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United Nations Special Envoys for Syria Geir O. Pedersen briefing to the Security Council

29 April 2020

Arabic version

The Arab League, the United Nations and the European Union continue to call on the Syrian government to take immediate and bold action to remove the obstacles to truce and to lift a range of additional and extreme measures that prevent humanitarian agencies from reaching those in need. This will enable those affected to secure the food and medical supplies that they urgently need, and to deliver more support for the population.

Security Council briefing

Security Council briefing by Geir O. Pedersen, UN Special Envoy for Syria

29 April 2020

This briefing was to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, following the Resolution 2254 (2015).

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Muheet al'am al-mutahidah Turksiya 'an biydesoon

A'holat a'llam al-am

29 Nisan/April 2020

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Arabic version
I strongly believe that Syria needs a ceasefire arrangement that results in sustained calm and is nationwide in scope – one that does not see new assaults across lines of contact, and enables Syrians to access equipment and resources necessary to combat COVID-19. We cannot afford this scenario before the pandemic; the price could only be higher now.

Mr. President,

I appeal to all relevant parties to address internationally proscribed terrorist groups in a cooperative and targeted manner, so as not to compromise the existing calm and the COVID-19 response, and so as to ensure full respect of international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians.

I also note that the different ceasefire arrangements between Russia, Turkey and the US in the northeast also continue to broadly hold.

Mr. President,

I welcome the fact that there has been significant calm in many areas of Syria – especially relative to the apaxes of violence of previous years. We have not witnessed all-out offensives or further displacements since early March. Russian-Turkish arrangements have taken hold in the northwest, and I do see a positive difference on the ground, including compared with previous arrangements. The level of incidents is low.

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I also note that the different ceasefire arrangements between Russia, Turkey and the US in the northeast also continue to broadly hold.
Secretary-General Mark Lowcock will brief you this afternoon on the UN family’s efforts to help build capacity to test and treat COVID-19 in Syria.

11. While testing remains limited, the officially reported COVID-19 caseload in Syria is comparatively low: 42 reported cases in areas controlled by the Syrian Government; 1 reported case in the northeast; and no reported cases in the northwest. Mr. President, we all hope that these low numbers will continue – but as in all countries, the risk of a major COVID-19 outbreak in Syria is there. The trend lines in the coming weeks will be very important. So will a ramping up of testing and treatment capacity in all parts of Syria, along with information sharing between all parties.

12. Syria faces many challenges that can hamstring a response to the pandemic. Syria also lacks sufficient health professionals, medical equipment and supplies. The healthcare system is degraded in some areas and destroyed in others, following nine years of armed conflict. You all saw the recent findings of the Secretary-General’s Board of Inquiry, a terrible reminder of what has happened in this conflict.

13. Let me reiterate the need for full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access, using all modalities, including scaled-up cross line and cross border access is important.

14. As part of the global efforts, the Secretary-General has appealed for the waiver of sanctions that can undermine the capacity of the country to ensure access to food, essential health supplies and COVID-19 medical support to respond to the pandemic. This has been affirmed in direct information to the Syrian government. The United Nations, and I personally, have directly engaged concerned States so that all humanitarian exemptions to sanctions remain available and are fully utilized to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. I note the positive response of different countries to the United Nations on this aspect.

15. Turning to the economic situation, after nine years of conflict and a wide range of factors and measures, Syria faces extremely grave economic conditions. We have recently seen price increases and shortages among other further worsening trends. The measures rightly taken by the authorities to combat COVID-19 in Syria have – as in all countries – also had economic impact too.

16. I have long urged the parties to move to large-scale and unilateral releases of detainees and abductees and more meaningful actions on missing persons. The pandemic makes this humanitarian imperative more urgent than ever. I continue to urge the Syrian Government and all other Syrian parties to follow the lead of other governments around the world in releasing detainees. We really need to see this happening as part of all the efforts to stem the spread of the virus in Syria.

17. The need for an all-out effort to combat COVID-19 in Syria was conveyed to me on Monday in consultations with civil society actors in all different parts of Syria via our Civil Society Support Room, which included many medical NGOs and other grass-roots organisations. They are doing all they can to raise awareness and support local communities. They reflected the diversity of the challenges faced in the various parts of the country, and a common belief that more can and needs to be done to support the efforts underway.

18. The Women’s Advisory Board has been convening virtually every week since the risk of a COVID-19 crisis emerged. I spoke with them yesterday. They expressed support for a sustained ceasefire throughout the country, and support for medical staff and provision of food, medicine, medical supplies and equipment to access all regions of Syria, without delay or impediment. They emphasised that women are at the forefront of the response to the spread of COVID-19, and explained how they are carrying additional caregiving responsibilities at home due to the movement restrictions. They also noted heightened risks of domestic violence in isolation settings – and fears of potential marginalization of women as COVID-19 response gradually pushes some to more traditional roles. They stressed the need to prevent violence against women.

19. In that regard, I briefed you last month that the agenda for a next session of the Constitutional Committee had been agreed between the co-chairs. It will be important to build on this with a substantive discussion during a next round. The co-chairs have been clear in their dealings with me that agreement during a next session on national foundations and principles is not a precondition to moving to other items in subsequent sessions. I remain in regular contact with them on how to resume the meetings in Geneva as soon as the situation allows – and I have been in touch with the civil society members of the committee and will further that too. We continue to explore whether any preparatory work can take place in the meantime. I urge all members to be seriously preparing for renewed work.

Mr. President,

20. I reiterate my appeal for a nationwide ceasefire and an all-out effort to ensure that Syrians across the country will have access to the equipment and resources needed to combat and treat COVID-19. I stand ready to work with the government and the opposition and all relevant players on the ground, as well as key countries with weight and influence. I see every possibility for relevant players to come together in a common effort to support sustained calm and scaling up of the response to the pandemic. This is the only responsible path.

21. And I believe it is the path that also could pave the way for progress on the broader political process to implement Security Council resolution 2254. We all agree: there is no military solution to the Syria crisis. We must act on our common humanity, help build trust and confidence including via reciprocal measures, and begin to move towards a political settlement that can meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and fully restore Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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