

**ACTING UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND  
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MR. RAMESH RAJASINGHAM**

**Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria**

*New York, 23 June 2021*

*As delivered*

Mr. President, thank you.

Further to the Secretary-General's remarks and his latest report, I will focus my briefing today on five points: first, the ongoing spread of COVID-19; second, the impact of the economic crisis; third, the water crisis; fourth, the protection of civilians; and fifth, humanitarian access, particularly as it relates to the United Nations cross-border operation.

Let me begin with COVID-19. Transmission rates are high, with the actual spread likely exceeding official records. An already weak health system is overstretched. Shortages of materials and trained personnel continue to be reported.

Vaccinations are under way across Syria. In May, vaccines from the COVAX Facility were dispatched through all available modalities: cross-line to north-east Syria, cross-border to north-west Syria and within government-controlled territories. As of 20 June, more than 97,000 people have received their first dose in government areas and the north-east. Some 26,000 people have received at least one dose in the north-west.

Current vaccinations are prioritizing front-line health-care workers, helping to protect an essential group that has been at the highest risk. The pandemic has been severe for health-care workers. Each illness further depletes the already critically low number of doctors and nurses at a moment when all support is needed to address the pandemic.

It is important, however, not to underestimate the burden of disease in Syria. The first COVAX delivery is only sufficient for about 0.5 per cent of Syria's people. The total delivery from the COVAX Facility is expected to cover only 20 per cent of the entire population.

As the Secretary-General noted last month, equal access to vaccines, tests, medicines and supplies, including oxygen, is needed to curb transmission rates, especially among the most vulnerable population, together with sustained access and additional funding.

Mr. President, my second point is about the impact of the economic crisis.

Daily life in Syria is becoming less and less affordable. The economic crisis has profound consequences for people throughout the country. Across Syria, they face eroded employment opportunities. Prices remain at record levels, and goods and services are becoming scarcer.

In his report, the Secretary-General notes his call more than a year ago for the waiving of sanctions that may impede access to essential health supplies, COVID-19 medical support or food in Syria.

The UN Population Fund has observed in recent months an increase in child and early marriage in north-west Syria. Desperate living conditions have led many families to marry off their daughters at a very young age. The vulnerabilities of children, especially girls, grow exponentially under such difficult conditions.

In May, a nationwide survey found that a growing percentage of the population faces challenges in accessing basic health services. Access to health care remains most difficult in north-east Syria.

Some 37 per cent of interviewed households reported not being able to purchase necessary medicines. A lack of financial resources was the overwhelming reason, with 82 per cent of participants indicating that medicine was unaffordable. A shortage of medicine on the shelves was second. Essential treatments are beyond the reach of many, particularly in north-east Syria.

Mr. President, my third point concerns the water crisis in Syria.

As the Secretary-General just warned, Syria is facing critical water shortages, especially in the north-east. The water deficit in the Euphrates basin is the worst in memory. The Tishreen and Tabqa dams will stop functioning if the water levels become any lower, with far-reaching impacts.

Nearly 5.5 million people face reduced access to drinking water. Three million people, as well as hospitals and other vital infrastructure, may lose access to electricity. The potential long-term consequences are severe.

I urge all parties concerned to find a solution that accounts for the needs of everyone in the region who depends on water from the Euphrates and its tributaries.

Mr. President,

With respect to the protection of civilians, the destructive effects of a decade of armed conflict are inescapable. In April and May, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights verified that at least 150 civilians were killed, and another 154 civilians were injured, in 186 incidents during hostilities. Women and children comprised a significant proportion of these victims.

There has been an alarming increase in hostilities in north-west Syria in the last month. This has resulted in many civilian casualties and the displacement of over 11,000 civilians.

Civilians in many parts of Syria live under constant threat, even if front lines are relatively static. Vestiges of armed conflict litter the country, and explosive remnants of war, landmines and improvised explosive devices pose a constant danger.

Mr. President,

Amid growing needs and deepening hardship, the attack that severely damaged the UN-supported Al Shifa'a Hospital in Afrin on 12 June was all the more shocking. At least 19 civilians were killed, including 3 children, and 40 were injured, including a child with disabilities. Among the dead were four humanitarian workers. In total, 11 hospital staff were also injured.

The Al Shifa'a Hospital is one of the largest medical facilities in northern Syria. Before the attack, it provided an average of 15,000 medical services each month, including 250 specialized surgeries.

The attack rendered the hospital inoperable. One missile reportedly hit the emergency room. Another landed in the delivery room, where some 350 babies were born each month. Both units were destroyed, as were the outpatient department and radiology rooms.

This is not the first time that the Al-Shifa'a has come under attack. But it is the latest in a long pattern that endangers patients and medical workers, and jeopardizes health care in the long term. It also raises serious concerns about compliance with international humanitarian law, which prohibits attacks directed against medical facilities and requires the parties to take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize civilian harm.

Like many other health facilities, including the Al Atareb Surgical Hospital hit on 21 March, the location of the hospital was well known to all the parties.

As the Secretary-General has stressed, and as required under international humanitarian law, all allegations of serious violations must be investigated and the perpetrators must be prosecuted, where appropriate. There must be accountability for war crimes in Syria.

Mr. President,

My fifth point is on humanitarian access. The Security Council's authorization for the UN cross-border operation in Syria expires on 10 July, just 17 days from now.

While the Security Council deliberates, the United Nations and its partners will continue to operate, as they have since 2014, when the Security Council first authorized the humanitarian operation across borders and conflict lines.

Hundreds of trucks will continue to deliver assistance to people otherwise unable to meet basic needs. Life-saving services, such as vaccinations, will continue to be provided. Humanitarian staff will continue to help manage camps for women and children with nowhere else to go.

The UN and its partners will also continue to monitor its programmes to ensure assistance reaches people in need. The UN cross-border operation remains one of the most heavily scrutinized and monitored aid operations in the world.

A failure to extend the authorization will have stark consequences. It would disrupt life-saving aid to 3.4 million people in need across the north-west, millions of whom are among the most vulnerable in Syria.

A group of 42 NGOs last week warned about such a scenario. NGOs estimate they only have capacity to meet the needs of 300,000 people, leaving more than 1 million without food assistance.

With 90 per cent of people in need requiring assistance for their survival, they would face a truly catastrophic situation. There is simply no substitute for the cross-border operation.

The United Nations and its partners spare no effort to access all people in need across north-west Syria using all possible means. The needs are simply too great not to exhaust all options.

This includes attempting to reach people in need across front lines, from within Syria. Consultations continue with relevant parties to undertake such operations as soon as possible. Despite all efforts, no such mission has been able to proceed.

A cross-line operation would provide a vital addition to the cross-border lifeline, but it could by no means replace it. Even if deployed regularly, cross-line convoys could not replicate the size and scope of the cross-border operations.

Cross-line operations can complement, not substitute for, a well-funded cross-border operation to north-west Syria.

Mr. President,

When it comes to delivering life-saving aid to people in need across Syria, all channels should be made, and kept, available. The stakes are simply too high otherwise.

Even with the massive United Nations response in Syria, more humanitarian access is required to reach those most in need of assistance.

As the Secretary-General notes in his report, with more crossings, and more funds, the United Nations can do more to help the rising number of people in need in Syria. This potential remains, both for the north-west and the north-east.

I echo the Secretary-General's call to the Security Council to help ensure that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have every opportunity to assist people in need by extending the cross-border authorization for 12-months.

Thank you, Mr. President.