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Opening remarks at the high-level panel discussion on violations of the human rights of children in the Syrian Arab Republic

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As delivered

Mr. President, thank you.

Thank you for inviting me to this morning's high level panel on violations of human rights of children in Syria. This dialogue this morning is a unique opportunity to take up some of the most pressing issues of concern we have regarding the protection of children affected in Syria.

Today, 13.1 million people in Syria require life-saving humanitarian assistance. Children make up over 40 per cent of this total. Of the 5.6 million people in acute need across Syria, a shocking 663,000 are under the age of five – 663,000 are in acute need.

As we speak, the protection of civilians in the conduct of hostilities is a really critical concern. In besieged eastern Ghouta, children are being subjected to an unprecedented level of indiscriminate violence. Airstrikes, barrel bombs, artillery shelling and starvation are a daily reality. After some five years living under siege, they are sheltering at the moment in overcrowded basements with their families, not knowing if they are going to live another day. The psychological trauma will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am appalled by reports from the Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children, the Independent, International Commission of Inquiry, OHCHR and others, of ongoing major violations of children's rights. In 2017, documentation of violations of children's rights during the conflict – by all sides – was the highest since the beginning of the conflict. Simply put, 2017 was the deadliest year of the Syrian war for children.

Countless children have been killed and injured as a result of fighting. In 2017 alone, the Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism verified at least 910 children killed and 361 injured, the large majority of child casualties occurring in Idleb, Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zor, and other locations. There is a child and a grieving family behind every single of these numbers. Verification of additional cases continues and these numbers only provide the tip of the iceberg of the actual scale of violence suffered by children in Syria.

Attacks on hospitals and medical facilities – such as those currently witnessed in east Ghouta and Idleb Governorate – critically undermine health service delivery and have a disproportionate impact on the lives of children. Last year, the Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism verified 108 such attacks – including 81 airstrikes – on hospitals and medical personnel.

In any other country in the world, one attack on a hospital would cause outrage, calls for action and accountability; in Syria, more than 100 such attacks have taken place in the course of one year alone, with no end in sight. Child casualties, sadly, are a daily feature of the conflict; when the facilities and persons supposed to provide them with emergency medical care are equally under attack, children are given no chance at all.

Reports that the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict – by all parties – continues to increase, and are also of deep concern. In 2017, 25 per cent of cases involved boys and girls under the age of 15 – of course considered a war crime and prohibited under International Humanitarian Law. Nine out of ten recruited children served in a combat role: in uniform, armed and with military training. Growing up in conflict, they may have little choice or alternative; they may also have no way out, as killing or detention by the other side may await them.

Today, ensuring unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access is a greater challenge than ever before. The United Nations and its partners in Syria focus on reaching those most in need across the country. The most vulnerable are the 2.9 million men, women and children living in hard-to-reach areas. This includes more than 400,000 people in UN-declared besieged locations, nearly half of whom are children.

Ladies and gentlemen, in recent months, cross-line assistance into hard-to-reach and besieged areas has almost totally collapsed due to the refusal of the Government of Syria to grant the necessary approval, with a few exceptions in the last few days. As the Emergency Relief Coordinator stated after the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2401, “unless this changes, we will soon see even more people dying from starvation and disease than from bombing and shelling.”

Your excellencies, protection of civilians is central to the humanitarian response in Syria. It also remains one of the most challenging aspects of the humanitarian agenda. I welcome today’s discussion around concrete ways to safeguard children’s rights and joint efforts that can be undertaken at all levels to protect Syria’s children. We often focus only on the parties to the conflict: however, all Member States must leverage any influence they have to stop violations against children. Even in the midst of a high intensity armed conflict, there are solutions to make sure all parties comply with their international obligations, and not least keep children from harm’s way. I call on all belligerents and their influencers to put children first.

Thank you.