

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

Statement to the Security Council on Syria

New York, 30 May 2017

As delivered

Mr. President,

The cruel conflict in Syria continues to tear families apart, inflicts brutal suffering on the innocent, and leaves them pleading for protection and justice. I readily acknowledge that there have been reports of a significant drop in violence in some areas of the country, but such steps forward continue to be counter-weighted by the reality of a conflict that continues to devastate the civilian population. Just last week, 30 children and women were gravely injured in a heinous attack by ISIL on besieged neighbourhoods in Deir ez-Zor as they were lining up for water. In addition, more than a hundred civilians, many of them women and children, have fallen victim, in recent weeks, to the escalating counter-ISIL airstrikes, particularly in the north-eastern governorates of Al-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

Millions more are in the line of fire, facing crushing poverty and alarming physical danger. Tens of thousands of children have been killed, and for those who have survived till today, the outlook remains bleak. Children have been forcibly detained, they have been tortured, subjected to sexual violence, forcibly recruited and in some cases executed. Close to seven million children in Syria live in poverty. Nearly 1.75 million children remain out of school and another 1.35 million are at risk of dropping out. 7,400 schools – one in three across the country – have been damaged, destroyed, or otherwise made inaccessible. And even if the schools were intact, many would be unable to open, with almost one quarter of the country's teaching personnel no longer at their posts.

Outside Syria, hundreds of thousands of Syrian children are left to face an uncertain and traumatic future on their own; they have become stateless, abandoned by the world but for the generosity of neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, as well as Egypt. How are these children meant to function as adults? What future do these children have – illiterate, orphaned, starved, traumatized and maimed? What future does a country have

when its next generation is a lost generation? For these suffering children, what's at stake isn't politics. It's their lives and their futures. It is their innocent voices, their suffering that need advocating.

Mr. President,

Astana produced a promising step: a memorandum between the three guarantors – Iran, Russia and Turkey – on the creation of four de-escalation areas; a memorandum that stipulates, in no uncertain terms, that fighting must significantly decrease and unhindered humanitarian access be enabled to these four areas – areas which essentially encompass all of the besieged locations except for those in Damascus and Deir ez-Zor.

That said, too many agreements that could have saved lives and reduced suffering have failed in the past. Let me therefore be clear: this agreement simply has to succeed. We owe it to the 2.6 million people that we estimate to be in these four de-escalation areas. We – the United Nations – stand ready to sit with all parties involved to make it a workable agreement – one that will make a tangible difference to civilians on the ground; one that facilitates the delivery of life-saving assistance based on the UN's own needs assessments without constant interference, reduced beneficiary numbers, the removal of medical and other essential items out of spite, bureaucratic restrictions and procedural and physical roadblocks.

We also must not lose sight of the fact that – all over Syria – millions of people, in locations inside and outside the four de-escalation areas, continue to suffer because they lack the most basic elements to sustain their lives. We must not stand silent while violence flares up elsewhere in the country and parties continue to use starvation, fear tactics and the denial of food, water, medical supplies, and other forms of aid as methods of war.

Mr. President,

As you all know, in recent months, restricted access and increased attacks resulted in a number of so-called 'surrender' or 'evacuation' agreements in communities such as Al-Tal, Darraya, Moadamiyeh, Eastern Aleppo, Khan al-Shieh, Wadi Barada, and the four towns of Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kafraya. In the last few weeks, thousands more have been moved from the besieged neighbourhoods of Barzeh and Qaboun (Damascus) and the besieged Al Wa'er neighbourhood in Homs city to Idlib and Jarablus city in rural Aleppo.

These are evacuations that have followed years of intense airstrikes, shelling and sniping. The tactics are all too obvious: make life intolerable and make death likely; push people to choose between starvation and death or fleeing on green buses to locations that are just as unsafe. There needs to be accountability for these actions; for these 'starve and surrender tactics' – a monstrous form of cruelty to impose upon a civilian population. We have seen this happen numerous times already – as I said, in Homs, Moadamiyeh, Al Waer, and elsewhere. In fact, Darayya and Zabadani are already devoid of their civilian population. And this may very well be the fate of hundreds of thousands more people still trapped in besieged locations across the country. Evacuations are, however, only the

beginning of a new set of challenges for both those who are forced to leave their homes, and host communities. Traveling mostly to Idleb and northern rural Aleppo, those displaced now find themselves in an increasingly precarious environment. The capacity in these areas to support additional displacement is reaching its limit. In Idleb alone, there are over 900,000 displaced people, placing significant strain on local communities and resources. While the situation has quietened since the memorandum on de-escalation was signed, any increase in fighting – attacks by the Government of Syria, or fighting among groups inside of Idlib – would be catastrophic for these already stressed communities.

In fact, in many corners of the country, the protection space is shrinking, humanitarian conditions are worsening, and the level of despair is rising – not due to insecurity or poor infrastructure, but by increasingly strict limitations by local authorities, non-State armed groups, as well as terrorist organizations, and the actions of some neighbouring countries. I call on members of this Council to use its influence to see that these actors respect humanitarian principles and allow the unfettered delivery of aid. We are also greatly concerned at cross-border restrictions and regulatory impediments imposed on the NGO community operating in northern Syria and are troubled by increasing reports indicating that IDPs fleeing Raqqa Governorate are being kept for prolonged periods in screening camps and subjected to restrictions on their movement by the self-proclaimed Democratic Self-Administration in northeastern Syria.

We need to see a step-change in access to the increasingly dire situation in northeastern Syria. Rather than restrictions, we need an opening of space to respond. With some 100,000 people displaced due to fighting around Raqqa since April, access is needed now through every possible modality. We need to see restrictions eased for those operating in the area. We need to see increased cross-border and cross-line access for humanitarian assistance into the area, including land access from Aleppo. I call on all with influence over the parties involved to act now. Further delays or restrictions will only result in the continued suffering and the death of civilians.

Mr. President,

For cross-line inter-agency convoys, administrative delays on the part of the Syrian Government in the approval of facilitation letters and convoy plans continue to hamper our efforts. Every month, thousands of facilitation letters are readily signed for convoys headed to Government-controlled areas. Yet, in cross-line areas, we have only been able to secure facilitation letters for seven convoys under the April/May access plan, allowing us to reach 266,750 people in need. This is out of a million people requested under the bi-monthly plan. And as a result, we are essentially down to one cross-line convoy per week to reach those who are most in need, with only one besieged location - namely Duma in eastern Ghouta - reached by road during the April/May period. Compared to last year, when we deployed 50 cross-line convoys through May, today we stand at 18 cross-line convoys in 2017. In addition, the ICRC and the SARC also delivered three cross-line convoys without the UN, reaching 136,500 people in hard-to-reach areas during this period as well.

Moreover, the removal of life-saving medicines and medical supplies such as surgical kits, midwifery kits, and emergency kits has continued unabated, with nearly 100,000 medical supplies refused or removed from convoys since the beginning of the year. In addition, and as you all know, attacks on hospitals and other health facilities – as

highlighted by the Secretary-General in the open debate last week on the Protection of Civilians – have become commonplace in Syria – about 20 per month between January and April this year, an average of one attack every 36 hours, turning Syrian hospitals into death traps. These attacks and restrictions are not only violations of international law and Council resolutions, they are deliberate and cowardly acts aimed at those – the sick, the injured, the infirm, unborn children, the elderly, pregnant women, young children – who are least able to protect themselves and are most in need of care and assistance.

The denial and delay of access, particularly to those in besieged locations, is a political calculation and a military tactic; this much is clear in Syria. We may speak about the practical elements of delay and denial – facilitation letters, inspections, checkpoints – but these are simply the manifestation of a mindset and approach by the Government of Syria to use civilian suffering as a tactic of war. We have seen that when political will exists, the humanitarian imperative to deliver based on assessed need is possible. Facilitation letters are signed, inspectors do not remove items, and checkpoints allow safe passage. I call on this Council to take all necessary steps to see that the will to place humanitarian aid delivery in its rightful position – outside of any military or political calculations and totally impartially – is restored. The delivery of aid is not an ask, but is a demand and the law and its denial, refusal or frustration is and must be a red line not to be crossed. Denial and delays of assistance contravene resolutions of this Council and are against international humanitarian law. They must end. I call on this Council to act to see its resolutions implemented. Any prevarication will result in further death and suffering of civilians. Humanitarian relief cannot be viewed as an optional element to be occasionally provided. It must go where it is needed, when it is needed, not where it is allowed and when it is convenient.

Mr. President,

As I have said numerous times before, we remain committed and ready to deliver aid – through all possible modalities – for people in desperate need, whoever and wherever they are. However, the bottom line is that the real extent of progress cannot be measured by ad hoc deliveries to besieged communities – once or twice, every so often. The bottom line is that we have been wasting too much of our time literally begging for facilitation letters; too much time arguing at roadblocks, pleading that trucks can pass without the sniper taking the shot and medical items not be removed.

I do not come here today to seek favours. But let me say this. Calling for humanitarian actors to be allowed sustained access to all people in need throughout Syria is not a favour. Calling for an end to the removal of medical items off of convoys is not a favour. Calling for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure by all parties to the conflict is not a favour. Seeking to prevent children from being buried under piles of rubble, in their basements, in their schools, is not a favour. Medicine for the sick and food for the starving are not favours. These are the common precepts, the bedrock, of our shared humanity and the foundations of international humanitarian law, and they must be an unflinching call to the fundamental decency of all people. I call on all those with influence over the parties to reinforce this message and act.

Mr. President, distinguished members of the Council,

In closing, let me send my very best wishes to everyone observing the holy month of Ramadan. For Muslims in Syria, in the region and across the world it is a time for charity, for contemplation and community; a time for peace and forgiveness. Let us all sincerely hope for an end of violence for this period and beyond. Let us all sincerely work towards achieving the objectives of the Astana memorandum, so that attacks and bureaucratic impositions are put to an end – once and for all – and the UN and its humanitarian partners can sustainably reach those hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped behind the current front lines.

I thank you Mr. President.