

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MARK LOWCOCK**

*Opening remarks at the 2019 Brussels Conference on
Supporting the future of Syria and the region*

Brussels, 14 March 2019

As delivered

The humanitarian needs in Syria remain great, and your support continues to provide a lifeline for millions of people.

Let me first share a message from the UN Secretary-General. [*Video address*]

Syria remains one of the great crises of our time. Syrians many of us listened to as part of this conference's Days of Dialogue left a single stark message ringing in our ears: they want to live in safety.

While many places are calmer than a year ago, others, particularly the north-west and the last pockets of ISIL-controlled land in the north-east are seeing ongoing and even escalating violence.

I am increasingly alarmed at the deteriorating situation in Idlib. More than 90 people were killed by shelling and airstrikes just last month, nearly half of them children.

Let me repeat what we have said many times before. A large-scale military assault on Idleb would create the worst humanitarian catastrophe the world has seen in the 21st century. That is, I believe, simply unacceptable.

I would like to thank donors for their generous contributions last year. We received more than US\$6 billion in 2018. This year we are asking for just under \$9 billion. That includes \$3.3 billion needed for the Humanitarian Response Plan inside Syria and \$5.6 billion for the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan.

I hope we can make substantial progress towards meeting these goals today.

Without continued funding, humanitarian activities would be interrupted, cutting deliveries of life-saving food, water, health, shelter and protection.

Eight people in ten in Syria now live below the poverty line. Monthly food costs are six times higher than before the war. Access to adequate health care – including maternal and reproductive health services, nutrition support and treatment for non-communicable

diseases – is hopelessly inadequate in relation to basic needs. Some 6.2 million people inside Syria are still displaced from their homes, and 4.7 million still need help with shelter. Two million children inside Syria are out of school.

While recognizing the severity of need, donors must also be confident that the money they provide is used well. Specifically, I understand the importance of independent, impartial needs assessments, and of demonstrating that aid provided then reaches those most in need.

The Humanitarian Response Plan, the near final version of which, pending ongoing discussions with the Government, you have in front of you, has been developed with exactly those concerns in mind.

In 2018 humanitarian agencies reached 2 million people in acute need inside Syria every month. We also mobilized responses to new - and large - displacements from Afrin and East Ghouta and for increased needs in Idleb, southern Syria, Hajin and elsewhere.

So humanitarian action is having an impact. Serious outbreaks of disease have been contained. There has been no major deterioration in nutrition levels: there is no famine in Syria. Humanitarian assistance is keeping people alive and reducing suffering.

Access to those in need remains a major problem, due to security and bureaucratic impediments. We appeal to all concerned to do more to let the aid agencies help the most vulnerable people, wherever they are.

Looking ahead, 2019 might be the first year since the war started in which more people – both the internally displaced and refugees – return home than are newly displaced. Filippo Grandi will say more about this, but the UN will continue to support any refugees who have returned spontaneously as well as both refugees and host communities in the region. But, as Federica [Mogherini] said, it remains our view that more work is needed to remove the obstacles to voluntary, safe and dignified refugee returns.

I want to say a word about education. We have seen some progress in recent years, but with one in every three schools inside Syria damaged or destroyed, and many refugee children still out of school, much more remains to be done. I hope donors will prioritize this in today's pledges.

Gender-based violence too remains endemic in Syria, and we continue to see women and girls reduced to negative coping strategies, including early marriage. I hope donors will prioritize this in pledges today.

I also want to highlight the need for humanitarian mine action. As we have seen in Raqqa and other areas, it is critical to scale up risk education, awareness, and survey work to protect people from the unexploded remnants of war. The UN's Mine Action Service has begun scaling up its mine risk education activities inside Syria, and support for such programmes is critical to allow a return to normal life for all Syrians.

Finally, the staff of humanitarian agencies, most of whom are Syrians working to support their fellow citizens, continue to face unacceptable levels of violence and attacks. Doctors and other medical workers in particular brave extreme risks trying to save others. They deserve our fullest support and our fullest respect. One day, there will have to be accountability for the crimes committed against them and against others.

Thank you.