Thank you, Madam President.

I will focus on three points today. First, the economic crisis and the rise in food insecurity; second, humanitarian access; and third, the protection of civilians.

In addition, I have been asked by the Secretary-General to provide, on behalf of the UN system, a briefing on the UN Strategic Framework and “Parameters and Principles”. This was a request made by the Russian Federation as conveyed to the Secretary General’s office by this month’s Security Council President.

Starting with the economy, disturbing new food security data published by the World Food Programme highlighted the challenges we face last week.

Around 60 per cent of the Syrian population, that’s 12.4 million people, do not have regular access to enough safe and nutritious food. An additional 4.5 million people have fallen into this category over the last year.

The increase maybe shocking, but it cannot be said to be surprising.

Syria’s fragile economy has suffered multiple shocks over the past 18 months. The substantial depreciation of the Syrian Pound, which lost more than three quarters of its value over the past year, has been one of the visible effects of this.

While the value of the Pound dropped, prices of food and other essential items increased by more than 200 per cent.
And purchasing power has dwindled substantially as a result. Average household expenses now exceed average income by an estimated 20 per cent.

The result is that millions of Syrians are resorting to desperate measures to survive.

More than 70 per cent of Syrians say they have taken on new debt over the last year. Many are selling assets and livestock. Parents are eating less so they can feed their children, and they are sending them to work instead of to school.

Those who have run out of options are simply going hungry.

More than half a million children under five in Syria suffer from stunting as a result of chronic malnutrition, according to our latest assessments. We fear this number will increase.

These problems are visible in many parts of the country but the situation is particularly bad in the north-west and the north-east, where nutrition surveillance data show that up to one in three children in some areas suffer from stunting. That effects this will have on their development and learning will be lifelong and irreversible.

Last week I spoke with a group of Syrian doctors.

A doctor at a pediatrics hospital told me that of his 80 in-patient beds, half are occupied by malnourished children. Five children have died at his hospital as a result of malnutrition in the past two months.

Another pediatrician told me that she diagnoses malnutrition in up to 20 children a day. But parents are bringing their children to her for completely different reasons, unaware that they are suffering from malnutrition.

Malnutrition, she said, has become so normal that parents cannot spot the signs in their own children.

Some doctors also told me how concerned they are about a potential disruption of cross-border aid into the north-west of Syria. And that brings me to my next point, Madam President: humanitarian access.

All humanitarian assistance that enters north-west Syria is delivered cross-border. It supports 2.4 million people on average each month and the majority of that is delivered by the UN operation.

Without the cross-border operation, doctors in north-west Syria, like some of those I spoke to, would not be able to provide those children the care that they need to survive.
They would not have the resources and supplies to carry on within quite a short period of time, they said, the situation would go from terrible to catastrophic.

Madam President, as the Secretary-General notes in his latest report: when it comes to delivering life-saving aid to people in need, all channels should be made, and should be kept, available.

Conditions in the north-west are worse now than they were when the Security Council decided to extend its authorization for cross-border assistance last July.

A failure to extend the authorization in the future would trigger suffering and loss of life potentially on a very large scale.

Madam President, the UN is continuing its efforts to conduct a first cross-line mission into north-west Syria. The aim is not to have a one-off mission, but to have regular cross-line missions that complement the ongoing cross-border operation.

A new operational plan is being developed to accommodate the concerns of the relevant parties. The new proposal, which is in the process of being submitted, foresees a UN aid convoy crossing frontlines, and distributing aid in Atareb with appropriate involvement from local volunteers and other relevant partners, the precise details of which and composition of whom need to be agreed.

We continue to discuss this but have yet to reach an agreement with all parties concerned. And without that, we will not be able to conduct the cross-line mission.

Let me be absolutely clear: the UN is ready. We have been ready for a long time. What is needed now is wider agreement so that the first mission can go ahead.

Turning to the north-east, Madam President, an increase in tensions in recent months caused temporary disruptions in emergency assistance for hundreds of thousands of people.

The UN has however continued to make every effort to scale up cross-line deliveries of medical supplies into the north-east. That includes deliveries of 344 tons of health supplies, amounting to almost 3 million treatments, in 2020. WHO plans to deliver another 50 tons of health supplies during the first quarter of 2021.

Expanding the reach of medical supplies delivered cross-line will continue to depend on expedited approvals, on improved security conditions leading to an end to road blockages, and on access to adequate funding.

These deliveries are critical, but given the immense health needs in this region, they are not enough. Only 6 per cent of public hospitals, and none of the public health centres in the north-east are assessed to be fully functioning. As the Secretary-General observes in his report: “one year on from expiry of the Security Council’s authorization for the United Nations agencies and their
implementing partners to use the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing, humanitarian needs in north-east Syria remain high, and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Madam President, my next point is the protection of civilians.

I am deeply saddened to report the death of another humanitarian worker in north-west Syria on 16 February. The colleague was working on a UN-supported health project in Al-Bab, providing services for people affected by COVID-19. He was killed by a car bomb in a market in the middle of Al-Bab city that day. Two others – a driver and a co-worker – were injured in the attack.

This was the latest in a series of horrific bombings that have killed dozens of civilians and injured many more in northern Syria in recent months.

Madam President, it is the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights who has the mandate in the UN to document incidents of this sort, involving civilian casualties. They have recorded an increase in civilian casualties in northern Syria due to increased use of IED attacks. As the Secretary-General has repeatedly said in his reports on Syria: “Perpetrators of serious violations and abuses of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law must be held accountable.”

On 17 February, a day after I spoke with the group of doctors, I referred to earlier, a hospital in Afrin was damaged when a missile struck a building right in front of it. A staff member of the hospital, his wife and three children who were nearby, were injured in the attack.

Humanitarian workers in Syria are, you know, delivering aid every day under the most difficult circumstances and at great personal risk. They must be protected.

Finally, Madam President, let me update you on the UN Strategic Framework and the “Parameters and Principles,” which the Secretary-General has asked me to speak to, on behalf of the UN System, and as requested by the Russian Federation.

The drafting of the UN strategic framework covering the period 2021-2023 was initiated last year and aims to reflect the agreed operational activities of the UN country team in response to needs and priorities in Syria, from which programmes and projects of specific UN agencies, funds and programmes will be derived.

The UN is moving the process forward and currently working on the third draft of the document, in consultation with all stakeholders in Syria and elsewhere.

The programmatic priorities reflected in the current draft result from an extensive dialogue with national partners and are informed by ongoing programmes and available resources.
Consultations also continue with all other partners, in line with established practice, to help enrich the outcome and secure wide support, including financial support, for the successful implementation of the Strategic Framework.

To allow for further consultation on all the pending issues, the UN sought a six-month extension to the current strategic framework.

Our Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and Country Team are moving ahead in an open and transparent process, working with our national counterparts to deliver the best possible outcome.

As the drafting process proceeds, the “Parameters and Principles of UN Assistance in Syria” document serves as a key internal guidance tool to help target the operations of the UN Country Team in what remains a very complex context.

The parameters and principles were formulated through a consultative processes, drawing on existing mandates, and shared within the UN system to ensure support and assistance is provided to those in need in all areas of Syria in an equitable and non-discriminatory manner with a needs based approach upholding neutrality and impartiality.

The document is consistent with the principles of the UN Charter and relevant Security Council resolutions. It reconfirms core humanitarian principles, ensuring that the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence lie at the core of our work.

Ultimately, all UN operations in Syria are conducted in full compliance with Resolutions you have passed and with other relevant decisions, including General Assembly Resolution 46/182 and the QCPR resolution 75/233.

I also note that activities undertaken by the UN Country Team under the Strategic Framework are complementary to the Humanitarian Response Plan in order to save lives, enhance protection, and increase resilience and access to services, including through the rehabilitation of critical civilian infrastructure, which serve a critical humanitarian function.

This is essential at a time when the economy continues to suffer severe decline, poverty and hunger are on the rise, and humanitarian needs are also increasing.

Thank you, Madam President.