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DEPUTY EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, AD INTERIM, RAMESH
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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

New York, 25 November 2020

As delivered

Thank you, Madam President.

I will focus today on five areas: first, the situation of displaced people across Syria as winter approaches; second, the humanitarian impact of the economic crisis, third, the protection of civilians; fourth, humanitarian access; and fifth, assistance being provided by humanitarian organizations across Syria.

Madam President, 6.7 million people in Syria are internally displaced. Our assessments show that a third of them lack proper shelter. That means they live in damaged or unfinished buildings, in public spaces like schools, or in tents that don't provide sufficient protection from the elements.

Winter weather is proving to be incredibly hard for those without adequate shelter, not to mention the very basics like fuel for heating, blankets, warm clothes and shoes.

We estimate that more than 3 million people across all of Syria need this type of assistance this winter season. Displaced families are particularly vulnerable, as are communities in elevated areas, such as in parts of Rural Damascus.

Already, heavy rains are causing flooding in some areas. Hundreds of tents in displacement sites in Idlib and western Aleppo have been damaged or destroyed by floods over the past month.

When sites like this flood, the water ruins or washes away what little belongings people have left; it muddies the ground, preventing water trucks and other assistance from getting through; and it causes sewage systems to overflow.

As the weather gets colder over the coming weeks, and with continued fuel shortages, we expect people will, as they did last year, resort to burning anything they can find to try and keep themselves and their children warm, risking tent fires and poisoning from toxic fumes.

Our colleagues are working hard to supply vulnerable families across Syria with what they need to get through the winter. I would like to thank our donors for continuing to support this life-saving effort.

Madam President, my second point is the **economic crisis**.

The value of the Syrian Pound on the informal market is not as volatile as it was over the summer, but it has declined steadily over the past month, as Deputy Special Envoy Mattar has also noted. It currently trades at around SYP 2,900 to the US Dollar, compared with around SYP 2,300 in October.

Prices of essentials are at historic levels. The price of subsidized bread, which the poorest and most vulnerable families rely on, doubled last month, while the weight of a bundle was reduced by 15 per cent.

The market price of bread increased by 26 per cent between September and October. Diesel went up by 21 per cent; and some fresh produce went up by 44 per cent.

The price of a national reference food basket increased by 247 per cent since October last year, and is now higher than at any point since WFP started price monitoring in Syria in 2013.

Madam President, what this means, quite simply, is that people are increasingly unable to feed their families.

Today an estimated 9.3 million people in Syria are food insecure – that's 1.4 million more people than a year ago and more than at any other time during the crisis. About 1 million of them are severely food insecure – twice as many as last year – and we expect this number to increase.

The **protection of civilians** is my next point, Madam President.

Deputy Special Envoy Mattar has already briefed you on the concerning rise in violence, including in the north-west.

Since the ceasefire agreement in March, some 240,000 displaced people have returned to towns and villages in southern Idlib and western Aleppo. Some of these places are now, again, coming under attack.

At least eight civilians were reportedly killed, including children, and at least 15 others were injured as a result of shelling and airstrikes in the north-west this month.

Among those killed were two aid workers on their way to a UNICEF-supported child-friendly space, where children can play and rest.

Over the past two months at least six humanitarian workers have been killed and six others injured in north-west Syria.

The risks our humanitarian colleagues are taking every day are simply unacceptable. Humanitarian workers must be able to deliver assistance without fear of attack.

Across the country civilians continue to be exposed to additional serious violations and abuses, including arbitrary detention, abduction and extrajudicial execution. Reports continue of kidnappings and killings in the south.

We are also seeing an alarming increase in the use of improvised explosive devices. Just yesterday, separate bombings in Al Bab and Afrin killed eight civilians and injured more than 30, according to preliminary reports.

Explosive hazards are having a devastating impact. Our most recent data show an explosive incident recorded roughly every 10 minutes on average. The vast majority of victims – 85 per cent – are boys and men.

An explosive ordnance assessment in parts of eastern and western Ghouta has surveyed some 68 hectares since August, and identified 63 per cent of that as contaminated. 272 items of explosive ordnance have been located and marked.

Survey and clearance are the only solution to the problem of landmines and explosive ordnance in Syria, but this work is not sufficiently funded. UNMAS requires another \$18 million, of which \$5 million is urgently needed to launch clearance operations in eastern and western Ghouta.

Madam President, protecting the infrastructure that is indispensable to civilians' survival is equally critical.

In Aleppo's Al Bab sub-district an estimated 185,000 people continue to face water shortages as water supply from the Ain Al Bayda pumping station remains cut off. Water from local wells is of poor quality and only covers around 15 per cent of water needs in the area.

Madam President, my next point is **humanitarian access**.

All UN assistance bound for northern Aleppo that previously came through the Bab al-Salam border crossing point is now being re-routed through Bab-al Hawa.

Road works continue on the main route into northern Aleppo, and are scheduled for completion in the coming weeks, before the weather makes such works impossible.

A UN cross-border mission into Idleb last month saw firsthand the widespread and acute needs of people in this part of Syria. Cross-border assistance continues to respond to these needs. More than 2,000 trucks of UN aid have entered through Bab al-Hawa since July, when Security Council resolution 2533 came into effect.

Madam President, efforts continue to bridge gaps in medical assistance in north-east Syria.

All 17 hospitals and 106 primary healthcare facilities in the north-east have been reached with medical supplies on at least one occasion, through one or more delivery modalities. That includes those that previously depended on UN cross-border operations. However, it has been inconsistent access. Gaps continue to be reported, and partners continue to explore all available means of addressing these.

But let me be clear: health services are extremely weak across the country and are being stretched to new extremes under the public health impact of COVID-19. Gaps in assistance and shortages of medical supplies and personnel are prevalent everywhere. In Dar'a, in the south, the National Hospital had thirty doctors pre-crisis, today it has only three, one tenth of the previous number, with women giving birth in rooms with other patients due to lack of beds.

Turning to Al Hol, we are monitoring with concern an increasing number of violent incidents in the camp. Ensuring the safety and security of residents is a priority, and the responsibility for this resides with the local authorities.

Some 64,000 people remain at Al Hol, more than half of whom are children under the age of 12. Many are unaccompanied; many are suffering high levels of psychological distress. Their situation must be urgently addressed.

Turning to Rukban, an inter-agency mission visited the Al Waha transit center early this month as part of ongoing efforts to facilitate departures for those wishing to leave. Meanwhile, the UN remains without access to the 12,000 people at Rukban. While efforts continue to support voluntary departures and to find sustainable arrangements for those who remain, humanitarian assistance must be allowed to get through.

My final point, Madam President, is the **assistance** being provided by humanitarian agencies across Syria.

So far this year, this has included the delivery of regular food assistance to 5.4 million people; emergency nutrition assistance to 1.5 million pregnant and lactating women and children under age five, the delivery of essential non-food items, such as blankets, plastic sheets, and water containers to almost 3 million people; cash transfers of US\$68 million to 1 million people, including 430,000 Palestine refugees; the initiation of COVID-19 PCR testing capacity in nine laboratories in seven governorates; and the establishment of 34 COVID-19 treatment sites with 1,433 in-patient beds for moderate cases and 303 beds for critical cases.

The Syria humanitarian operation collectively reaches an average of 7.4 million people with assistance each month. It is an enormous effort to stave off an even worse situation.

This would be impossible without the extraordinary commitment and endurance of our front-line colleagues, who are overwhelmingly Syrian and are themselves directly affected by the crisis. They are delivering aid under the most difficult of circumstances, at great personal risk. They must be protected.

Thank you, Madam President.