

**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 July 2020

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President.

I will focus today on four main areas:

First, the support humanitarian agencies are delivering to people across Syria.

Second, the economic situation and its humanitarian consequences.

Third, protection of civilians.

And fourth, funding for the humanitarian operation.

Mr. President,

Humanitarian aid operations across Syria are reaching an average of 6.8 million people each month.

The economic crisis, which I will come on to, is deepening poverty and pushing more people into humanitarian need.

4.6 million people are receiving monthly food assistance; more than 8.9 million medical procedures have been conducted; and more than 1.6 million children have received help with their education.

With the Security Council's decision, on 11 July, to extend authorization for UN cross-border aid delivery into north-west Syria, we are working to address the operational challenges arising from your decision.

The UN is also helping tackle COVID-19 in Syria. The problem is now country-wide: cases have now been confirmed in all but one of Syria's governorates. UN staff working in Syria are also struck by the disease.

The number of confirmed cases remains in the hundreds – so still a relatively low level. The true number of cases is certainly higher; limited testing capacity, compared to what is available in neighbouring countries, and a reluctance, among some people, to acknowledge an infection masks the real scale of the outbreak.

Mr. President, my second point today is the impact of the economic downturn.

The Syrian economy, devastated by nearly a decade of conflict, has entered a period of extreme fragility, marked by exchange rate volatility, high inflation, dwindling remittances, and lock down measures to contain COVID-19. For the year as a whole, the economy is expected to contract by more than 7 per cent this year.

Initial estimates suggest that job losses in recent months have increased unemployment from 42 per cent last year to close to 50 per cent today.

Remittances from abroad, a lifeline on which many Syrians depend, have fallen. Estimated remittances from Gulf States alone are now \$2 million per day, down from \$4.4 million in 2017, and at least \$7 million in 2010.

After falling to its lowest recorded informal rate in June, at 3,200 Syrian Pounds to the US dollar, the Pound has been regaining value. But this has so far not translated into price reductions for basic commodities and the cost of them continues to rise.

Market monitoring by the World Food Programme recorded a 48 per cent increase in the average price of a standard reference food basket between May and June. Food prices are 240 per cent higher than in June last year.

What this means is that families across the country can no longer afford the very basics. And food security and nutrition indicators clearly reflect that.

Some 9.3 million people are food insecure. More than 2 million more are at risk of becoming food insecure.

86 per cent of households say they are buying lower quality food, or less food, or skipping meals.

In some parts of the country, recent surveillance data show that chronic malnutrition among children under five is now at 29 per cent, compared to 19 per cent around this time last year.

Mr. President, my third point is on the obligation to respect and protect civilians.

The ceasefire reached in March in the north-west between the Russian Federation and Turkey is largely holding, but some air and ground-based strikes have been reported in recent weeks.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recorded at least five civilian deaths, including two children, and 26 civilians, including seven children, injured as a result of shelling and airstrikes this month.

Another 34 civilians, including 15 children, were killed and at least 98 wounded by attacks using improvised explosive devices in residential areas and local markets, and in incidents involving landmines and explosive remnants of war.

We are also monitoring with concern the increased level of violence and attacks in Dara'a.

In Rukban, the lack of any regular humanitarian assistance or basic service access has created a critical situation for the 12,000 people thought to remain there. I reiterate the urgency of delivering assistance to the remaining civilians and to supporting continued voluntary departures.

In the north-east, the water supply from Alouk water station was again disrupted this month, affecting 460,000 civilians in Al-Hasakeh governorate. Low water levels in the Euphrates are adding to the water shortages and disrupting electricity supply.

Among the areas affected and facing significant water shortages is al Hol camp, which accommodates around 65,000 people. Two thirds of the camp population are children. More than half are under the age of five – that is 35,000 children under the age of five.

Aid agencies need better access to the camp to help these children.

Mr. President let me close with some words on the funding situation for our humanitarian operations.

On 30 June, the fourth Brussels Pledging Conference resulted in total pledges of \$7.7 billion, of which \$5.5 billion was pledged for 2020. These pledges covered funding for humanitarian, resilience and development activities in Syria and across the region.

The highest amounts were pledged by the European Commission, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, France, and Denmark.

The Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria, with a funding requirement of \$3.4 billion in 2020, is 32 per cent funded halfway through the year, making it one of our better funded operations. I would like to thank donors for their generous contributions, without which we would be unable to help people throughout Syria. I would also urge others to contribute so that the financial burden is shared more fairly.

Another \$384 million is needed for Syria under the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan. 28 per cent of this has been received.

In my statement to the Brussels IV conference, I urged donors to give greater priority to education in their pledges. The education requirement in the Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria is currently just 24 per cent funded.

I want to reiterate my appeal to invest in the education of Syria's children. A third of school-aged children in Syria – 2.5 million children – are out of school. Another 1.6 million are at risk of dropping out of school.

The number of out-of-school children has increased by 16 per cent since last year. With school closures due to COVID-19, that number is very likely to increase further.

I briefed you last month on thousands of school children crossing, or attempting to cross, lines of control to take their national exams. Amid simultaneous and seemingly unsurmountable crises they are not losing sight of their future. Neither should we.

Thank you, Mr. President.