



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MARK LOWCOCK**

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

29 August 2019

As delivered

Thank you, Madam President.

I want again today to start with the situation around Idleb, on which we have briefed you many times over the last four months. The Secretary-General issued another statement on 20 August, expressing deep concerns about the continued escalation. He strongly condemned continued attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including on healthcare and educational facilities, and urged the parties to fully respect international humanitarian law.

On 21 August, the Secretary-General issued his latest report, which you just referred to, Madame President, on implementation of your resolutions on Syria. This report covers the period up to the end of July. In summary, according to conservative estimates, more than 500 civilians had been killed and many hundreds more injured since the start of the escalation in northwest Syria in late April. WHO and UNICEF reported that 43 health facilities, 87 educational facilities, 29 water stations, and 7 markets have all been impacted by fighting since April. The Secretary-General's report reminds you that these attacks have been confirmed using tried and tested systems, whereby the UN receives reports from partners on the ground and reviews them against at least two other independent sources.

I think Geir in his statement will touch on recent military and political developments in the area. I want to give you a few examples of the humanitarian consequences we have seen since my Deputy last updated you on 14 August.

Over the weekend of 16-18 August, an additional 44 civilians were reportedly killed due to airstrikes, including 16 children and 12 women. Attacks also reportedly impacted two schools in Heish, one in Maar Tahroma and one in Hazarin. On Monday this week, 15 civilians, including women and children, were reportedly killed in airstrikes on seven communities in Idlib. And this morning we received reports that yesterday, 17 more people, including three women and seven children, were killed by airstrikes, and that a healthcare facility in Ghadqa town was damaged.

Over the last three weeks, since the collapse of the conditional ceasefire on 5 August, dozens of communities have emptied out in northern Hama and southern Idlib. Satellite imagery shows that entire towns and villages have been razed to the ground. Most of those who can, are fleeing northwards further into Idlib Governorate and closer to the Turkish border. Those who stay behind are cowering in basements or in what's left of their homes.

576,000 individual displacement movements have been recorded by UN supported systems since May. Just to give you a sense of scale, that is three to four times the figure recorded during the violence in eastern Ghouta early last year; and almost 75 per cent more than was seen during the offensive in southern Syria in mid-2018.

Many of these people are living in the open air, frequently protected only by a plastic sheet. About 100 schools have been turned over for displaced people, compromising their ability to provide education for children.

On 22 August, following advances in many areas of northern Hama and southern Idlib, the Syrian authorities announced again the opening of the Morek/Soran crossing point for civilians wishing to leave the area. We understand the Syrian authorities have stationed buses in the area and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent has been asked to prepare for possible population movements. There are two shelters identified in Souran to receive people with a capacity of 150 families.

The UN and humanitarian partners have mobile teams ready to respond in the area should civilians decide to use the crossing point. From the information available to us, however, it appears that relatively few people are opting to move in this direction, compared to the much larger numbers preferring to move north and west further into Idlib.

Madam President,

One dimension of the Idlib conflict we have not covered much in our previous briefings, but is covered by the Secretary-General's latest report, is the impact on agricultural activities in northern Hama and southern Idlib Governorates. Traditionally, large parts of the agricultural area in Idlib, considered to be among of the most fertile land in the country, are cultivated for wheat.

Shelling, air strikes and widely reported fires have contributed to the destruction of crops and damage to farming equipment. Much of the harvest has been lost, and the capacity to prepare the soil for the new planting season is compromised.

Madam President,

I and other UN officials have repeatedly called on the parties and this Council to ensure respect for international humanitarian law. The rules are clear. The parties must at all times apply the

principles of distinction and precaution in the conduct of hostilities, and take all necessary steps to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure from attacks and the effects of violence. People's homes, hospitals, schools, water systems and markets must be protected. There can be no reason, rationale, excuse or justification for the destruction of civilian areas on the scale seen in Idleb today.

In the months ahead, the Board of Inquiry announced by the Secretary-General will investigate incidents in northwest Syria which damaged or destroyed facilities which have either been de-conflicted or received humanitarian support from the UN.

Madam President,

Despite all the challenges, the humanitarian community is doing everything it can to respond to the needs of the estimated three million people in and around Idleb. With some 15,000 aid workers on the ground, humanitarians continue to provide shelter materials, food assistance and health services to the population including newly displaced people.

More than a million people receive general food assistance every month. The people of Idleb are reached exclusively through the cross-border operation. Because, as I have said before, that is the only way they can be reached for as long as access from within the country is impeded. It is for that reason that the renewal of your resolution 2165 later this year will be crucial.

Madam President,

Let me update you now on Rukban. Dire conditions and lack of assistance, coupled with the hope for durable solutions, have led many people to leave. Another joint UN-Syrian Arab Red Crescent assessment mission took place last week. The purpose was to determine the number of people wishing to leave Rukban and those wishing to stay. The mission informed everyone in the camp about plans for future assisted voluntary departures and assessed the needs of those wishing to stay.

As per our agreement with the Syrian authorities, another mission is planned to Rukban within the next couple of weeks to facilitate the transport of those who said they wanted to leave Rukban for shelters in Homs. All movement must be voluntary, safe, well-informed and dignified, with humanitarian access assured throughout. The agreement is that in the same mission the UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent will provide critical humanitarian assistance to those who decide to remain in Rukban.

Let me turn now to Al Hol. There are currently some 68,600 people in the camp there. About 40 per cent of them are Syrians, 45 per cent are Iraqis and 15 per cent are other foreign nationals.

Some 94 per cent are women and children, of whom 67 per cent are under the age of 18. Most have been exposed to violence and trauma under ISIL.

They are now living in extremely difficult conditions. And they face an uncertain fate. That includes the risk of being denied repatriation, rehabilitation, re-integration or a fair trial, and the risk of becoming stateless despite having citizenship or a claim to citizenship. Solutions to these difficult issues need urgently to be found, and the UN has repeatedly called on all Member States to take the measures necessary to ensure that their nationals are repatriated for the purposes of prosecution, rehabilitation and/or reintegration, as appropriate, in line with international law and standards. In that effort, it is important that all children under 18 be considered primarily as victims and be duly protected and assisted.

The UN has taken note of statements released by the United States and Turkey regarding their plans to coordinate the establishment of a so-called ‘safe zone’ in northeastern Syria. The UN is not a party to and has not been consulted on this agreement. I must emphasize that any measures taken must ensure the safety and welfare of civilians, including by protecting them from violence, forced displacement or loss of livelihoods, and that sustained, unimpeded and safe humanitarian access to civilians in need must be guaranteed, including through the cross-border programme, for the UN and its humanitarian partners.

Madam President,

The UN and humanitarian agencies run a large relief operation all across Syria, reaching 6 million people in the period covered by the Secretary-General’s latest report. Humanitarian assistance provided by UN agencies included food for an average 3.6 million people a month, and more than 2.1 million health treatments to people around the country. The response is, however, this year significantly less well funded than it was at this stage in 2018. So I would ask all those who made pledges at the Brussels conference in April to take early action to implement them.

Madam President,

Let me return, finally, to Idleb. Three weeks from now it will be one year since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Idleb – an agreement which called for restraint and aimed to prevent further escalation in northwest Syria. Yet, one year on, the bombing and fighting go on in plain sight, day in and day out. Three million people – two-thirds of them women and children – are counting on your support to make this violence stop. I told you last month what some of them have said to me. We cannot turn back the clock on what has happened, but this Council and its members can take meaningful action now to protect civilians and ensure full respect for international humanitarian law. It is within your power to do that.

Thank you, Madam President.