

**Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs****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, 16 December 2020**As delivered*

Thank you very much indeed, Mr. President.

I will focus today on five areas: first, COVID-19; second, the humanitarian impact of the economic crisis; third, protection of civilians; fourth, humanitarian access; and lastly, our assessment of the humanitarian situation as 2020 draws to a close.

Mr. President,

The number of reported COVID-19 cases in Syria continues to rise, though limited testing in all parts of the country makes the extent of the outbreak impossible to assess with any certainty.

Bed occupancy rates of 100 per cent are being reported in Sweida, Homs and other governorates, but we also know that many people who are sick are reluctant to seek in-patient treatment.

The number of reported cases in schools – which are often overcrowded and often suffer poor or damaged infrastructure – more than tripled during November. WHO and UNICEF are working with education providers to strengthen COVID-19 preventive actions in schools.

Beyond the immediate health impact, we are extremely worried about the secondary effects of the pandemic, including on access to education.

Analysis recently by Save the Children found that an estimated two thirds of children in northern Syria are now out of school. Apart from COVID-19, teachers say that children are dropping out because of rising poverty.

And that brings me to my second point, Mr. President, the impact of the economic crisis.

As my deputy told you last month, even subsidized prices of essentials have surged. Prices of subsidized bread have doubled; of subsidized diesel have more than doubled since September.

Both remain in short supply and reports continue of long queues at bakeries and petrol stations.

The market price of a standard reference food basket is higher now than at any point since price monitoring by WFP began in Syria in 2013.

More than 80 per cent of displaced families across the country now say that their income does not cover their needs. Families in which women are the primary breadwinner are even worse off – they make 30 per cent less, on average, in terms of income than other displaced families.

The impact all of this is having on the most vulnerable is clear from the data.

In the north-west, child stunting increased by five per cent this year. We now estimate that 34 per cent of all children, more than one in three under five in north-west Syria suffer from stunting.

In areas of displacement in the north-west, up to 37 per cent of mothers are also malnourished.

Mr. President, my next point is the protection of civilians.

Hostilities in recent weeks putting civilians at risk in the north-west, and increasingly in an area such as Ein Issa.

We all know the immediate and devastating human cost of military escalations in Syria. I echo the Secretary-General's and the Special Envoy's calls for a nation-wide ceasefire.

Mr. President, infrastructure that is indispensable to civilians' survival must also be protected.

Alouk water station again stopped pumping water on 3 December as a result of a disruption in the power supply to the station.

That's the fifteenth disruption this year and it affects almost half a million people in Al Hassakeh, forcing them to resort to potentially unsafe alternative sources of water.

Humanitarian organisations are trucking over 2,000 m³ of water to the area every day and are working to scale up further. But that neither enough nor sustainable.

So a solution must be found to ensure uninterrupted water supply from Alouk. In the meantime, safe access to the water and electricity installations must continue for the technical teams.

Turning to the north-west, water shortages also continue to be reported in Al Bab city and surrounding areas, affecting 185,000 people.

Electricity from Turkish providers last month increased pumping at local wells, but supply is still far short of needs. Water supply from the Ein El Bayda pumping station to Al Bab could meet these needs, and should immediately resume.

Mr. President, my next point is humanitarian access.

In October, a humanitarian organization delivering WFP food assistance in north-east Syria was instructed by the Syrian Government to stop distributing food aid to around 220,000 people in non-government controlled areas of Ar-Raqqa governorate. Distributions to all areas were able to resume earlier this month, after a two-month disruption.

Also in the north-east, in late November, local authorities suspended operations of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, SARC, in Al Hol and Al Roj camps, which together accommodate some 65,000 people. And that disrupted food distributions, waste management, as well as some health services. SARC activities resumed on 1 December.

These incidents exemplify how vulnerable humanitarian operations in the north-east are to disruption. When aid is suspended, those most in need are the ones who suffer, and that suffering is needless.

International humanitarian law requires that all parties allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need.

Also in Al Hol, three children died in a fire at the camp last week, reportedly caused by a kerosene cooker. This tragic incident again underscores the challenging conditions at Al-Hol. It is simply no place for children – tens of thousands of children – to grow up.

Tent fires usually increase in the winter, as families try to keep warm with whatever means available to them. So, unfortunately we have to expect more such incidents in the coming months.

Mr. President, as another year comes to an end, families in Syria remain without respite after almost a decade of conflict.

Millions have been displaced and impoverished. Millions have suffered trauma and deep personal loss.

Even as active conflict in some areas has subsided, economic decay and the compounding impact of COVID-19 are driving deterioration in people's lives experiences. Food insecurity and malnutrition are expected to rise significantly, as is the overall number of people in need of humanitarian assistance.

An escalation of hostilities would be all the more devastating against that backdrop.

As we have briefed you for the past couple of months, one immediate concern is getting winter assistance to families as temperatures are now dropping.

Distributions are underway, with plans to reach over 3 million people identified as those most in need. Current funding, however, will only allow us to reach 2.3 million of those 3 million. I thank the donors who are supporting this effort, but more is needed.

Thank you, Mr. President.