

**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, 20 January 2021*

*As delivered*

Thank you, Mr. President. I'm told, Kelly [Craft, US Ambassador to the UN], that this is your last session in the Council, so I would just like to offer you my best personal wishes.

Mr. President, I would like today to focus on five areas: first, the economic crisis; second, the impact of COVID-19; third, the protection of civilians; fourth, humanitarian access; and fifth, how humanitarian organizations are organizing themselves to provide assistance across Syria.

I want to make clear that I very strongly endorse everything that Geir [Pedersen, Special Envoy] has told you in relation to all of these issues, but I am not going to repeat everything that he has said.

Mr. President, Syrians are starting 2021 with a currency whose value has drastically declined and food prices at historically high levels, partly because subsidies for key commodities like bread have been cut.

In December, monitoring by the World Food Programme showed food prices increasing again, by 13 per cent compared with November, and by 236 per cent compared with December 2019.

Nearly one in five households reported poor food consumption in December. That's double the level recorded in December 2019.

Bread shortages continue in many areas.

Domestic wheat production cannot meet demand, and most of what is produced is grown in areas outside government control. In government areas, production fell significantly last year.

As a result of decreased purchasing power, over 80 per cent of households report relying on negative coping mechanisms to afford food.

Perhaps the most worrying is a growing reliance on child labour. One family in ten say they have to rely on their children to contribute to the family income.

Fuel shortages and power cuts in the middle of winter are another manifestation of the deep economic crisis.

Black market prices for heating fuel are up to ten times the subsidized rate.

There are shortages of fuel for transportation, and long queues at fuel stations.

Mr. President,

We have told you before of our concern that many vulnerable families would not be sufficiently prepared for winter this year. Unfortunately, those concerns are proving justified.

As a result of heavy rainfall affecting thousands of people in the north-west this week, people are telling us that they, their children and their elderly parents are spending whole nights standing upright in their tents because they are inundated with so much water.

There are similar problems in other parts of the country. Heavy rains in Tartous have caused flooding in at least one IDP camp. Rural Damascus faces particularly harsh weather due to its high elevation, and many people there are vulnerable.

Mr. President, compounding the economic crisis is the impact of COVID.

While testing remains too limited to convey the true extent of the outbreak, there are indications that Syria may be experiencing a renewed wave of infections.

Cases reported in Government areas increased by 64 per cent between November and December. More than 50 per cent of tests are coming back positive in Sweida and Tartous; in Homs it is 60 per cent.

Survey data in December revealed 45 per cent of households as having lost one or more sources of income over the previous month because of restrictions related to COVID.

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

At least 13 children have been killed in incidents involving explosive weapons and unexploded ordnance across Syria so far this year. At least 14 more have been injured.

In Al Hol in the north-east, we are monitoring with concern the security situation in the camp following a surge in violent incidents, which also reduce humanitarian organizations' ability to operate safely.

The responsibility for security inside the camp rests with local authorities. Security must be provided in a manner that does not endanger residents or violate their rights, and that does not restrict humanitarian access.

Let me remind you again that most of the 62,000 people who remain at Al Hol are young children, less than 12 years old, growing up in unacceptable conditions.

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

Alouk water station, which almost half a million people in Al Hassakeh continue to rely on as their primary water source, had resumed operations on 20 December, but water was cut off again on 17 January. It is critical that technical teams continue to be provided safe access to the water and electricity installations at Alouk.

Which brings me to my next point, Mr. President: humanitarian access.

The UN has been unable to proceed with a planned first cross-line mission from Damascus into Idleb, as parties on both sides remain unable to agree on the composition of the mission.

The UN will continue to engage with all relevant parties to work towards a solution that will allow this mission to go forward. I hope to have more to say on this topic next month.

In the meantime, cross-border operations into north-west Syria dispatched an average of 1,000 trucks of aid a month in 2020, reaching 2.4 million people each month throughout the year.

And that brings me to my final point, Mr. President: humanitarian assistance being provided to people in need across Syria.

The UN-coordinated humanitarian operation assisted an average of 7.6 million people a month across the country in 2020. That's an increase of around 20 per cent compared to 2019.

On 1 December, I released an overview of global humanitarian needs for 2021, including for Syria. The overview highlights that there are 13 million people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, and another 10.1 million people in need (including 5.5 million Syrian refugees) in the region.

The needs are calculated on the basis of our independent assessments and they are the basis for our response, which focuses on life-saving humanitarian needs and repairs to critical

humanitarian facilities. A total of \$10 billion is being requested, including \$4.2 billion for needs inside Syria, so that we can respond throughout this year.

Let me also update you on how the UN is organizing itself to provide assistance in Syria.

The UN's assistance continues to be guided by the humanitarian principles, and UN leadership remains attentive to the necessary oversight of the organization's work on the ground, through our established internal coordination mechanisms and regular engagement with Member States, both in the form of dialogue and through UN entities' governing bodies. Appropriate internal mechanisms for oversight and other frameworks remain in place, including the Parameters and Principles of UN Assistance in Syria, and we continue to work in compliance with resolutions you have passed and with other relevant decisions, including General Assembly resolution 46/182.

The UN country team in Syria has been in discussions and continues to engage with the Syrian Government and with Member States in the region regarding its work on resilience and early recovery and the new strategic framework for 2021–2023.

Given the importance of further engagement, the UN in Syria is working on a six-month extension of the strategic framework, to ensure that critical operational activities continue.

We will continue to use every opportunity we have to deliver aid to those most in need. That will require adequate funding, improved access, and an end to the violence that has tormented Syrians for nearly a decade.

Thank you, Mr. President.