

**Briefing to the UNSC on**

**HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN SYRIA**

Ms. Sonia Khush, Syria Response Director for Save the Children

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*As delivered*

**Madame President, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,**

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria and for allowing us to bring the voices of children and their families to this key institution.

While this year marks 10 years of conflict in Syria, the situation facing children today is as urgent as it has ever been. During the last decade, more than half the population has been forced to flee their homes, and thousands of children have been killed.

Around half of Syria's children are now growing up having known nothing but conflict, which has permeated all aspects of their lives and robbed them of their childhoods.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has added another layer of suffering to an already dire situation.

Children today are facing a graver reality than at any other point in the 10-year conflict. They are more likely to be in need of humanitarian assistance, more likely to go hungry, to die from preventable diseases, miss out on school and face protection risks.

**Madame President,**

I would like to start today by addressing the issue that children consistently raise to us — which is, their wish to go to school.

We are facing an unprecedented education crisis in Syria. The combination of conflict, displacement, poverty and now COVID-19 has created the conditions in which millions of children are missing out on education.

Research carried out by Save the Children last December found that in Northern Syria for example, 2 out of 3 children are now missing out on school.

Schools should be safe places where children can learn, play and dream about what they want to be when they grow up. Instead, after ten years we continue to witness attacks on schools, the use of schools by armed groups, and the prevalence of unexploded ordinance in schools.

*We met 11-year-old Basma in Al Hol camp. She remembers the time when she was in second grade and a shell fell next to her school. She told us: "We were all girls and we hid under the school desks in the classroom. There were loud explosions and glass from the windows shattered everywhere." Yet Basma still has dreams of becoming a doctor to treat her sick mother.*

The immediate effects of attacks on school can include death, injury, and the destruction of the building. However, in the longer term, attacks can lead to diminished education quality, loss of teachers, weakened educational systems, and the risk of children never returning to school.

Education is also being impacted by the economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

*As 10-year-old Ziad told us: "The war forced us to flee and made me drop out of school. I started working in cleaning tiles. I work from morning till night and make less than 3 dollars a week. I'm very tired from working".*

Our same research last December showed that 79 percent of teachers in North East Syria reported that their students had dropped out of school because they had to support their families financially. As many as one in two teachers in North West Syria are also working without pay, and hundreds of others are going on strike, for salaries, as we speak.

Loss of physical learning spaces due to COVID-19 restrictions has also meant that the only option for children to learn is remotely. But most children do not have access to the internet, and eventually start dropping out of school. We know from experience that many children who dropped out of school will never return.

*Layla is a 38-year-old mother of five including a boy named Husam. Layla told the team: "My son Husam had never been to school until we got to this camp. I really wanted him to learn how to read and write, as no one in our family can do that. He was so excited. Unfortunately, the school closed because of COVID-19 and now he is scared because he doesn't know if he will ever have the chance to learn again."*

We are very concerned at the impact that the lack of education of Syria's children will have on them now, and on the country's future, as another generation of children now begins their journey under the shadows of the conflict in Syria.

### **Madame President,**

The second issue I would like to raise is the serious protection crisis facing children in Syria. Across Northern Syria, five million people continue to rely on humanitarian assistance, delivered mostly cross-border, to meet their basic needs. This includes at least two million children. At least half of these children are displaced. Some have been displaced more than 10 times in their short lives, with no view of achieving a durable solution soon.

Basic needs for adequate food, shelter, water and hygiene are still not being met and each year families face either intense heat or brutal cold and flooding in flimsy shelters.

Just last month, flash floods in North West Syria led to the death of a six-year-old boy and impacted over 140,000 displaced people, the majority of whom were women and children. People are in desperate need of heating, fuel, cash, food, mattresses and blankets.

The nutrition situation in the country is becoming alarming. One in eight children in Syria is now stunted. This means they have gone for months without eating nutritious food that is vital to their survival and development, and the number of children who go to bed hungry every day is in the millions.

Child labor is becoming increasingly prevalent and children may also be engaged in harmful work and exploitation, while teenage boys are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups.

In many instances, girls are being forced to end their education and engage in early marriage. This will have profound and long-term consequences on them, including the loss of education, and personal and economic independence.

Last year we met 15-year-old Dalia who had just gotten engaged. She told our local partner staff, *“Every time my fiancé calls, I feel a sense of anxiety. I’m dreaming about continuing my education and finding a job in the future, not marriage.”* Our team worked with Dalia and her parents. Luckily Dalia is not engaged anymore and is back in school, but there are thousands of more girls like her that are not so lucky.

In this context, COVID-19 and the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are making an already dire situation worse and increasing children’s vulnerability to protection risks.

The way we can address the profound challenges facing children today has not changed. Continued delivery of lifesaving supplies—through *all* possible means, including the cross-border mechanism—is essential for their survival. This must also come with a focus to address the root causes of children’s suffering, prioritizing investment in education and child protection programming, including mental health and psychosocial interventions.

### **Madame President,**

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the specific protection risks facing children and their mothers in camps in North East Syria, specifically in Al Hol and Roj camps, home to 64,000 people, more than ninety per cent of whom are women and children. This includes more than 10,000 foreign children and their mothers from every region of the world.

The majority of children in these camps are under the age of 12, and half of them are less than five years old.

The conditions in the two camps are dire and critical gaps continue to exist across all services. Lately, there has been an alarming increase of violent security incidents in Al Hol, putting children further at risk, and regularly disrupting our humanitarian programs.

*A 13-year-old girl named Salma in Al Hol camp told us “We had to go through a lot to extend electricity to our tent. It was amazing to finally have light inside the tent. But after the killings started, there were rumors that people who have electricity in their tents were being targeted. So now, we don't turn our lights on at night because of the fear of being killed.”*

There are confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Al Hol. Yet we remain very concerned about the health care response capacity in both the camp and the region, particularly in the context of restrictions in humanitarian access to North East Syria.

Over the last few months, my team in the Al Hol Annex watched as a nine-year-old girl from Azerbaijan got progressively sicker due to a kidney disease. We raised her plight repeatedly to the authorities in order for her to be able to access kidney dialysis outside of the camp. We also urgently tried to arrange her repatriation to her country of origin as a humanitarian case. To my great frustration, we were not successful with either effort, and tragically she died last month.

We witnessed an innocent child die in a foreign country, a needless death from a disease that is treatable.

At the end of the day, foreign children trapped in Syria are innocent victims of the conflict and must be treated as such, and not as deadly security threats to be kept behind barbed wire.

Like all children inside Syria, they have lived through conflict, bombardment and acute deprivation. Some know nothing but conflict: *When one of my colleagues asked a foreign girl in the Al Hol Annex “What country are you from?” she replied “I’m from that tent.”*

They are also unfortunately losing faith in our ability to help.

*A mother from Turkey told us that her children asked her many times to register them as orphans, because they know that orphans are more likely to be repatriated from the camp.*

These children need specialized help to recover from the brutal experience of being ISIS's first victims, physically and mentally, and help to return to normality. The kind of support they need is impossible to provide in a place like Al Hol.

Therefore, we urge all Member States to repatriate these extremely vulnerable children to their country of origin, together with their families. They deserve a chance to become doctors, artists or engineers like any other child.

**Madame President,**

To conclude — to bring the suffering of children in Syria to an end, first and foremost the fighting must stop. There can be no lasting solution to this crisis without peace.

Second, humanitarians must be supported to scale up aid safely and effectively through all modalities, to address the immense needs that children and their families are facing.

Ten years into the conflict, the challenges I have set out today are more complex than they have ever been, but the standards by which we must respond are simple. Children and their families, wherever they are in Syria, deserve to live with the security of knowing that they will continue to have safe access to the lifesaving support on which they depend, and that the international community will not turn their backs on them at this critical time.

As Security Council members, you continue to have a vital role to play in this effort. Seven years after coming together to pass UN Security Council Resolution 2165 and creating a system whereby humanitarian aid is able to reach all Syrians wherever they are, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has only grown.

In the middle of the worst pandemics the world has seen in one hundred years, I wouldn't know how to tell families in Syria that our access has been limited again by the Security Council. We welcome continued discussion on improving principled humanitarian access and about how to better reach all populations in need. But for now, there is no other way to sustainably program for millions of people without the cross-border resolution.

*I will end with what seven-year-old Lara told us: "When I grow up I want to become a teacher and teach children so they won't stay out of school. I wish the war would end and all the children could learn how to read and write and go back to their homes"*

I hope I will be able to go back to Lara and the other children I tried to give a voice to today and let them know that UN Security Council will do everything within their power to ensure they are safe, protected and educated.

Thank you very much.