Thank you, Mr. President,

Geir has just updated you on the political and military developments. So, let me update you on the humanitarian situation.

In the week since I last briefed you on the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding now in northwest Syria, we have seen a further substantial escalation. Every morning, we wake up to more reports of shelling and airstrikes on dozens of communities throughout the northwest.

The impact of military operations on civilians has been severe. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has now documented 373 civilians killed since 1 December. 49 deaths were recorded between 1 February and 5 February. Three humanitarian workers from organizations the United Nations works closely with have also been killed in recent days.

While many of the attacks have been reported close to frontlines, we’ve also seen an escalation in the major civilian centers in the northwest. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported one of the most serious incidents in the last two months on 15 January, when at least 19 civilians are believed to have been killed, and more than 60 others injured, as a result of an airstrike that hit the al-Hal vegetable market in Idleb city.

More than 95 per cent of all civilian deaths, Mr. President, were in non-Government controlled areas.

The bombing and shelling have forced hundreds of thousands more people to move in the attempt to find safety. We now estimate that 586,000 people have moved in the last two months. They are mostly children. 200,000 people moved in the 8 days between 26 January and 2 February. UNICEF report some 300,000 children, in total, have fled since 1 December. We have all seen chaotic pictures in town after town as vehicles line up in every direction trying to flee.
And as we’ve told you before, the vast majority of people continue to move north and west into the ever-smaller enclave controlled by non-Government groups.

These areas are now dramatically overcrowded and available accommodation is severely congested. People who have just moved cannot find adequate shelter. The area already hosts large IDP populations. There is no unused capacity left in formal camps in Idlib, forcing many IDPs to camp on agricultural land with no infrastructure. Towns and villages in the area are also congested. Some 80,000 people are believed to be sheltering in unfinished houses and buildings.

We are also seeing more people move north out of Idlib into Turkish-controlled areas in Afrin, Azaz and Al Bab. Some 144,000 people have now moved into these areas.

Mr. President,

The United Nations has continued to work with the Russian Federation to try to agree pauses in hostilities along pre-identified routes to allow those fleeing to reach temporary safety. Between 27 January and 2 February, some 4,000 people were supported by local NGOs, during these pauses, to move from Ariha, Saraqeb and Sarmin, to areas closer to Turkey.

Mr. President,

Civilian infrastructure also continues to be damaged and destroyed, or otherwise affected by the fighting. The World Health Organization reports that 53 medical facilities have stopped operations, either due to the direct impact of fighting or because the doctors themselves need to move to safer places. Of these 53 facilities, three were affected by airstrikes or shelling, including two attacks on 26 and 30 January, in and around Ariha in southeast Idlib. The World Health Organization reports that these two attacks killed 10 people and injured 30 others.

As health services break down, the danger of new disease outbreaks grows. Some 26 immunization centers have had to close down since 1 December.

Mr. President, as Geir noted, the Secretary-General spoke again about these issues earlier in the week. He has been very clear. The attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure taking place in northwest Syria are unacceptable. They must be brought to an end.

As the Secretary-General said, we need an immediate cessation of hostilities. While localized pauses have helped some civilians flee, and we will continue to work with parties to the conflict to see pauses continue, millions of people continue to face some of the most severe protection challenges we have seen in all the years of the Syrian crisis. A broader ceasefire continues to be the only way to ensure that civilians are protected.

Mr. President,

The United Nations and the broader humanitarian community are doing everything possible to address the significant needs of some 3 million people who now need help in
north western Syria. In January, 1,227 trucks of humanitarian assistance were sent from Turkey through Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam border crossings. Nearly 900 trucks carried food assistance for some 1.4 million people. Other trucks carried health supplies for almost half a million people, and non-food items for more than 230,000. This is the most aid the United Nations has sent across the border in any month since the operation was authorized in 2014. The cross-border operation remains essential to the relief effort in Syria. It is still the only way to reach people in need in Idleb.

Mr. President,

My team has also this week released another Humanitarian Readiness and Response Plan for northwest Syria, requesting an additional $336 million for the next six months to address the massive displacement we’ve seen since 1 December. The biggest need is for shelter and protection against the harsh winter conditions: tents, plastic sheeting, stoves, warm clothes, and fuel.

We announced in December the release of $44 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund, which I manage, for the Syria crisis, both to meet needs in refugee hosting countries and for humanitarian activities across Syria. That was the largest single allocation from the Central Emergency Response Fund for the Syria crisis since the war began.

I am now, today, releasing a further $30 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund as the first resources for the new response plan in Idleb. I again thank the donors whose contributions make this possible. But I also note that CERF resources are limited, and I urge others to provide money for the new plan as soon as possible.

Mr. President,

We are also continuing our dialogue with all parties to seek cross-line access. We will use all options available to us to reach people in need. But there has been no substantive progress on cross-line access since I updated you last week.

Finally, let me reiterate that despite the efforts of humanitarian organisations, needs are growing exponentially. There are still hundreds of thousands of civilians in what appears to be the area at risk from the current fighting, in addition to all those who have fled since December.

So, what we have been warning you about is happening. How severe the crisis becomes will depend on whether a solution can be found to ease the situation for those still in harm’s way and those crammed into an ever-smaller area in the north west of Idleb.

Time is short. The front-line has now moved to within a few kilometres of Idleb city, the largest urban center in the northwest.

So, I echo Geir’s appeal for an immediate end for the hostilities, and for a serious international effort to cooperate on Idleb. It is, indeed, a humanitarian imperative.
A ceasefire would be a first step, and compliance with international humanitarian law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure remains fundamental. But as Geir also outlined, what is needed is a genuine dialogue by the parties to the conflict towards a sustainable political solution pursuant to Security Council resolution 2254.

Thank you, Mr. President.