humanitarian assistance.

Several cross-border options were identified in the Secretary-General's report on alternatives to Al Yaroubiya, released in February. His report also described their limitations in comparison to Al Yaroubiya.

Mr. President, also in the north-east, the provision of water from Alouk Station was again interrupted and reduced many times since my last briefing, creating severe disruptions in water supply, especially in Hassakeh City and IDP camps in the area. At least half a million people are affected.

To compensate, humanitarian agencies have scaled up emergency water trucking, but this is neither a sufficient nor a sustainable solution. Access to water in all areas is all the more critical in this COVID-19 pandemic. Across Syria, relevant parties need to ensure the provision of basic services to civilians.

Mr. President, I have briefed you on the ongoing COVID-19 response across Syria as well as assistance being channeled through the cross-border operation.

Let me also highlight the broader response operation underway from within Syria in areas under the Government's control – where the UN and its partner organisations reach most of the people we help. In the first quarter of 2020 the humanitarian operation has delivered food assistance for 3.3 million people; 3.3 million medical procedures; more than 2 million medical treatment courses; life-saving water, sanitation and hygiene assistance for 1.2 million people, education for 1.3 million people; and nutrition support for almost half a million people.

Mr. President, in closing I will reiterate my key ask to the Council today:

The cross-border operation for north-west Syria, authorized by the Security Council, is a lifeline for millions of civilians whom the United Nations cannot reach by other means.

It cannot be substituted. Its authorization must be renewed.

An early decision by the Council will avoid disruption of this vital operation and help humanitarian organisations continue the scale-up that the current needs and the prospect of COVID-19 demand. A delay will increase suffering and cost lives.

Thank you, Mr. President.