

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MARTIN GRIFFITHS**

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

New York, 20 December 2021

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President.

The Secretary-General has issued, as you referred to, Mr. President, his report requested by Council members with regard to Security Council resolution 2585.

This report outlines the robust measures in place, in some detail, to ensure transparency in our Syria operations.

The operating environment is clearly complex. Nonetheless, the UN operates in a transparent manner to mitigate risks and to provide principled assistance. The report describes the robust systems in place for needs assessments, due diligence, monitoring and risk management.

It also speaks to our efforts to facilitate regular and predictable cross-line operations.

In north-east Syria, we reach nearly 1 million people each month through regular cross-line deliveries. However, we continue to strengthen this activity. Approvals for cross-line access to the Tel Abiad area to assess the situation and distribute vaccines are a recent and very positive step in that regard.

In the north-west, as we have discussed before and as is stated in that report, over the last six months we have taken renewed steps to create a cross-line delivery system to assist people in need.

Two cross-line convoys have now deployed to north-west Syria. The second one crossed conflict lines on 9 December, just a few days ago. They carried food and other humanitarian supplies for I think a total of about 80,000 people. The next convoy is planned for January.

Through our access negotiations, we were able to identify solutions acceptable for all parties. Agreement needed to be reached on who would be involved in conducting cross-line convoys and who would be authorized to distribute the aid. And all of this, as you know, Mr. President, has taken time. We also need and rely on the necessary security guarantees by all relevant parties to ensure the safety of our convoys and personnel.

On 16 December, distributions of food through a local World Food Programme team commenced under a newly established distribution mechanism, and we will continue to push for distributions to proceed apace.

We need to collectively translate the initial progress into more predictable and sustained humanitarian operations. And we have discussed in this chamber before the six-month plan that we have developed to achieve this predictability. We will continue to do all in our power to facilitate these cross-line convoys – convoy once a month, delivery every week. And I call upon all parties to facilitate, to help, and not to block the implementation of our plan.

As the Secretary-General has said, cross-line deliveries cannot at this point replace the massive scale of the cross-border operation, but they are important. Both of those operations are essential to support the 3.4 million people in need in the north-west.

Mr. President,

Let me turn to my monthly humanitarian update. I'm sure that Dr. Amani [Ballour], who will speak after me, will speak much more vividly and clearly to these issues, as well as others.

As Geir [Pederson, UN Special Envoy for Syria] has said, as the year ends, the situation for people in Syria remains grim. Humanitarian needs have grown, while funding has shrunk. And I have said before, and I have said again on many occasions: we continue to fail the Syrian people in what they need, what they deserve, and what they are entitled to in terms of humanitarian assistance and protection.

Violence continues to kill and injure civilians.

For example, on 11 November, a reported air strike hit a shelter in northern rural Idlib, killing five civilians, of whom three were children. As I say to you each month: civilians must be protected and are legally entitled to that protection.

As winter sets in, millions of people are in the cold. Internally displaced people living in temporary tents are especially vulnerable. And I regret to say that the humanitarian operation simply does not have sufficient funds to provide the basic shelter, heating, and warm clothes to all of those in need. As I say, we are failing in our responsibilities to the people of Syria.

COVID-19 – and I’m sure we will hear more in a minute – continues to wreak havoc across Syria, with vaccination rates, as we have discussed before, below 5 per cent, and women, of course, bearing the disproportional part of that impact.

Over five million people do not have sufficient and safe water in northern Syria. Food security, access to electricity, and livelihoods are also impacted, and indeed, food security, electricity and livelihoods are connected in their impact and exponential in how they impact each other.

We continue to build on our constructive dialogue, I’m glad to say, with parties to find a sustainable solution for Alouk water station. After two months of sustained engagement and operation, the station has functioned, however only intermittently again, since 26 November. This limits access to water to over half a million people.

Mr. President,

The economy continues its downward trajectory. Food costs more now than at any time since the World Food Programme started monitoring such costs in 2013.

Many families – this is an extraordinary assessment – spend on average 50 per cent more on basic items than they earn each month, and of course, they are forced to rely on credit and loans and help. It should be obvious that this is simply not sustainable.

Immediate life-saving activities therefore, of course, remain a priority, but we must also help people in Syria chart their own course towards a better future. Early recovery, as is emphasized in 2585, is another critical aspect of the humanitarian response.

Beyond food, people in Syria are the same as people anywhere. They want jobs – to earn a living – they want their basic needs met, and they want a future.

Working at a local level, we can ensure – and we can ensure, through early recovery and investment – that basic services can be provided in a manner that is equitable, responsive, and accountable to affected populations.

To take just one example, a UNFPA midwifery project in rural Aleppo addresses the massive need for trained health-care workers. A training facility was rehabilitated in this project to broaden access to maternal health care, and midwives were trained and received essential equipment – a simple process repeated daily throughout the world of aid. These midwives helped close to 800 pregnant women safely deliver their babies over the past year. And the midwives were able to make a living, in turn, to support their own families. This is, in fact, a story that can be, and should be, repeated throughout Syria.

The Secretary-General’s report identifies our increasing focus on this aspect of the response to the needs of the Syrian people.

The UN is currently completing an allocation of approximately US\$20 million to early recovery activities from the Syria cross-border humanitarian fund. And the Syria Humanitarian Fund, which provides assistance to those in other parts of Syria, allocated 40 per cent of its budget to enhancing community resilience. The good news is that donors are increasing their engagement in early recovery. And we are very grateful for this additional support that Member States have recently provided, including the recent support from Norway of \$17 million.

So we have seen real progress on early recovery, and I'm encouraged by the growing donor consensus on the need and priority for this kind of expenditure. I expect that to further increase in 2022. I have called on the UN system to increase its identification of relevant projects available for such funding.

Mr. President,

We have heard from Geir of the plight of Syria, but as he carefully and precisely put it, some hopes for next year that we must work on. And I associate myself with everything that he says, that the essential quality of the humanitarian requirement for the people of Syria requires us to hope and to do, as he described, a step-by-step approach to meet those needs and give the people of Syria a future.

Civilians must be protected.

Increasing support for life-saving aid, especially as people in Syria endure this winter.

Early recovery aid.

Safe and voluntary return of refugees, if we can make that dream happen.

And finally, access to all in need.

We will work in lockstep with Geir and his colleagues as we go into 2022 to identify ways in which we can support his mission, because it's quite clear to all of us that it is only an end to this conflict which will really meet the needs of the people of Syria.

Thank you very much.