

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
DEPUTY EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, URSULA MUELLER**

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

New York, 28 May 2019

As delivered

Mr. President, distinguished Council members,

You all know the statistics of this conflict. You know that more than half of the Syrian population has either fled the country or faced repeated internal displacement. You know that hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed and millions injured. And you know that, currently, an estimated three million people in Idlib are caught up in the crossfire, with some living under trees or plastic sheeting on bare patches of land. There are no safe schools or clinics, no way to earn a living. Eight years of air strikes and shelling, of deadly terrorist attacks and the constant fear of sending your child to a school that may be bombed later that day.

Mr. President,

Fighting in Idlib has continued over recent days – despite the announcement of a temporary ceasefire on 17 May. So far this month, heavy shelling and aerial bombardment resulted in the confirmed deaths of more than 160 civilians and the displacement of some 270,000 people. As recently stated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and I quote “both pro-Government forces and non-State armed groups fighting in northern Syria appear to have failed to respect the principles of distinction and proportionality under international humanitarian law.”

Since 28 April, that is in the last four weeks, a total of 25 attacks on healthcare have been reported by the World Health Organization, including on 22 health facilities, with some having been hit more than once. All of these attacks occurred in northwestern Syria. Some 25 schools are reported to have also been impacted by the violence, as well as markets and at least three sites for displaced people.

Mr. President,

The humanitarian community is responding in accordance with its contingency and readiness plans. For example, so far in May, more than 170,000 ready-to-eat meals have been handed out to those who fled the latest round of violence. Shelter support has been provided to 25,000 newly displaced people while an additional 60,000 civilians are to be assisted in the coming days and weeks. And this is in addition to the 1.2 million people that we already reach on a monthly basis.

However, despite our best efforts, the response is stretched. Further military operations will overwhelm all ability to respond. Many of our humanitarian partners are part of the affected population and have themselves been displaced. As a result, in many areas of active hostilities, humanitarian operations have been suspended. This includes the suspension of health, nutrition and protection services previously supporting some 600,000 people, including 21 immunization centres that have ceased operations, and at least 49 health facilities that have partially or totally suspended activities out of fear of being attacked.

Mr. President,

As you all know, this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions as well as the 20th anniversary of the Security Council's adoption of the protection of civilians as an item on its agenda. And yet, as stated by the Secretary-General last week during the open debate in this Council on the protection of civilians, respect today for international humanitarian law is – at best – questionable. In Syria, for example, the World Health Organization has confirmed 33 attacks on healthcare since the beginning of the year. And some of these facilities have been impacted repeatedly.

You are all – as Member States – aware that *all* parties to armed conflict are legally bound to comply with international humanitarian law. Sparing hospitals and schools is not optional. It is a fundamental legal obligation.

Mr. President,

While fighting in Idlib is perhaps the most distressing front in the conflict at present, it is not the only place where humanitarian needs continue to rise. We remain gravely concerned, for example, about reports of deteriorating conditions inside Rukban. As you may know, during the past two months, over 13,100 people have left Rukban. Typically, those who leave Rukban spend around 24 hours at five shelters around Homs city, where children are vaccinated and families receive humanitarian and medical assistance before most of them continue on to their areas of choice. The United Nations now has access to people who left Rukban, having visited the shelters on 22 April and 13 May, and humanitarian assistance is being provided to all of them. This is a welcome development.

Sustained assistance for 29,000 people who remain in Rukban is, however, just as necessary. These are perhaps the most vulnerable of all. Food, basic medicines and other life-saving supplies delivered in February have run out inside the camp. Fuel is scarce and prices are skyrocketing. People are exhausted.

The deployment of a third humanitarian convoy to Rukban therefore remains critical in order to avoid further suffering. We strongly urge the Syrian authorities to reverse their refusal and facilitate access for a third humanitarian convoy as first requested in March and again on 9 May. Access at all stages, in the camp, as they pass through the shelters and in their areas of origin, is important to provide support to this vulnerable population.

Mr. President,

We have frequently reported to this Council about the plight of some 74,000 civilians at the Al Hol camp – 92 per cent of whom are women and children. Most have been exposed to extreme violence and trauma under ISIL. They are now living in extremely difficult conditions where they are facing a range of protection challenges, and an uncertain and disconcerting fate. Many of them are foreigners, and face the risk of being denied repatriation, rehabilitation, re-integration, a fair trial, or even of becoming stateless. They also face the risk of family separation and not knowing the whereabouts of family members, given the notable absence of adult males and adolescent boys over the age of 12 in the camp.

All children, including those suspected of being associated with armed groups and/or designated terrorist organizations, are entitled to special care and protection under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These children must be treated first and foremost as victims. The focus must be on their prompt rehabilitation, reintegration, and repatriation, where applicable, while remaining with their families, and, in the meantime ensuring their access to specialised support, including protection services, translation where necessary and mental health and education services.

Solutions for foreign nationals need to be urgently found to avoid their protracted encampment, and we call – yet again – on all Member States to take all measures necessary to ensure that their nationals are repatriated for rehabilitation and reintegration, or prosecution, as appropriate, in line with international law and standards.

We understand that more people may yet arrive in Al Hol in the coming period. Conditions are already difficult with the current population. Summer months and the risk of new arrivals may complicate the situation even further. Solutions for residents of the camp – including voluntary returns to their areas of origin or choice and/or repatriation, as relevant, must be found urgently.

Mr. President,

Our concerns extend to the situation in the south of the country, under the control of the Government since the summer of 2018. As described by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, active hostilities have ceased yet the levels of violence continue to be unacceptably high. Moreover, OHCHR has received reports of at least 380 people arrested or detained in recent months, 230 of whom have been forcibly disappeared. At least two have died in detention. Many families continue to have limited or no information about their missing or detained relatives.

Mr. President,

This Council has been briefed in great detail – month after month – on the scale of the suffering of the Syrian people. Sixty-one reports have been submitted by the Secretary-General. Hundreds of Council sessions have taken place. There is no question today about whether you, Members of this Council, are aware of the tragic humanitarian situation in Syria – you clearly are. The question today is what you will do to protect civilians in Idlib – the latest example of an entirely known, predictable, and preventable humanitarian disaster unfolding before our eyes.

Can't this Council take any concrete action when attacks on schools and hospitals have become a war tactic that no longer sparks outrage? Is there nothing to be said or done when indiscriminate barrel bombs are dropped in civilian areas – a clear breach of international humanitarian law and of Council resolution 2139. Millions of battered and beleaguered children, women and men cannot wait for another Geneva round to succeed. They need protection – and your action – now.

Thank you, Mr. President.