

**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, 28 April 2021*

*As delivered*

Thank you very much, Mr. President.

I will cover five points today: first, COVID; second, the economic crisis; third, the protection of civilians; fourth, the issue of humanitarian access; and finally, assistance humanitarian organizations are providing across Syria.

Let me start with COVID, which Geir [Pedersen, UN Special Envoy for Syria] said I would.

As I have said before, since testing across the country is so limited, there is a high degree of uncertainty over exactly the scale of the pandemic in Syria.

But from the available information, it is pretty clear that the virus spread is, again, rapid but also accelerating. The number of new cases recorded by the Ministry of Health in March was twice the number recorded in February.

Hospitals in Damascus, including intensive care units, are now full.

In northern Syria, new cases have been confirmed in displacement camps, including at al Hol and al Roj. Both those camps lack the resources to treat COVID patients.

In the UN, we are doing what we can to provide support, including by enhancing surveillance capacity, by providing PPE and by providing training for medical workers, as well as supporting the roll-out of vaccination campaigns.

Last week, the first deliveries of vaccines from the COVAX facility arrived in Syria, and additional deliveries are expected throughout the year.

The supplies from COVAX should cover around 20 per cent of the population, but that's obviously not nearly enough. It is a vital first step to protect medical workers and those most vulnerable, but more vaccines will be needed as soon as possible.

Let me just make the obvious point that the vaccine doses that reached north-west Syria were delivered, like all UN humanitarian assistance there, through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. It is really not clear how future such deliveries could reach north-west Syria unless you confirm the re-authorization of UN cross-border access.

And Geir has made an appeal to you today on that, reinforcing what the Secretary-General has already said. I, of course, endorse those appeals too.

Next, Mr. President, is the economic crisis.

The exchange rate has again been volatile; in fact, it has appreciated over the last month or so. It is now around SYP3,400 to the US dollar on the informal market. That compares with SYP4,700 to the dollar at a low point in March.

One consequence of that is that there are, in some places, some reductions in prices, for staples like rice and sugar, many of which are imported, obviously. But food prices overall do remain at historically high levels. In fact, in Al Hassakeh, subsidized bread prices doubled this month.

So, across the country, our food security assessments still show the situation is getting worse.

Most Syrian households – more than half of them – report not having sufficient, or sufficiently nutritious, food. That's an increase of more than 70 per cent compared to last year. And the proportion is – it won't surprise you – much higher among people who have been displaced or among returnees.

Ongoing fuel shortages are increasingly affecting humanitarian operations as well. Several field missions were cancelled this month because there wasn't enough fuel to conduct them.

Mr. President, my next point is protection.

Geir touched again on the violence we have seen recently. Two more aid workers were killed in Syria this month. The two volunteers for the national NGO "Al Bir and Al Ehsan Ras Al Ain" were killed in an armed attack on 17 April on their way back from a humanitarian assistance project in Deir ez-Zor.

I, again, condemn this and all similar attacks. Humanitarian workers in Syria deliver life-saving aid under the most challenging circumstances and at great personal risk. They really must be protected.

Also in the north-east, we are monitoring with concern the increasing tensions in and around Qamishli and Al-Hasakeh cities. Last week, clashes in Qamishli killed at least three civilians, including two children, and injured many others. At least 15,000 people have been displaced.

Turning to al Hol, a security operation that concluded on 1 April resulted in the detention of more than 100 camp residents. That exercise also forced the temporary suspension of some humanitarian services.

Insecurity at al Hol continues, however, and at least two more people have been killed since that security operation.

As the Secretary-General has said, we are seeing a collective failure to protect women and children at al Hol and other camps and places of detention in north-east Syria. Tens of thousands of children are growing up in desperate and really scandalous conditions.

So again, I join the Secretary-General in urging relevant Member States, rapidly and safely, to allow for the voluntary repatriation of their nationals as is required by international law and standards.

Mr. President, objects that are indispensable for civilians' survival must also be protected, and I and others briefed you in the Council on that yesterday.

I want to update you on the situation at the Alouk water station. The water supply has again been interrupted almost consistently for the past two weeks. That affects close to half a million people in Al-Hasakeh, including in al Hol camp. The UN has now recorded more than 20 of these interruptions over the last year.

Humanitarian agencies are trucking more than 3,000 m<sup>3</sup> of water every day to the area, but this is not enough to meet people's essential needs, particularly as the area battles, like many other parts of Syria, with increasing numbers of COVID cases.

So I again call for a sustainable solution to keep water flowing at Alouk. Any solution must include safe and regular access for technical teams to the station and to the electrical installations that it relies on.

My next point, Mr. President, is humanitarian access.

In north-west Syria, millions of people remain pressed up against the border in an active war zone, dependent on aid that is delivered across the border from Turkey.

Our data show those people are worse off now than they were nine months ago.

Every month, the cross-border operation reaches some 2.4 million people who depend on it for food, medicines, shelter and other vital supplies. A failure to extend the cross-border authorization would sever this lifeline. I made my appeal alongside Geir and the Secretary-General to you on that earlier in my briefing.

We can't, under current conditions, substitute for the cross-border channel. We are continuing to engage with the parties to deploy a first cross-line humanitarian convoy into north-west Syria. A revised concept of operations for that convoy and the delivery was presented in March.

It has not yet been rejected, but nor have the operational details of the proposed mission been agreed by everybody. So consultations continue to try to address parties' reservations, including on the question of how aid would be distributed once the convoy reaches the places it is intended to reach.

In the north-east, hostilities in and around Qamishli and Al-Hasakeh, which I mentioned earlier, are affecting operations as well. Twenty-five trucks containing food rations have been stuck at a checkpoint outside Qamishli since 23 April.

That kind of disruption is really unacceptable, and is another example of the challenging operating environment humanitarian organizations face in north-east Syria.

While the UN has scaled up cross-line deliveries, needs continue to outstrip our ability to respond. Many medical facilities remain short of the necessary supplies and equipment, as I told you again last month in more detail.

And overall, the situation has worsened since the removal of the Al Yarubiyah authorized border crossing in January of last year.

Let me turn now to Rukban. Preparations are under way for UN-supported voluntary departures to Syrian Government-held areas. This month, the Government approved the use of al-Dweir in Rural Damascus as a COVID quarantine centre, and that does pave the way for those who opt to choose to leave.

The assessment in the camp itself is, meanwhile, pretty dark there. There has been no humanitarian assistance delivered to the estimated 12,000 people in Rukban from the Government-held areas since December 2019.

Geir touched on the issue of sanctions. I again echo what he said. I note, again, the public assurances by the United States and by the European Union that their sanctions programmes don't ban the flow of humanitarian supplies to Syria, and that they are committed to fully and expeditiously apply humanitarian exemptions.

Unfortunately, we see the impact of sanctions on humanitarian operations in the form of overcompliance with the measures put in place, including in the financial sector. More than half of the international NGOs that are operating out of Damascus have reported serious problems with their banking requirements this year. So I do encourage the relevant Member States to work closely both with the NGOs and with the banks to try to resolve these problems.

Finally, Mr. President, just a few words on the assistance we are delivering through the UN and the agencies we work with across Syria.

At the fifth Brussels conference, which Geir eluded to also, which the UN and the EU co-chaired on 30 March, pledges of US\$4.4 billion were made to provide assistance in Syria and the region this year.

Those contributions help us sustain what is a massive humanitarian operation coordinated by the UN in Syria. It reaches currently around 7.7 million people every month all over the country.

But much more is needed. Humanitarian organizations were aiming to deliver assistance to 12.3 million people in Syria this year. It is really vital that they receive the additional resources and the access necessary to enable them to do that. to do so.

Thank you very much, Mr. President.