

**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, 30 January 2019

*As delivered*

Thank you, Mr. President.

The people of Syria are suffering a cold hard winter, with freezing temperatures, snowfall and heavy rain resulting in flooding which is destroying shelters and forcing tens of thousands more people to move. Millions are living under tents or tarpaulins or in damaged buildings with no power or heating. There are severe shortages of all the basics – from blankets to baby milk to bandages.

Since late last year, the United Nations and its partners have been raising funds to support Syrians across the country with vital winter items, including plastic sheeting to reinforce shelters, stoves and heating fuel, blankets, jackets and winter clothes. We have raised \$81 million so far, which has allowed us to help 1.2 million people. Continued support is critical to ensuring that all those in need can be reached.

Mr. President,

The weather has been difficult for people in Idlib, where the risk of military escalation continues to loom. Over the second half of last year I frequently highlighted our growing concerns about the plight of three million people in Idlib and neighbouring areas in northwest Syria, where civilians simply have nowhere else to flee should there be a full-scale military incursion into the area. The September agreement between Russia and Turkey was followed by a significant decrease in ground fighting and airstrikes. However, January saw an increase in fighting between non-State armed groups, placing civilians at risk and resulting in injury and death. Today I

reiterate the importance of sustaining the Russia-Turkey agreement and I remind you that a large-scale military operation in Idlib would have catastrophic humanitarian implications.

Last month you extended the authorization for the cross-border relief operation into Idlib. Hundreds of thousands of people are reached each month with lifesaving assistance through our cross-border operations. We must continue to be able to provide food, medicine, tents, critical winter supplies and other help.

Mr. President,

Some 42,000 people remain stranded in Rukban along the Syria-Jordan border. Conditions in the informal settlement have continued to deteriorate since the last humanitarian convoy to the area, from 3 to 8 November. Eight infants have reportedly died since last month. Again, the cold is making the situation even worse.

So it is critical that the parties support a second convoy to Rukban. The United Nations has been engaged on multiple fronts to ensure it can happen, including by addressing concerns expressed by the Russian Federation and the Government of Syria about the security of the convoy and monitoring arrangements for aid distribution.

The convoy will include more than 100 trucks of relief supplies, focusing on food, winterization support and health, nutrition and household and water and sanitation items. The vaccination campaign from the first convoy will be continued and the team will conduct an intention survey, to help identify a durable solution for those people in the informal settlement.

Monitoring will be further enhanced, from the offloading site up to the distribution points where beneficiaries collect their assistance, with some 250 United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent personnel accompanying the convoy. The team plans to stay in Rukban for at least a week, to ensure sufficient time to monitor distributions, to carry out the intention survey and to vaccinate as many children as possible. In terms of security, we have agreed that from the entry to the 55-kilometre exclusion zone up until the offloading site, there will be a 5-kilometre buffer zone between the armed groups present in the area and the convoy to avoid any interference. However, protection for the accompanying personnel must be provided at the offloading point and the accommodation site, and security is needed inside the informal settlement, where distributions will take place, where vaccination points will be established, and where enumerators will conduct the survey.

On 27 January, we received verbal approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Damascus for the convoy to proceed. Security guarantees have also been received from the Russian Federation and from International Coalition Forces. Planning is now underway for loading of the trucks to begin before the end of the week, and for them to set off by 5 February. We call on all parties to ensure that this goes ahead without any further delay.

Mr. President,

Turning to the north-east of the country, we are concerned about the humanitarian impact of ongoing military operations in south-eastern Deir-ez-Zor, where thousands have been displaced and an unknown number of people remain trapped under ISIL control. Continuing and intense airstrikes and ground fighting have caused scores of civilian casualties and damaged critical infrastructure.

Since December, some 20,000 people – most of them women and children – have been displaced from the Hajin area to Al Hol camp in Hassakeh Governorate. They have been exposed to hostilities, explosive hazards, intense cold and prolonged security screenings, through which they have received minimal assistance. We have received reports of 25 children having died, either in transit or shortly after reaching the camp. We are scaling up our efforts to respond in Al Hol. But people continue to arrive in critical condition, with many reporting that they were relocated involuntarily, that their documentation has been confiscated, that their movement continues to be restricted and that they would prefer to seek shelter with family members or acquaintances in Deir-ez-Zor. Once more I call on all parties to do their utmost to protect civilians, and to allow them freedom of movement to seek safety and basic services in a location of their choosing.

Mr. President,

We have frequently reported to the Council about the unacceptable risk that mines, unexploded ordnance and other explosive hazards continue to pose across Syria. I am therefore pleased to be able to confirm that the United Nations Mine Action Service yesterday launched its first project out of Damascus, following the opening of its office last year. Some 25 young Syrian men and women are being trained in explosive hazard risk education. UNMAS remains ready to deploy and assist with humanitarian mine action in Raqqa, should such a deployment be authorized by the authorities.

Humanitarian organizations are fully mobilized throughout Syria to meet the needs of the people. In consultation with the Government, and guided by humanitarian principles, we are now finalizing our 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview. We are working to ensure that our Humanitarian Response Plan is completed in advance of the upcoming Brussels conference. These documents are based on a thorough assessment of needs undertaken over the course of the last year, including in areas that have recently seen changes in control, like eastern Ghouta, south-western Idlib and the south of the country.

Monitoring and evaluation remain central to our efforts. In the last three months of 2018, for example, the United Nations, with the agreement of the Government, undertook nearly 1,000 missions across Syria, 75 per cent of which were for monitoring and evaluation purposes,

allowing us to understand in greater detail and to report credibly to donors on how their money is being used.

I would like to conclude by reiterating some current priorities for which we seek your help:

- First, support from all Member States to ensure that the parties respect and protect civilians, with particular attention to the north-west and north-east of the country. Once again, a full military offensive in Idleb and the surrounding areas must be avoided at all costs.
- Second, the humanitarian convoy to Rukban must be allowed to proceed as planned.
- Third, for all parties to facilitate safe, regular and sustained humanitarian access, so we can carry out additional needs assessments, deliver to all areas where needs are most severe and monitor the impact of our interventions.
- And fourth, where I started, financing for the immediate life-saving needs in Syria, to help people through this bitter winter but also to ensure the humanitarian programmes in our 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan are well-funded. The conference in Brussels on 13-14 March will be a critical marker in this regard.

Thank you.