

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

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria - *As delivered*

New York, 30 July 2019

Thank you, Mr. President.

Last Friday, 26 July, I spoke via a video link to Dr Mohammed Abrash, a surgeon at Idleb Central Hospital. Trained in Aleppo, he has been a physician for 28 years, and since 2011 he's been in Idleb.

Dr Mohammed told me he is afraid. He has a room at the top of the building. He says the lower floors and basement are the safest places, so that is where the patients are. A few days before I spoke to him, a bomb landing 50 meters away blew out all the glass and windows of his room. A day or so before that, another bomb had hit a gynecological facility 200 meters away. Dr Mohammed's hospital is deconflicted under the UN system.

Everyone knows where it is.

I spoke to him because two days previously, on 24 July, three young sisters were taken to his hospital by emergency ambulance. Their house had been hit by a bomb dropped by a war plane. Dalia, the 9-year-old, lay on the bed behind Dr Mohammed as we spoke while he tended to her.

Mr President,

You have all seen the pictures of her two younger sisters, because they were printed on the front pages of newspapers all across the world: Rawan, a 3-year-old, buried by rubble, covered in dust and clinging on to the T-shirt of her baby sister Tuka, in a desperate effort to stop her falling to her death off the precipice that the bomb had made of the upper stories of their home. Their mother, just 25 years old, and 5-year-old sister Reham were killed in the attack.

Rawan, that brave little three-year old, died of her injuries the day after the attack. She had saved her baby sister, who has now been discharged from Dr Mohammed's hospital.

Mr President,

For more than 90 days now bombing and shelling by the Government of Syria, backed by the Russian Federation, has produced carnage in the so-called de-escalation zone of Idlib. On 26 July, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights identified at least 450 civilians who have been killed since late April – including more than a hundred in the last two weeks alone. We have seen continued reports of attacks killing civilians, including further attacks in the town of these little girls.

Many hundreds more have been injured. Over 440,000 have been displaced. Dozens of civilians have also been killed or injured as a result of shelling by Security Council listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the non-State armed groups associated with them.

Mr President,

My office and I have now briefed you on this seven times since 29 April when the current onslaught started.

You will all have seen the statement from the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued on 26 July. Let me quote from it for you.

“Despite repeated calls by the United Nations to respect the principle of precaution and distinction in their conduct of hostilities, this latest relentless campaign of air strikes by the government and its allies has continued to hit medical facilities, schools and other civilian infrastructure such as markets and bakeries. These are civilian objects and it seems highly unlikely, given the persistent pattern of such attacks, that they are all being hit by accident.”

She emphasized, and I quote, “Intentional attacks against civilians are war crimes, and those who have ordered them or carried them out are criminally responsible for their actions”.

Mr President,

I last briefed you in your closed meeting on 18 July. I said then that I would respond today to a number of questions that Council members asked me. First about the information sources we use to determine what is going on. Second, an update on the deconfliction system. Third, about the letter sent to you and the Secretary-General on 16 July by His Excellency the Syrian Permanent Representative. And fourth, whether we would pass on to the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism and the Commission of Inquiry the information we hold about attacks on civilians and civilian objects.

First then, on information sources. Many of you provide us with information, which we study carefully.

Information that I provide to this Council is information that is from direct or verified sources, triangulated, reviewed and confirmed. Our teams on the ground tell us what they see. Our partners, who we have worked with sometimes for many years, who many of the countries represented here in this Council also work with, provide information. Testimony comes from those closest to the source, who are assessed by the UN as credible. We use imagery, including satellite imagery, or geotagged and time-stamped pictures of medical facilities, that have been analyzed and assessed by the UN. We see videos, of explosions, destroyed buildings, scorched bodies and screaming children. We triangulate all our information.

There are many other sources of information. Media organisations report extensively on what is happening. You have all seen their reports and their footage.

There is a lot of satellite imagery illustrating the impact of the fighting on towns and villages in southern Idlib over the last three months. If, for example, you compare satellite photos of Kafr Nabutha, a town in southern Idlib, taken at the end of April and again at the end of June, which is what analysts at UNOSAT – the UN body with capacity in this area – have done, what you see is a level of destruction consistent with a bombing campaign aimed at a scorched earth policy.

Almost every building destroyed in a three-month period. Such satellite imagery has shown 17 entire villages almost completely destroyed and emptied.

Then there is information from organisations delivering humanitarian assistance, including UN agencies like UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA and others, and the many humanitarian partners they finance. These organisations are all financed by you the member states on a voluntary basis. You require them to provide you with information on how they are spending your money as a basis for financing them. And some of you hire other independent bodies to double check that what the delivery organisations tell you is true. These organisations have staffs amounting to thousands of people, most of them Syrians, and a lot of them like Dr Mohammed: and you can talk to them too, just as I have done.

Then of course there is the testimony of the people of Idlib themselves. I spoke yesterday by video link to two groups of displaced people in different parts of Idlib.

I asked them what is happening where they are. Quote: “We are being bombed every day by the Russians and the regime” is what they said.

I asked them what they need. “We just want the bombing to stop,” they said.

Do you feel safe? “No. We are afraid.”

What is your hope for the future? “We just want to live in peace.”

We know there are people from the Security Council listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idleb who make daily life there difficult for ordinary people, but we also know that estimates suggest there are about 100 civilians for every fighter.

Do the answers from the people I spoke to yesterday sound to you like the words of terrorists?

I don't think so. Especially because the people I spoke to ranged in age from 8 years old to 12 years old.

They are children. Little boys and girls. There are a million children just like them in this part of Syria, many forced to flee with their families from elsewhere in the country.

I asked if any of them go to school. "No. It's not safe. They hit our schools".

So, Mr. President, there is no shortage of information about Idleb. We all know exactly what has been happening for the past three months.

Second, I was asked again for information on the deconfliction system.

Through that system, humanitarian agencies, mainly NGOs, provide information to OCHA to identify static civilian locations or humanitarian movements. The United Nations then shares the coordinates with the International Coalition Forces, the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation.

When there is an incident on a deconflicted site, we notify the parties and request an investigation be undertaken.

As I said to you last week, whether the information provided through the deconfliction system is being used by the parties to protect civilian facilities from attack or to target them for attack is an extremely important question.

As you know, I have asked the Russian Federation for clarification of what it does with the information we give them. I continue to hope to receive further clarification.

We have also sent Notes Verbale to parties to the conflict in respect of six different attacks in northwest Syria in 2019 in relation to deconflicted locations or movements. While we have received a formal response from Turkey, we have not yet received one from the Russian Federation.

In spite of our efforts to work with parties to the conflict to prevent attacks on civilian objects and humanitarian workers, I have come to the conclusion that in the current environment deconfliction is not proving effective in helping to protect those who utilize the system. I have asked my team to meet again with the humanitarian organizations who would like their activities to be deconflicted to update them on the current situation and determine again whether we should continue to provide information to the parties on new sites or humanitarian movements.

Third, I have now seen the letter of 16 July from the Syrian authorities, which I was asked about when I last briefed you. As you know the letter says that 119 hospitals in Idlib Governorate have been taken over by terrorist groups, no longer serve their original purpose, and cannot be considered hospitals, health-care centres or even civilian objects.

Few of the facilities referred to in the letter are named, but one that is Ma'aret al-Numan Hospital. According to the UN-led health cluster, it has been functioning as a hospital since December 2014. The current operating partner, helped by the UN, has been supporting the hospital since April 2015, and it is still supporting it today. Another facility that is named is Ibn Sina hospital, where the basement floors were rehabilitated with funds from the United Nations and other donors and which has been in operation since April this year.

The letter also says that there is no ambulance network left in Idlib. You have all in recent days seen footage and photos of ambulances in Idlib, including one used to take those three little girls I talked about earlier, Rawan, Tuka and Dalia to be treated by Dr Mohammed. The UN continues to support organizations operating ambulance systems in Idlib. As you are aware, medical facilities and transports are entitled to special protection under International Humanitarian Law, requiring steps to spare them even if they are being used for military purposes.

Fourth, on the question of whether we will pass on relevant information we hold to the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism and to the Commission of Inquiry in order to support investigations into the potential violations we are seeing, the answer is yes, we will do that, subject only to the proviso that those giving us sensitive information consent to it being passed on.

Mr. President,

Between January and May this year, more than six million people in Syria were provided with humanitarian assistance with finance provided by donors to allow us to implement the UN Humanitarian Response Plan. An average of 2.9 million people were given some form of help every month.

The Humanitarian Response Plan is needs based. 85 per cent of all assistance provided reached areas of high severity need – areas where multiple, urgent needs have converged and require a systematic and sustained response. There is also a response in areas of lower severity, including for life-saving activities such as vaccination campaigns and nutrition screening.

Some recent reports have claimed that UN humanitarian assistance reaches only those in areas not controlled by the Government. That is untrue. In fact, most of those reached with UN assistance are in areas controlled by the Government of Syria. Access to the estimated 1.1 million people in need living in areas that changed control in 2018 continues to improve. In southern Syria, for example, half a million people in need have been reached at least once with some form of humanitarian assistance over the last 5 months, despite increased insecurity in

recent months. Significant gaps in access still remain across many of these areas. Eastern Ghouta, for example, remains heavily dependent on water trucking more than a year on from changes in control. I also remain concerned for those 24,000 people remaining in Rukban, and I call again for access again to reach them.

In the northeast, 734,000 people also receive assistance on a monthly basis including 70,000 civilians currently in Al Hol camp. Humanitarian agencies have significantly scaled up their response to meet needs in Al Hol, opening three field hospitals in the past month. I nevertheless remain extremely concerned about people there. I call again on all member states to repatriate their civilians and take all necessary steps to avoid statelessness. I also call on all member states to de-escalate growing tensions along the borders in the northeast and avoid any actions that may cause further displacement, casualties and suffering.

Humanitarian agencies have also in addition significantly scaled up cross-border operations authorized under your resolution 2165, particularly for those who have fled to the northern part of Idleb during the current fighting. This month, cross-border aid aims to reach some 1.2 million people with food assistance. In the current circumstances, there is no other way to provide adequate support to the three million civilians who are in the area.

Mr President, I am not sure I have told you anything today that is different to what you all already know. Many people have told you what is happening in Idleb for many months now.

I asked Dr Mohammed, and the children I spoke to yesterday if they have a message for you. They do.

“We are afraid. Please help us. Make it stop.”

You in this Security Council have ignored all the previous pleas you have heard. You know what is happening and you have done nothing for 90 days as the carnage continues in front of your eyes.

Are you again going to shrug your shoulders, as Michelle Bachelet said? Or are you going to listen to the children of Idleb, and do something about it?

Thank you, Mr. President.