Thank you, Madam President:

As the conflict in Syria evolves, one fact remains: it is the people of Syria who continue to bear the consequences of eight-and-a-half years of war. Across the country, more than 11 million remain in need of humanitarian assistance. That’s more than half the estimated population.

I want today to:

First, update you on the humanitarian response
Second, cover the situation in the north west
Third, flag some points on the north east
Fourth, brief you on my findings from my recent visit on the cross-border operation; and
Fifth remind you of the wider regional situation.

First, on the humanitarian response, the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations work through all possible avenues to reach as many of the people in need every month as possible. So far this year, we have reached an average of 5.6 million people a month in all parts of Syria. We try to prioritise the neediest.

Over half of the response is in areas under Government control. It takes place with their agreement and acceptance, and in coordination with them. This year, the UN and humanitarian organizations are delivering assistance to an average of 3 million people every month from within Syria. Most of the beneficiaries are people in the most acute need and in communities with a high concentration of people in need.

This assistance provided by the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations is tailored to meet people’s needs, based on independent assessments. Despite the administrative and security challenges we continue to face from within Syria, the UN conducted more than 5,500 missions between January and September to assess needs, deliver aid, and monitor the impact of our work.
In addition to the UN coordinated humanitarian response in government-controlled areas, we are regularly made aware of bilateral humanitarian assistance from Member States, including the Russian Federation.

Second, Madam President,

I remain very concerned about the situation in the northwest. In recent weeks there has been an increase in airstrikes and ground-based strikes, mostly in parts of southern and western Idlib, that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reports has caused a high number of civilian casualties.

In the last two days there have been reports of over one hundred airstrikes in Idlib and surrounding areas. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reports that four separate health facilities were damaged on 4 and 6 November, including the Kafr Nobol hospital. An increase in shelling out of the area has also been reported.

Civilians in these areas not only have to endure the impact of hostilities, but they continue to suffer under the presence of Hayat Tahrir al Sham, or HTS, a UN-listed terrorist organization.

We are following with concern the situation for civilians in Kafr Takharim, where civilians were besieged and shelled following protests against HTS. Reports indicate that civilians have been killed. More broadly, we are seeing that civilian infrastructure is being dismantled and sold in areas under HTS control, including water and electrical infrastructure, as well as rail lines. Removing civilian infrastructure affects basic services now, but will also make any future recovery all the more difficult.

More than half the people in Idlib have had to move from other parts of the country. Hundreds of thousands are living in camps and informal shelters close to the border with Turkey. There is little space left to absorb additional displacement. The onset of winter – with the rain, the cold, and the mud it brings - compounds the dire humanitarian situation.

In this context, the internal United Nations Headquarters Board of Inquiry established by the Secretary General has begun its work to investigate a series of incidents that have occurred in northwest Syria since September 2018. I would remind you of the Secretary General’s request that all relevant parties extend their support to the Board in the conduct of its duties.

Third, I continue to follow developments in northeast Syria very closely. Hostilities have decreased since the agreements reached on 17 and 22 October. But clashes continue in border areas, particularly around Ras al-Ain and Tell Abiad districts. OHCHR has verified reports that 49 civilians have been killed by a combination of air strikes, ground-based strikes, sniper fire, and executions carried out by armed groups.

OHCHR also verified that 31 civilians were killed by IEDs or explosive remnants of war since the beginning of October. About 200,000 people left the border areas between Turkey and Syria in the early phases of hostilities, mostly heading south. Most of them have now returned. But more than 70,000 remain displaced.
Civilian infrastructure has also been affected. WHO reported that five medical facilities were affected by fighting. The Allouk water station, which provides water services to 460,000 people in Al Hassakeh, has been repeatedly put out of service due to hostilities. The Government of Turkey has responded to requests to support humanitarian operations. A number of cross-line missions were facilitated by Turkey for technicians to come from Al-Hassakeh to Allouk to do repairs to the water station and the power supply. Turkey also sent its own technicians. While the water has again been restored, it is important to have sustained access to ensure the ongoing operations of these critical facilities.

More broadly, I remain concerned about the impact changes in administrative control could have on humanitarian operations in the north east Syria. With 1.8 million people in need, it is critical that there be continuity of life-saving essential services and humanitarian aid deliveries regardless of any changes in control.

This has particular implications for displacement camps, like Al Hol, where needs for the 68,600 residents are high. The camp includes Syrians, Iraqis and third country nationals. It is more important than ever that Member States, including members of this Council, repatriate their nationals, for reintegration, or for prosecution under national legislation, as appropriate.

Madam President,

Across northern Syria 4 million people are supported by the United Nations cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism, including 2.7 million in the northwest who cannot be reached from within the country. This brings me to my fourth point.

Last month, I went to Turkey and visited our cross-border operations. I was able to see the delivery of assistance, to assess the work of the United Nations Monitoring Mission, and to talk to people we are helping inside Syria.

Since 2014, the United Nations has sent nearly 30,000 trucks of humanitarian assistance across the four border-crossings named in the Security Council resolution. Civilians have been provided with food assistance, water, medical assistance, shelter, and other help.

More trucks are using the cross-border mechanism today than ever before, with more than 900 passing through in October.

More people are being reached than ever before. Last month alone, the United Nations provided 1.1 million people with food through cross-border deliveries, that’s double the number in January. The operation from Turkey has grown by more than 40 percent since this time last year, due to the increase in humanitarian needs. It is through these operations that we have been able to stave off an even worse humanitarian crisis in northern Syria.

Madam President,
I can confirm that the operation mandated by your resolution is one of the most closely scrutinized aid delivery systems in the world today. The movement and delivery of humanitarian aid is monitored at four distinct levels: at the border, at warehouses inside Syria, at distribution points, and after distribution.

The humanitarian nature of UN cross-border assistance is monitored and verified by the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism. Monitors of 15 different nationalities verify the humanitarian nature of the cargo being shipped. The monitors, who I met, climb into every truck. They open boxes, they cut into bags of rice, and they inspect vehicles before clearing assistance to cross the border.

When aid arrives at warehouses inside Syria it is examined by UN-contracted third-party monitors. They check the items being off-loaded against the waybill.

Third party monitors have conducted almost 2,000 assessments of aid so far this year. In addition to monitoring the arrival of aid at warehouses, they have observed the direct distribution to affected people, and deliveries of aid to schools and hospitals. They have conducted post-distribution monitoring, using community feedback mechanisms and individual interviews with beneficiaries. Their monitoring has not identified any evidence of systemic aid diversion.

We are also using new technologies to monitor the delivery of aid. Through video, and time stamped, geotagged photos, we can monitor the delivery process every step of the way. Commodity tracking systems, using barcodes on each box of aid, allow assistance to be followed from the border, to the warehouse, and on to the individual beneficiary. Those same boxes have phone numbers printed on them to allow beneficiaries to report back by phone or WhatsApp if everything they are expecting is not delivered, or if there are other things they need. A call centre has been established allowing anyone with questions about aid deliveries to get in touch.

Nothing in life is completely risk free, but I can say with confidence that the UN knows what is going across the border under our programme and where it is going. We know that help is reaching the civilians who need it.

So, Madam President,

I can be clear that there is no alternative to the cross-border operation. A renewal of the provisions of Security Council resolution 2165 is critical. There is no Plan B. Without the cross-border operation, we would see an immediate end of aid supporting millions of civilians. That would cause a rapid increase in hunger and disease. A lot more people would flood across the borders, making an existing crisis even worse in the region.

That brings me to my fifth and last point,

With more than 5.6 million Syrians living in neighbouring countries as refugees, the crisis has had an enormous impact on the entire region. The responsibility that refugee hosting countries bear is heavy.
When I visited Turkey last month, I had the opportunity to express again my deep admiration and gratitude to Turkey’s Government and people for their exceptional and prolonged hospitality to the refugees.

Exactly the same gratitude is due to Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and others.

I urge the international community to be more generous in supporting them all in shouldering the burden they have taken on.

Thank you.