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

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

New York, 27 October 2020

As delivered

Thank you very much indeed, Mr. President.

I will focus today on five areas: first, the COVID-19 outbreak; second, violence and insecurity affecting civilians; third, the humanitarian impact of the economic crisis; fourth, humanitarian access; and fifth, assistance being provided by humanitarian organizations across Syria.

Mr. President, where cases of COVID-19 in Syria are confirmed, they are overwhelmingly the result of community transmission. Ninety-two per cent of the officially confirmed infections cannot be traced back to a known case. As in other many countries, the scale of the outbreak is therefore likely to be far greater than the confirmed cases – which is currently at about 13,500 – suggest.

Healthcare facilities in some areas are reported to be unable to absorb all suspected cases. Also as in many other countries, some health facilities are suspending surgeries or adapting wards to take in more patients.

We are particularly worried about the densely populated areas – places like urban centers in and around Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, and crowded displacement camps, settlements and collective shelters in the north-west and north-east.

Eighteen cases have so far been confirmed among health workers and distribution staff working at Al Hol camp. Another five cases have been confirmed among camp residents. Testing, as in most of the country, is extremely limited, so the only thing these figures really tells us is that COVID-19 has taken hold at the camp. Some 65,000 people remain at Al Hol, 94 per cent of whom are women and children.

In the north-west, confirmed cases have increased six-fold over the last month, with cases also rising in displacement camps and settlements. Healthcare workers increasing fear being overwhelmed.

We are monitoring with particular concern the COVID-19 outbreak in al Bab in Aleppo governorate. Some 30 per cent of the confirmed cases in the north west are in the al Bab area.

The rapid spread of the virus there is not very surprising. Water shortages have affected 185,000 people in the area since 2017, when the supply from the Ain Al Bayda pumping station stopped. Shortly after that, al Bab became – and has remained – one of the top four sub-districts reporting water-borne diseases.

Mr President, the United Nations' COVID-19 response in Syria requires an additional \$211 million, including to maintain health supply lines; improve water and sanitation in displacement camps, shelters and settlements; and to make schools safer for returning students and their teachers.

Mr. President, my second point is on violence and insecurity affecting civilians and aid workers.

Shelling in front-line areas in the north-west, as well as airstrikes in Idleb have continued as the Special Envoy just told you. Shelling on Jorin village in north-west Hama governorate killed 20 civilians in a single day on 24 September.

Yesterday's air strike in the Armanaz sub-district, which Geir Pedersen mentioned, reportedly hit an area close to displacement camps. This is the third time airstrikes have been reported in Idleb over the past week, with reports of at least five civilians injured, including three children.

An alarming degree of insecurity has also continued in the Idleb, Afrin and Azaz to Jarablus areas. On 6 October, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in al Bab city killed at least 18 civilians, including five children, and injured at least 62, including 11 children. Among the injured are three NGO staff who work in the local COVID-19 referral system.

On 15 October, two Syrian aid workers and their driver travelling from a project site in Salqin city were injured by shrapnel resulting from a drone attack on another car travelling in the area.

Mr. President, violence directed against civilians, including humanitarian workers, is unacceptable and must never be normalized. They must be protected.

Mr. President, relocations of displaced people from multiple camps and collective shelters in north-east Syria are underway, and more have been announced by local authorities. That includes relocations from collective shelters to Al-Tala'a camp near Al-Hasakeh city. I want to stress that all such movements must be fully informed and voluntary.

Mr. President, my next point is on the humanitarian impact of the **economic crisis**.

Food prices, while relatively stable in August and September, remain more than 90 per cent higher than six months ago, with a year-on-year increase of 236 per cent. That leaves many families unable to afford basic goods.

The impact of the economic downturn is hardest on the most vulnerable. Recent assessments in the north-west point to an increase in child marriage, linked to deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances. The more desperate a family's situation becomes, the more they are forced to make previously unthinkable choices.

Bread shortages are being reported in a number of regions, especially in the south. Syria used to produce enough wheat to meet domestic demand, but current wheat flour production falls short of national consumption by around a million metric tons.

Seasonal wildfires, which again Geir Pedersen mentioned, have been among the factors limiting food production. More than 35,000 hectares of agricultural land are estimated to have burned this year. That will have a long-term impact on food production and on the livelihoods of at least 40,000 families.

The fuel crisis is also affecting civilians in a serious way, as well as hindering aid supply lines. People are queuing for hours – in some cases for days - for fuel in some areas. Several aid convoys have also been delayed in recent weeks due to the lack of fuel.

Turning now to my fourth point, Mr. President, **humanitarian access**, technical teams have been able to conduct maintenance and rehabilitation work at the Alouk water station since late August. The resulting increase in pumping capacity, although still limited, will benefit almost half a million people in Al Hasakeh. But water shortages continue to be reported in the area, and it is important that regular access to the station for both maintenance workers and humanitarian staff is established and sustained.

Staying in the north-east, the distribution of 85 metric tons of medical supplies from the last WHO cross-line overland shipment to reach the region, in July, was completed last month. You may recall that this shipment was originally intended for cross-border delivery from Erbil, back in January. It has now reached the north-east in reduced quantity and at greater cost.

All hospitals in the north-east that previously depended on UN-supported cross-border operations have now received medical items from cross-line deliveries on at least one occasion. There has also been some progress in reaching the primary health centres and mobile medical units.

But focusing on single instances of access does not paint a full picture. Cross-line assistance, so far, is simply not delivering at the scale or frequency required to meet the current health needs in north-east Syria.

Let me illustrate that through a few examples.

One of the hospitals received cross-line supplies in the form of 450 gowns in April. But they got nothing else – and have had nothing at all since April.

Another hospital reports that cross-line deliveries have covered only two per cent of the types of essential pharmaceuticals needed in its maternity wing.

A third hospital reports that its maternity wing has received no cross-line supplies at all.

At the primary health care level, 20 facilities report that cross-line deliveries have supplied less than 20 per cent of the types of medicines they need – and in quantities that will last them less than two months. Out of 13 items of personal protective equipment needed, those 20 facilities received just one item through a cross-line delivery, and that will last less than a month.

Mr. President, turning to Rukban, where 12,000 civilians remain living in unsustainable conditions, the UN's efforts to deliver life-saving assistance to those who wish to remain do continue. But, again, there has been no meaningful progress since I last updated you.

I also want to say a few words on access to education. Around 100 schools in Al Hasakeh were closed by local authorities in August and have not reopened, even as other schools in the governorate did re-opened in September. Senior UN staff in the region are talking to the relevant people in the hope of making progress. And I do hope that will be possible, in everyone's interests.

Mr. President, humanitarian agencies have continued to address the logistical and operational challenges resulting from the reduction to one authorized border crossing into north-west Syria.

The trans-shipment hub at the remaining authorized crossing at Bab al-Hawa has been expanded, doubling its physical size to meet the increases in demand, while also ensuring compliance with COVID-19 physical distancing measures for staff.

On the Syrian side of the border, roadworks are underway on the route leading into areas previously serviced through the Bab al-Salam crossing. The aim is to complete the most urgent road repairs ahead of the winter season. There are however very significant challenges.

Mr. President, my final point is on the assistance humanitarian agencies continue to provide across Syria.

The Syria Humanitarian Fund, which my office administers, last month made its largest ever allocation of \$40 million, in support of projects across 93 Syrian sub-districts. Those projects are intended to help 1.3 million people.

The Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund is also preparing its next allocation for north-west Syria, which will prioritise lifesaving winterisation assistance.

Humanitarian agencies plan to reach 3.1 million people across Syria with such assistance during the imminent winter season. Donors have been supporting this effort, with over 70 per cent of funding for the winterization response now received, but a further \$24 million is still needed.

You will recall the horrific scenes of last winter, when military operations in the north-west displaced almost a million people over the course of three months, with many families fleeing on foot and sleeping in the open in the freezing cold. Most of these families are still displaced. Many of them are in shelters that will not protect them from the winter weather.

Our colleagues on the ground are working tirelessly to get families in all of Syria the supplies they need before temperatures drop. To do that, they need resources, they need access, and they must be protected.

Thank you, Mr. President.