

United Nations



Nations Unies

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 June 2020

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President.

As of this morning, Syrian government authorities have confirmed 256 cases of COVID-19 in Syria, including nine fatalities. Six cases have been recorded in the north-east, including one fatality.

This is a more than four-fold increase in recorded cases since my last briefing. So far, overall infection numbers have, thankfully, remained low. But this must not be read with too much optimism, since testing remains extremely limited. Little over 8,000 tests have been conducted to date.

Moreover, we can see from what has recently been happening elsewhere in the region, including in Iran, Saudi Arabia and in particular Yemen the scale of the risks ahead.

The United Nations continues to support COVID-19 preparedness and response measures across Syria, including the expansion of testing capacities. But significant gaps remain, including in personal protective equipment, medical case management supplies, and isolation and quarantine capacity.

Syria's health system is not prepared for a large scale outbreak.

We need only to look at Yemen to see how quickly COVID-19 can collapse a health system devastated by years of war.

Even as the number of recorded infections remains low, the threat of a broader COVID-19 outbreak is aggravating the economic downturn and constraining the humanitarian response. That could have serious consequences across the whole region, not just in Syria.

It is in this context that I will brief you today on three areas:

First: the human cost of the economic downturn.

Second: the situation in north-west Syria.

Third, the humanitarian response underway from within Syria, including assistance delivered cross-line.

Mr. President,

Prices of food, medicines, fuel and other essentials commodities are soaring across the country. The volatile exchange rate has seen the Syrian Pound lose more value in the last six months than in the first nine years of the crisis.

This month the Central Bank adjusted the official exchange rate from 704 pounds against the US dollar to 1,256 pounds against the US dollar – a 78 per cent devaluation. The unofficial rate fell to its lowest point on record, at 3,120 pounds against the dollar.

Food prices have consequently reached unprecedented levels. Market monitoring by the World Food Programme shows a 200 per cent increase in the price of the national average food basket since last year.

A growing number of Syrians are no longer able to provide for themselves and their families. Many report going into debt and eating less to survive. As I briefed you last month, the World Food Programme now estimates 9.3 million people to be food insecure. This is the highest level ever recorded in Syria, and it is increasing.

An estimated 4.6 million children and pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are in need of nutrition assistance. 3.7 million of them are in acute need.

We estimate that almost half a million children under five suffer from stunting – a condition likely to impact irreversibly their physical and cognitive development.

Across the country, people who have struggled through nine years of devastating conflict are telling us that they have now reached breaking point.

Mr. President,

I note again the public assurances by the United States and by the European Union that their sanctions programs relating to Syria neither ban the flow of humanitarian supplies, nor target medicines and medical devices. I welcome their commitments to fully and expeditiously apply humanitarian exemptions. I reiterate again the Secretary General's appeal for the waiving of sanctions that can undermine countries' capacity to respond to the pandemic.

Mr. President,

I am particularly concerned about the situation in the north-west.

An estimated 2.8 million people in the north-west – 70 per cent of the region's population – require humanitarian assistance. Mass-displacement of almost a million people earlier this year and new economic hardships, aggravated by the regional impact of COVID-19, have left civilians in the north-west among the country's most vulnerable people.

Displaced families make up two thirds of the current population of the north-west. The vast majority of displaced people sheltering in 'last resort sites' are concentrated there.

'Last resort sites' are what we call camps and informal settlements that fall short of even the minimum emergency standards for shelter, water and sanitation. Just last week, rainstorms and flooding in rural Idleb uprooted hundreds of tents and swept away many people's few remaining belongings.

In this environment, malnutrition rates have unsurprisingly been rising over the past months. Almost three in every 10 children in the north-west under the age of five suffer from stunting.

Mr. President, under the cross-border operations, authorized by this Council under Security Council resolution 2504, 1,781 aid trucks crossed the border from Turkey into north-west Syria in May.

Most of this cross-border aid is food – and it is enough for 1.3 million people every month.

Still, more and more children and infants are arriving at nutrition centres showing signs of chronic and acute malnutrition.

Mothers arriving at the centers say they have long been priced out of food staples and medicines in the markets, leaving them solely reliant on the food packages delivered across the border.

Some say they are also cooking weeds to supplement the food rations. Such is the level of desperation.

So I want to be clear that the current levels of assistance delivered across the border are far from sufficient. The north-west continues to suffer a major humanitarian crisis. The cross-border operation needs to be scaled up further.

A failure to extend the cross-border authorization would sever the UN operation currently underway. It would end the UN food deliveries and the support to nutrition centres. It would cause suffering and death.

Mr. President,

As the Secretary-General said in his latest report, which you received last week: efforts have been, and will continue to be made to deliver cross-line assistance into the north-west. But at the moment it is simply impossible to replicate with cross-line assistance what is being delivered through the cross-border operation.

Planning has progressed for a cross-line mission to Idleb, which has been on hold since April, when UN movements into the north-west were paused due to concerns over COVID-19 transmission. Our operational planning has now resumed and is proceeding proceeded with careful consideration of these risks, as well as the complex security environment. A concept of operations is being finalized to share with the parties.

The Secretary-General's report further states that continued cross-border operations require a renewal of the authorization for Bab al-Salaam and Bab al-Hawa for an additional 12 months.

Both border crossings are required to sustain delivery. While the transshipment capacity of Bab al-Salam is lower than that of Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam provides direct access to parts of northern Aleppo that host some of the highest concentrations of displaced people in the country. 1.3 million people live in the area accessed from Bab al-Salam, and 62 per cent of these people are displaced.

Mr. President,

I will turn now to the massive aid operation continuing from inside Syria.

In the first four months of 2020 humanitarian operations inside Syria reached more than 5.5 million people with humanitarian assistance, including cross-line assistance into the north-east.

This includes food assistance for 3.2 million people; nutrition support for half a million children; critical water and sanitation for 1.3 million people; 4 million medical procedures and 2.5 million medical treatment courses.

Due to the deteriorating economic situation we have expanded humanitarian cash assistance. So far this year, more than 40 million dollars' worth of cash and vouchers have been distributed to highly vulnerable persons, including people living with disability, single-parent households and the elderly.

UNICEF and other education organizations are also supporting students currently taking their national exams across the country, by preparing safe examination centers and implementing COVID-19 preventative measures.

Thousands of students have been travelling cross-line to government areas, joining a quarter of a million of their peers to sit their national exams. To the students currently doing that across Syria: I wish you all the very best in your exams.

Mr. President, the World Health Organization has dispatched two shipments of medical supplies to the north-east overland, in addition to continued deliveries by air.

But, more than five months on from the removal of Al Yaroubiya, distributions of WHO medical items have not reached the majority of facilities that previously depended on supplies delivered cross-border.

As the Secretary-General stated in his review of cross-line and cross-border assistance back in February, and as he reiterates in his 67th report on the humanitarian situation in Syria: a combination of more cross-border and cross-line access is required to sustain levels of humanitarian assistance into the north-east, and preferably increase that assistance. Should adequate steps not be taken for cross line deliveries to work effectively, and in the absence of consent from the Government of Syria or neighbouring countries to use border crossings into the north-east that are safe and logistically feasible, the Security Council would need to authorize the United Nations and its implementing partners to use additional crossings.

Also in the north-east: some 90,000 people remain in overcrowded displacement camps in the north-east, including al Hol camp. About 58,000 of them are children, from more than 60 different countries.

High Commissioner Bachelet last week described her concern that thousands are unable to return to their countries of nationality or origin. I join her in calling on States to assume responsibility for their nationals, in accordance with their obligations under international law.

Mr. President,

Our humanitarian operations in Syria rely heavily on our front-line partners, including national NGOs and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. I call on all parties to facilitate humanitarian access and protect all civilians and civilian objects, including humanitarian workers and assets, in line with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

The humanitarian assistance we provide across Syria also depends on the support of the international community, including the assistance provided by regional neighbours hosting millions of refugees. Tomorrow sees the fourth Brussels conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" and we will be asking for this critical support to continue.

Mr. President,

On 23 June, the Russian Federation informed the United Nations that it will no longer participate in the humanitarian notification system, which the United Nations and its humanitarian partners use to share information with parties to the conflict. We will discuss the situation further with our humanitarian organizations in Syria and with the Russian Federation. Humanitarian notification aims to facilitate the safe delivery of humanitarian assistance by informing parties to the conflict of facilities and movements that fulfill a humanitarian function. Whether or not they participate in the humanitarian notification system, parties to the conflict remain bound by international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2504 expires in 11 days. I will close by reiterating the Secretary-General's and my own numerous appeals to extend the cross-border authorization.

The cross-border authorization provides a lifeline for millions of civilians in north-west Syria. We cannot reach them without it.

Thank you.