

**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, 26 May 2021

As delivered

Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Complementing what Geir [Pedersen, Special Envoy for Syria] has just told you, I will cover four points today: firstly, the key water shortages in the north-east; secondly – again, as he began to describe – the ongoing economic crisis; third, the protection of civilians; and fourth, humanitarian access.

So let me start with the **water situation**. We have not covered this in detail in my previous briefings to you, but there are a number of problems affecting the humanitarian situation now, which I thought we should draw to your attention.

Reduced water levels in the Euphrates since January reached a critical point this month.

The Tishreen dam in north-eastern Aleppo governorate was receiving around 180 m³ of water per second. That is less than half of the minimum amount it takes to keep the dam operational. And the low water flow prompted a partial closure, which caused electricity blackouts across north-east Syria.

Now, Tabqa dam, which lies downstream in ar-Raqqa governorate, has been drawn on as an emergency backup, but water levels there are now 80 per cent depleted.

Engineers operating Tishreen dam last week warned of a complete shutdown if water levels do not increase.

Mr. President, nearly 5.5 million people in Syria rely on the Euphrates and its subsidiaries for drinking water. There are about 200 water stations which pump, treat and deliver the water to those people. Those stations can't function without electricity from the Tishreen and Tabqa dams.

In addition to the water pumping stations, some 3 million people would lose their electricity if the dams shut down, as would hospitals and other vital infrastructure across the north-east.

A total shutdown of Tishreen dam could cause internal flooding and long-term damage. Wide-ranging knock-on impacts on agricultural production and public health would also be inevitable.

Crop forecasts for this year are already poor, as Syria suffers the effects of a drought. Below-average rainfall in the north-east has left wheat and barley fields reliant on irrigation, for which water is short.

The north-east was previously responsible for 70 per cent of Syria's wheat and barley production. If this year's crops fail, food insecurity – which, as you know, is already at historic highs – will deteriorate further.

Preventing a shutdown of the Tishreen and Tabqa dams requires dams in Turkey to release a minimum of 500 m³ of water per second.

However, Turkey has been experiencing water shortages of its own. So we would urge all concerned to find a solution that sustainably addresses the needs of everyone in the region who depends on water from the Euphrates. There have been some reports that in the last few days the amount of water released downstream has increased. And I think that demonstrates that a solution to this set of problems can indeed be found.

At Alouk water station, which I brief you on very frequently, and which is also powered, by the way, with electricity from the Tishreen dam, water pumping remains limited. Water levels are insufficient to reach most of the population the station ordinarily serves, including all those people in Al-Hasakeh city and at the al Hol camp.

On 23 May, technical teams secured one-off access to repair a sudden pipeline leak, but they are still not being granted regular and consistent access to the station.

Mr. President, my next point is on the humanitarian impact of the **economic crisis**.

The Syrian pound remains at over 3,000 to the dollar and food prices, partly as a consequence, remain at historically high levels.

More than two households in five – more than 40 per cent – report not having sufficient, or sufficiently nutritious, food.

Nealy half of Syrian families who were surveyed in April said that adults are eating less themselves so that the children in the family can be fed.

Fuel shortages also continue across Syria. Protests in al-Hasakeh against an increase in fuel and cooking gas prices announced by de facto authorities in the north-east last week were met with excessive force, leading to the deaths of at least five civilians, including a child. The decision to increase prices was subsequently overturned.

Mr. President, my next point is **protection**.

Following the artillery strikes on Atareb Surgical Hospital on 21 March, which we briefed you about previously, the hospital remains largely out of action, even though staff have gone back to work. Before the attack, the hospital was carrying out over 200 consultations and procedures a day. That number has dropped to around 50. Potential patients are worried about another attack and so they are reluctant to go to the hospital.

This is one of the longer-term consequences of attacks on health-care facilities. Those attacks instil fear in the civilian population, which discourages them from seeking health-care services, even though many are in desperate need of them.

As the Secretary-General says in his latest report, attacks directed against civilian objects like hospitals must be investigated. Impunity must end.

Security problems continue at Al Hol. Six murders have been reported since April, and 46 since January.

Some Syrian and non-Syrian nationals are leaving the camp. More than 10,000 people have left since June 2019.

But more than 60,000 remain, and they are living in unacceptable conditions.

I have raised this issue with you nearly every month for years now. I am regularly told how complex and intractable the situation is. But the truth is that those who could solve the problem have simply decided not to.

So let me remind you again that this is a camp of children. Most of the people there are younger than 12. Almost 14,000 of them are younger than 5 – babies and toddlers. They do deserve a future.

My next point, Mr. President, is **humanitarian access**.

The UN has not been able to deliver aid to Rukban since September 2019, nor have we been able to conduct assessments. Such reports that reach us from the camp paint a dismal picture of malnourishment, disease, and virtually no services apart from water.

Efforts continue to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave to go to government areas, and to identify alternative solutions for those who wish to remain, while also continuing to seek access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including, by the way, vaccinations. It would be nice finally, after so long, to see those access efforts succeed.

The north-east of Syria continues to lack essential health supplies, including to prevent, test and treat COVID infections.

And the virus is spreading again. After a 57 per cent increase in confirmed cases last month, recorded deaths from COVID have increased by nearly 50 per cent.

As in other parts of Syria, extremely limited testing means we are probably only recording a fraction of the true number of infections.

NGOs operating in the north-east have been clear in their assessment that the loss of the cross-border authorization for use by the UN in Yaroubiya has left the region woefully underserved in health services.

A first batch of vaccines from the COVAX Facility has been airlifted by WHO from Damascus to Qamishli this month. It's due to cover 9,000 health workers. Vaccinations started earlier this week.

But this is, of course, a drop in the ocean. Vaccinations in all parts of the country need to be radically increased for Syria to overcome the virus.

My final point, Mr. President, relates to humanitarian access to north-west Syria.

As you all know, the Security Council authorization for UN cross-border assistance into the north-west expires in just over six weeks. A failure to extend it would immediately end direct cross-border deliveries by the UN.

That means food deliveries for 1.4 million people every month, millions of medical treatments, nutrition assistance for tens of thousands of children and mothers, education supplies for tens of thousands of students – all of those things would stop.

Other crucial support the UN provides to water and sanitation, to health, to camp management, and other services would also end, along with the UN's ability to channel approximately US\$300 million in annual financing for operations to local partners on the ground.

The UN Monitoring Mechanism, which verifies the humanitarian nature of all UN deliveries, would shut down. The result would be a smaller, more fragmented operation of non-UN actors which would be less transparent and less accountable.

Mr. President, as you know I am regularly asked about the status of cross-line assistance into the north-west.

And you all know, we have worked for months to find an arrangement for cross-line missions that all parties can agree to. Consultations continue and I am now more hopeful that an agreement can be reached, at least for an initial set of conveyors.

Meanwhile, 1,000 trucks packed with aid are crossing into the north-west through Bab al-Hawa every month. That is important, albeit far from enough.

As I have said before, with more money and more authorized crossings, we can provide more help. That remains true for the north-west, as it does for the north-east.

Ahead of the resolution expiry last year, we appealed strongly for an early decision to limit the uncertainty agencies must operate in. Geir has issued his own appeal again to you today.

Without a decision so close to the resolution expiry, we must prepare, just like last year, for a worst-case scenario. So agencies have started pre-positioning supplies on the Syrian side of the border to draw on should access be cut.

We're also planning that the number of trucks crossing through Bab al-Hawa will increase to somewhere between 1,100 and 1,200 next month in order to help with the pre-positioning on that side.

But let me be clear that pre-positioning can only provide a very limited, short-term buffer. And due to the low levels of funding of the operation this year, that buffer will be much smaller than it was last year.

So, to repeat again, and as the Secretary-General has said, as Geir has just told you, as I have said many times, we want to see both more cross-line and more cross-border assistance. The cross-border operation – which is a lifeline for more than 3 million people – cannot be substituted. We look to this Council to ensure that that lifeline is not severed.

Thank you, Mr. President.