

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

Statement to Member States on Syria

Geneva, 23 February 2018

As delivered

For almost seven years now, the people of Syria have faced an onslaught of unspeakable violence. After having seen their homes destroyed, their neighbours killed, their loved ones disappear, after having fled multiple times within Syria or sought refuge elsewhere, faced poverty and lacked basic services, they are exhausted. As I mentioned in my briefing to the Security Council on eastern Ghouta yesterday, we have endless reports of airstrikes, mortars, rockets, barrel bombs, cluster munitions, chemical weapons, thermite bombs, suicide bombs, snipers, double-tap attacks on civilians and the essential infrastructure they depend on, including hospitals and schools, rape, illegal detention, torture, child recruitment, and sieges of entire cities reminiscent of medieval times.

You have seen the statements of the Secretary-General, of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and of others regarding the appalling violence in eastern Ghouta in recent days – a situation described by the Secretary-General as “hell on earth.” On Wednesday, our United Nations Human Rights colleagues estimated that 346 people had been killed since the beginning of this month, with close to 900 people injured. We have received reports of repeated attacks on medical facilities and bakeries. In yesterday’s briefing to the Security Council I relayed some of the countless appeals we have received from civilians in eastern Ghouta. We are running out of words with which to describe the brutality to which to close to 400,000 people are being subjected.

Since the beginning of the Syria crisis, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, and well over one million people have been injured. Life expectancy in Syria has fallen by 20 years. More than half of the population has been displaced, 6.5 million of them inside the country, and nearly 5.5 million as refugees in neighbouring countries and the region. Last year alone, more than 2.8 million displacements were recorded within Syria. Today, some 13.1 million people in Syria need protection and humanitarian assistance, including 5.6 million who are in acute need. Nearly 80 per cent of Syrians live in poverty and more than two million children have been forced out of school. Fewer than half of public hospitals and health centres are fully functioning, and 11.3 million people depend on access to life-saving and life-sustaining medical services.

We are also seeing a deterioration of the situation in southern Idleb Governorate, where more than 320,000 civilians have been displaced since mid-December. In Aleppo Governorate, there are reports of civilian deaths, injuries and displacement in the Afrin district.

Despite the enormous dangers in these and other parts of Syria, despite the harrowing images we saw in recent weeks of bombs and mortar attacks raining down on schools, medical facilities and IDP camps, the United Nations and its partners continue to do their utmost to provide lifesaving assistance to millions of people in need.

In 2017, each month, humanitarians delivered aid to an average of 7.8 million people across the country, with monthly reach ranging between 5.7 million and 9.8 million people. Operations are prioritized around meeting the most acute needs, with the different, but complementary, operating aid modalities serving as means to this end. The fundamental principle of impartiality—to deliver humanitarian assistance based solely on need—guides our work in Syria as elsewhere. And the United Nations will continue to strive to deliver to those in need across the country, through all modalities at its disposal, and advocate for full protection of, and access to civilians in need, regardless of where they are located.

As I told the Security Council yesterday, in recent months we have faced greater difficulties in accessing people in hard-to-reach and besieged areas, particularly through inter-agency cross-line convoys, than during any period since 2015. In just under three months since 1 December 2017, these convoys have reached 67,200 people. Only one convoy was able to access besieged areas during this period, delivering assistance to 7,200 people in Nashabieh in eastern Ghouta on 14 February. That represents less than 2 per cent of the currently besieged population in Syria. And this reach – 67,000 people over a three-month period – is dramatically lower than what we managed between January and November 2017, when an average of five convoys were reaching 175,000 people per month. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that our levels of access in 2017 were already 40 per cent below those in 2016.

In addition to restrictions around cross-line convoys, we are also seeing broader challenges to the quality of our access, and to our ability to independently assess needs and monitor delivery. Bureaucratic impediments, such as the non-issuance of facilitation letters, as well as additional restrictions imposed on United Nations personnel and the distribution of supplies, continue to be a significant factor in delays or non-delivery of aid, despite the creation of a tripartite coordination mechanism in Damascus to address such problems.

Humanitarian relief cannot be viewed as an optional element to be occasionally provided. It must go where it is needed, when it is needed. I call on all parties and Member States—in particular those with influence over the warring parties—to ensure that safe and unimpeded humanitarian access is granted as a matter of urgency and that civilians and civilian infrastructure are protected in accordance with basic humanity and international humanitarian law.

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be joined today by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, with the United Nations Development Programme Administrator also connected by video link. The conflict continues to drive the largest refugee crisis in the world, with 5.5 million refugees registered in a region with deepening economic, social and development challenges. The High Commissioner will describe the critical importance of our sustained support to refugees, in host countries which have demonstrated outstanding generosity for many years, as well as to impacted and vulnerable host communities.

In December last year the United Nations agencies and some 270 NGO partners released the 2018 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), a US\$5.6 billion plan designed to support over five million refugees from Syria and the vulnerable communities hosting them in neighbouring countries. Due to generous multi-year pledges already received in earlier years, the plan appeals for \$4.4 billion. This includes plans to address the protection, education, health, food and other challenges facing refugees, while also bolstering the resilience and stabilization needs of impacted and vulnerable host communities. I want to stress to you, as the Emergency Relief Coordinator, that having the plan well-funded is a crucial priority. I will work as hard as possible between now and the Brussels conference 24-25 April to encourage generous funding by Member States. The refugee appeal funding was substantially lower last year than the previous year, but we need the funding. Vulnerable people's lives depend on it.

Thank you.
