

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

Statement to the Security Council on Syria

New York, 30 August 2017

As delivered

Thank you, Mr President, and Eid Mubark to you all, distinguished representatives of the Security Council.

I also thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his determination and skill in seeking to find a way forward, above all, for the Syrian people, who have suffered for so long.

In this violent, brutal, chaotic world we live in today, it is a sad, tragic, blunt truth that on this, my last appearance in this role before you, the Security Council of the United Nations, the highest body in the world charged with preventing and resolving wars, conflicts and the desperate human death, pain and suffering directly caused, I am still urging you, in the name of our common humanity, to find a way to stop the Syrian people from paying the price of political failure. Syria is a conflict with an atrocious and incalculable human cost – one that has forced us to see the very worst of human behaviour – and a conflict that, as a consequence, has consumed all of us without respite for seven bloody years; and when you pause to think, even for a moment, that I say this knowing the sheer scale of needless man-made, violent, deliberate humanitarian horror that is 21 million Yemenis' sad lot today, or with Somalia, South Sudan and north-eastern Nigeria, desperately with humanitarian workers' brave help, trying to avert famine for 20 million of our fellow global citizens, let alone the others within the 142 million people in 40 countries who need us tonight. The fact that month after month it is the unremitting, fearful plight of the Syrian people which sears into our hearts and outrages and torments our minds – I am bound to reflect: surely we can do better?

Twenty-seven reports of the Secretary-General on the Syrian crisis have been submitted to you since I took up this office in June 2015; and countless briefings presented both in this open chamber and in private consultations, in 27 months, a record 55 to be accurate, 30 on Syria alone. This Council is fully on notice and has heard in minute detail as the deadliest years of the Syrian conflict unfolded. We are all witnesses to the destruction of a country, its people, its children, its future. We have endured the sight of people dying of starvation, or a child drowning and washed up on a beach in his family's desperate, dangerous bid to escape the scandalous ravages of Syria then, and continuing today.

Pictures of emaciated, starving children in the besieged town of Madaya. Harrowing images of bombs and mortars raining down on schools, medical facilities, on internally displaced settlements (which are meant to be sanctuaries), public markets, and, yes, on

those trying to bring the citizens of Syria hope and support, humanitarian and health workers and aid convoys. We watched the parties cynically, methodically take out every single medical facility in eastern Aleppo – one by one, day after day – with babies dying in their incubators due to oxygen interruptions following these attacks.

We have all been shocked by reports of double-tap attacks, where a helicopter or a jet bombs a building, then waits – just long enough for rescue and medical workers to arrive – before attacking again. We witnessed nothing less than an all-out effort by ISIL to impose a new dark age. We were at a loss for words at reports of Yazidi girls scratching their faces out of fear of being bought and sexually enslaved; and at reports of men being thrown off tower blocks for being gay, then being stoned to death even after surviving the fall. Just last week, we were reminded of the biggest chemical attack in Syria's war, which hit besieged eastern Ghouta four years ago.

Mr President,

Session after session, we have detailed this destruction, and yet failed to see accountability for any of the countless war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on the ground. As I leave the United Nations, despite every humanitarians' best efforts in the United Nations and beyond, none of us can escape a share in the shame, that collectively we have not put a stop to this – despite at least 300,000, even maybe 500,000 Syrians now killed, let alone millions injured, displaced, fled and petrified. I call again – one final time as the Emergency Relief Coordinator – for members of this Council to urgently refer the situation and the people responsible for it in Syria to the International Criminal Court. I also call on Member States to fully support the IIIM – the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism – and ask, once more, the Syrian authorities to finally grant access to the Independent Commission of Inquiry. To fail to do this, simply reinforces impunity and encourages the perpetrators – whoever they are – to feel unthreatened and undeterred from their malevolent, dastardly inhuman actions.

Mr President,

Over the month of July and into August, however hideous it remains in so many parts of Syria, to remain true to the facts I am the first to be glad to report that we continue to see a reduction of violence in some areas of the country following the May 4th Astana memorandum on de-escalation. Of course, I welcome that. The impact of this conflict on the basic needs and dignity of ordinary Syrians every day is clear. And efforts to push the so-called ISIL out of its strongholds continue to come with the terrible cost of killing, injuring and displacing scores of civilians. In Raqqa governorate, and since the beginning of the Euphrates Wrath operation in November last year, over 271,000 men, women and children – including an estimated 75,000 people from Ar-Raqqa city – have been displaced from their homes to other locations within the governorate as well as to Hassakeh, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zour and Hama governorates.

This comes on the heels of an increasing number of reported civilian casualties as military operations, including airstrikes, are intensifying as the area that the so-called ISIL holds shrinks. Last week alone, reports indicated that over 30 civilians were killed in the Al-Sakhani neighbourhood, while eight people from the same family lost their lives in a separate attack in another part of the city. Just days before, dozens more had reportedly been killed and injured in Raqqa city due to airstrikes and shelling. The UN estimates that an average of 27 people are being killed in Raqqa – every day. Up to 25,000 civilians still remain trapped in the city and are increasingly exposed to the crossfire of the ongoing

fighting. They risk being killed, either by airstrikes, or by ISIL snipers or mines if they try to flee, or being used as human shields if they remain. Can you imagine being faced with that choice, clinging to your young child's hand? It is a clear clarion call: in line with International Humanitarian Law [IHL] the safety of those trying to flee must be guaranteed, without excessive screenings and restrictions on movement.

Nothing is more important than protecting civilians during this conflict – that has always been the case. Be in no doubt, the heinous fault lies with the fighters and their masters on every side, but the international community cannot hold its head up high when it comes to protection. I therefore urge – again – all parties fighting in Raqqa and across Syria to take every possible measure, however difficult and however constraining they may feel it is on their military action, to spare and protect civilians and civilian infrastructure in these ever-increasing urban settings compounding the mortal risk to the innocents – as required under their obligations that they have freely entered into under International Humanitarian Law, are bound by and to which they have to be held to account.

Further to the south in Syria, the security and protection of an estimated 4,000 Syrians in Hadalat and 45,000 Syrians in Rukban – mainly women and children – who remain stranded at the berm along Syria's border with Jordan, continues to deteriorate. Airstrikes have been reported in the area in recent weeks, causing serious distress and panic amongst this already displaced, very vulnerable population, stuck in barren desert fearing for their lives.

The establishment of a Government of Syria-controlled corridor from Damascus to Iraq, north of the berm, has effectively trapped the population, restricting the movement of both people and goods to the area. Military action has intensified, heightening levels of insecurity and exposing the civilian population in both Hadalat and Rukban settlements to massively greater and graver risks. Moreover, the last cycle of distribution of humanitarian assistance was halted on 15 June, and we urgently seek the resumption of the distribution of life-saving assistance. I have visited Jordan multiple times, where I have had positive discussions with the authorities on the berm, and appreciate their continued engagement to see that those at the berm receive the support they so desperately need. Under today's new threat, their best chance is to be allowed to go, even if temporarily, into Jordan.

Back in the North of Syria, in Idleb, the situation of displaced people in the governorate remains a cause of deep foreboding. As local agreements continue to be reached with various non-State armed groups across Syria as well as in neighbouring Lebanon, agreements – which I am bound to say – are not in line with international standards or humanitarian principles and often force civilians to choose between remaining and fearing for their safety, or evacuating to insecure areas they have never been to. One million people – Mr President – one million people have now been displaced to the governorate. Even though airstrikes have diminished at least somewhat since the de-escalation memorandum was signed in May, the situation remains perilous for those displaced who arrive into an area unable to cope with such voluminous movement. It is the heroic work of our NGO partners, who provide the main part of the response to Idleb cross-border from Turkey, that is responsible for keeping people alive. This has been challenged, however, as the former Al-Nusra Front (as Staffan de Mistura said, a proscribed terrorist organisation, along with the so-called ISIS, on the United Nations Security Council sanctions list), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham have been battling against other opposition groups for control of parts of Idleb. The insecurity during fighting forced some NGOs to stop their work temporarily. I am gravely concerned by the current brutal

push by al-Nusra to control local councils and other important institutions. I call on all parties to respect humanitarian principles and ensure the independence of those providing humanitarian assistance. As Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura said, in Idleb, protection is key.

And IHL does apply to all parties, not just States – vitally important as that is in Syria as elsewhere – but it applies to all fighters, factions, movements, non-State actors everywhere. It applies to them all, to us all – and that is what my colleagues in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights need and must be allowed to gather, preserve, document, and one day present all this to an appropriate accountable tribunal to ensure that impunity is banished.

Mr President,

Let me now turn to cross-line inter-agency operations to besieged and hard-to-reach locations. On 19 July, the UN submitted its August and September inter-agency convoy plan to the Syrian authorities, aiming to reach 1,231,000 people across 36 locations. In its response, received on 3 August, and following subsequent United Nations engagement to clarify, the Syrian authorities affirmed that the UN and its partners could deliver multi-sectoral assistance to 1,638,114 people. The authorities clarified or even increased the number of beneficiaries due at least in part to persistent UN engagement, including authorizing more people than requested for 7 locations. This is welcome news, but the key now is to turn these requests and approvals to besieged and hard-to-reach locations into actual deliveries to Syrians in need. The team on the ground is working day and night to make this a reality, including negotiating with the Syrian authorities to turn partial approvals into full approvals and, let me stress with all the force at my command, to put an end to the removal of medical supplies, which continues. Do I need to remind you that that means birthing kits are not hostile weapons? What is in the minds of these brutes who remove these items and the people at the highest levels in the Syrian Government who order this to happen. No wonder they haven't allowed me back to Syria since December 2015. Speaking "truth to power" only hurts when it is a shameful truth.

So far, this month, humanitarian convoys have delivered desperately needed life-saving assistance to the besieged towns of Duma in Rural Damascus and Barzeh. In total, 55,000 people in besieged locations received assistance: 35,000 people in Duma on 17 August were provided with multi-sectoral assistance, and 20,000 people in Barzeh received food and nutrition assistance on 26 August. The delivery to Duma was notable due to it being the first convoy to proceed to eastern Goutah since the deployment of Russian military police to the area as part of the de-escalation area initiative. In addition, two inter-agency convoys delivered life-saving assistance to the area around northern rural Homs, one to the hard-to reach towns of Talbiseh and Tlul Elhomor on 19 August, and a second to Ar-Rastan on 27 August. In total, 191,500 people in need were provided with multi-sectoral assistance.

Mr President,

I am the first to acknowledge, as demonstrated by concurrent developments in Astana, Amman and Cairo in recent months, there remain persistent and determined efforts to reduce violence through de-escalation agreements. I welcome these efforts and I hope the Astana guarantors will soon be able to finalise the remaining operational and technical modalities for all de-escalation areas, as well as for promoting confidence-building measures regarding the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons and

humanitarian demining. I urge all parties to work together to consolidate and expand these ceasefires. And I wish to reiterate that any reduction in hostilities must also generate concrete results for safe, unimpeded and sustained freedom of movement and humanitarian access by the United Nations and our partners in full conformity with International Humanitarian Law – impartially, independently, neutrally to relieve the suffering in meeting humanitarian need wherever it arises and where we determine the beneficiaries, the quantities and what is needed. Access to areas identified for de-escalation, and to many other areas across Syria where needs remain high, still falls short of what is required. In particular, in areas where there has been a decrease in fighting, there is no excuse for any side to restrict access. And, let me say it loud and clear yet again, humanitarian and health workers are Not A Target.

I would like to reiterate our impartial appreciation to the Russian Federation and voice our support to their initiative – presented in this Council on 9 August – to scale up humanitarian operations in de-escalation areas. Be assured that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have been actively working on preparedness planning and remain committed to scale up operations and provide life-saving assistance to men, women and children in need in the de-escalation areas and throughout the country, despite the challenging and dangerous operational environment on the ground.

In recent days, the deployment of convoys to Duma, Barzeh, Ar-Rastan, and Talbiseh and Tlul Elhomor has shown that when there is sufficient political will – with the active engagement of the Russian Federation and other Member States – access to besieged and hard-to-reach locations is possible. That said – and I can't stress this point strongly enough – the only way of guaranteeing that the Russian initiative will be a continuing success is by ensuring that administrative delays on the part of the Government of Syria are lifted once and for all. We cannot keep waiting for the signing of the necessary facilitation letters. Give us the letters – and we will deploy. In fact, every month, thousands of facilitation letters are readily signed for regular programmes in Government-controlled areas, the vast majority of those that are requested. Yet, for access to cross-line areas, only a small percentage of those areas approved by the Government actually receive facilitation letters. Of course, this is wrong, it's outrageous and morally reprehensible, let alone in breach of IHL. So, it must change and now. Non-State armed groups must also approve the necessary security guarantees in an equally timely manner. Otherwise – and despite our very best intentions – we will not be able to noticeably increase our deliveries to areas where violence has ceased through the de-escalation agreements. It's as simple as that.

I must also share my frustrations with the little progress made in recent months in responding to the needs of the many thousands of people still besieged in Foah, Kefraya and Yarmouk. Following months of difficult negotiations, we were informed in mid-August that an agreement had finally been reached between the various parties for aid distributions to simultaneously take place in these three locations. We loaded our trucks on 17 August – only to offload them again a week later, on 23 August – the day on which we were informed that the agreement was no more. This is disgusting. It's scandalous and an outrage and I urge all Member States – in particular those with the influence – to do all they can to bring the parties to their senses. I am told a new agreement among the parties was apparently reached on 27 August, but where is the evidence? I have to be hopeful that this time we will succeed in getting through. Thousands of people – in most part women and children – depend on our collective action.

Mr President, distinguished members of this Council,

As I draw to a close, may I highlight a vital point. Ten days ago, we commemorated World Humanitarian Day, where we took time to pay tribute to all the brave women and men who have died in humanitarian service in Syria and around the world. Let us together honour them here today as well, and all of those who continue to risk their lives every day in Syria and elsewhere in their quest to help others. And let us also stand in solidarity with the millions of civilians in Syria whose lives have been destroyed by the conflict, their dignity obliterated, their loved ones killed, their towns reduced to rubble, their hope for the future shattered. We stand in solidarity with them to send a clear message to the world: civilians, humanitarians and health workers, wherever they are, are not a target.

So, Mr President, as I take my leave, despite all the grave humanitarian challenges to our fellow human beings today in over 40 countries, I remain inspired and eternally grateful for the selfless, skilled, persistent, brave courageous work of the humanitarian and health workers around the world – in the field, as well as those running organisations and coordinating, be they in the United Nations or in international and local NGOs and partners – saving millions of lives, and in today’s world of overwhelmingly protracted, man-made, avoidable conflict settings, protecting civilians wherever possible. Yes, we have to have safe, unimpeded access and the absolute right to principled humanitarian relief through action in line with International Humanitarian Law to meeting need, and, yes, we will need more and more of the continuing generosity of an ever-broadening number of donors of financial resources. And, yes, this is best done, for the scale necessary to meet exponential rising demand, through the coordinated United Nations and multilateral channels, as fully endorsed at the World Humanitarian Summit.

But, Mr President, I also leave with a heavy heart as I survey this famous horseshoe table, where you, the 15 members of the Security Council representing the world’s hopes for peace and security, are charged as you are, even while representing your own capitals and their respective, competing perspectives, to rise above these 15 interests to reach the collective responsibility of the interest of all the peoples of the world by recognising and acting to put our common humanity to our fellow global citizens first – their lives and their protection. That is the humanitarian imperative, that is our, it is your, collective responsibility, collective accountability. In Syria, in Yemen, or in the countless other areas of today’s and tonight’s desperate man-made humanitarian needs of people caught up in conflict crises, surely what divides you on this Council cannot be more important than what must unite you and us all – our common humanity to relieve the suffering of the world’s most vulnerable and give hope and a future to those women, men, elderly, sick, and the children – the young girls and boys – caught up in crises, who deserve no less a life than each of you sitting round this horseshoe.
