



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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Security Council Briefing on Syria
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Mr President,

The situation in Syria is a humanitarian catastrophe with ordinary people paying the price for the failure to end the conflict. The parties to the conflict have become increasingly entrenched in the rhetoric and reality of war with a total disregard for the impact on people's lives. And this body has been unable to reach the consensus necessary to support a political solution to the crisis.

The destruction of essential infrastructure including schools and hospitals, devaluation of the currency, rising food prices, shortage of fuel and electricity and lack of water has had an impact on the majority of Syrians.

The needs are growing rapidly and are most severe in the conflict and opposition- controlled areas. The latest figures show 6.8 million people in need, 4.25 million people internally displaced and an additional 1.3 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. The economic collapse has led to a consequential collapse in people's coping mechanisms. At a time when needs are growing dramatically, so too are the constraints inhibiting our ability to scale up the humanitarian response. So the question facing all of us around this table is, 'when is not enough too little, and when does continuing to do too little become part of the problem?'

Syria's main cities have been devastated by the conflict. Deir Az Zor, Hama, Homs and Idlib have been reduced to rubble. A United Nations inter-agency convoy that crossed the front lines in Aleppo last week witnessed the extraordinary destruction in the city. Large parts do not have running water because there is no electricity. Waste is piling up, raising fears that diseases will multiply as the summer heat approaches. And there are growing concerns about outbreaks of diarrhoea and potentially even cholera if the most basic of services cannot be urgently restored.

They visited a hospital in Aleppo where over 3,500 war-wounded patients have reportedly been treated. There is no blood bank and doctors are performing surgery at times without anaesthetic or even suture thread. And, the hospital and its staff are regularly hit during fighting.

But, Mr. President, our descriptions cannot begin to give you the real picture of the horrors being meted out every day. We have heard testimonies of houses burnt with families inside; of people being bombed and killed while queuing for a piece of bread. This is the reality of Syria today.

And children are amongst the ones who suffer most. Over 3 million have already been affected, including 2 million displaced. Children have been murdered, tortured and subjected to sexual violence. Many do not have enough food to eat. Millions have been traumatised by the horrors they have witnessed. This brutal conflict is not only shattering Syria's present; it is also destroying its future.

Mr. President,

The High Commissioner for Refugees will brief you on the situation of the over 1.3 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. I share his concern about the growing impact of the refugee crisis on neighbouring countries, particularly Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. We urgently need to increase our support to these countries and give them the help they need to continue to keep their borders open.

Mr. President,

I have visited Syria four times in the last year. January was my last visit and I was able to report to this Council areas of improvement in our relationship with the Syrian Government, including their agreement that UN humanitarian agencies and our partners could access all areas of Syria and their agreement to fast-track administrative procedures to facilitate an effective humanitarian response.

I regret to inform this Council that since my visit in January bureaucratic obstacles have grown and are inhibiting our ability to respond. Twenty-one visas are pending, many for over two months. All aid convoys require 72 hours' notice with as many as ten Notes Verbales exchanged to gain approval for a single convoy. The approved list of NGOs has recently reduced from 110 to 29. Only four additional international NGOs have been approved this year and, given the bureaucratic hurdles, only one is operational.

The approval to open UN hubs in six key cities was issued over a year ago, yet this has only been operationalized recently for two cities with a commitment to continue discussions on two more. Notwithstanding the fact that NGOs are cleared to accept UN funding, every project is considered in detail by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the result that projects designed in February for funding under the Emergency Response Fund - the *Emergency Response Fund* - are still awaiting final approval in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Twenty-two armoured vehicles, so vital for staff security, are still pending approval for import. And in the last twenty-four hours, we have been informed that every truck needs a permit signed by two ministers to enable clearance through Government checkpoints.

When I tell the Council that a convoy from Damascus to Aleppo goes through 50 checkpoints – half of them Government controlled - you will appreciate the impossibility of this request. We cannot do business this way.

The continued conflict and proliferation of armed groups has made Syria a highly unpredictable and insecure environment; jeopardizing aid organizations' operations. In the past two months access to those in most severe need has reduced: Homs is a good example.

In February and March this year, 276,000 people in the most severe need have been effectively cut off from assistance as the Government has closed down Syrian Arab Red Crescent cross-line operations. We have similar restrictions in Rif Damascus, Aleppo, Dara'a and elsewhere. These have all been the target of UN-led cross-line missions, but due to access restrictions the scale of aid delivered falls far short of the needs.

In the case of Aleppo it is important to highlight that contrary to some widely held perceptions, aid-flows across the Turkish border have significantly reduced in the past two months. The main crossing point at Kilis, through which 50 per cent of aid reportedly flows, has recorded a reduction to approximately 20 trucks per day, down from between 50 and 80 two months ago. The Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), the humanitarian arm of the Syrian Coalition, has limited capacity and reach. So we are not reaching those most urgently in need of our help: 2.5 million people in Aleppo and north of the city. Strengthening of the ACU should not come at the expense of the SARC.

The data available to us shows that the people in opposition-held areas are in the most urgent need. We have a duty and a responsibility to try to reach them. I was horrified to hear accounts, during my recent visit to Turkey, of children dying from hunger in these areas. We need to get aid into these hard-to-reach areas. And it is difficult to do cross-line because of bureaucratic constraints. The Council needs to consider alternative forms of aid delivery, including cross-border operations because too many lives are being lost.

When I say to the Council that the journey from Damascus to Aleppo is 310 kilometres - with those 50 checkpoints - and remember what I said about the need now to sign off each truck by two ministers: from Kilis to Aleppo the journey is just 56 kilometres.

Across the country, humanitarian convoys are regularly attacked or shot at; staff are intimidated or kidnapped. For example, on 21 March, a WHO convoy carrying medical assistance for 80,000 people was hijacked by an armed group on its way from Tartous to Aleppo, and all of the supplies were stolen. And yet, in spite of the threats, humanitarian workers continue their critical work. I want to pay particular tribute to the work of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) volunteers. They have shown incredible dedication, impartiality and courage since the beginning of the conflict. Many of them do not hesitate to risk their lives every day to bring assistance to people in need, whether they live in Government or opposition-controlled areas. 18 have been killed doing their humanitarian work. Given its network across the country and its capacity to negotiate access to almost all areas affected, SARC is an invaluable partner for the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations in Syria. They proved it again during the mission to Aleppo last weekend when their volunteers were welcomed on both sides of the line. We all need to support SARC. Syria needs them.

Mr. President,

There has been a qualitative and quantitative step change in UN Agency presence and response in Syria including the establishment of a hub in Homs. The deployment of a senior RC/HC to oversee the response has finally been agreed with the Government and deployment is expected in the coming weeks. In March, WFP food assistance reached close to 2 million people across the country; many of them in areas under opposition control. UNICEF and partners have reached more than 5 million people with safe water and aim to reach an additional 5 million in the coming months through chlorination and repair of urban and rural water supply systems.

The provision of primary and secondary health care services to approximately 2.7 million Syrians has been supported by WHO and its partners. UNRWA continues to assist the 400,000 Palestinian refugees, many of whom are facing future displacement.

Since my last briefing to the Council I can also report some improvement in the funding situation. About half of the \$1.5 billion required to cover Syria's humanitarian needs until June has been received with the recent allocation of the \$300 million pledged by the Kuwaiti Government in January.

A welcome and timely disbursement by the Emir of Kuwait and I ask those Member States who have not yet converted their conference pledges to cash to do so urgently.

Mr. President,

I cannot overstate the seriousness of the current situation in Syria. I do not have an answer for those Syrians I have spoken to who asked me why the world has abandoned them. While the humanitarian situation on the ground is becoming more and more disastrous every day, the limitations on the ground have forced us to being precariously close to suspending some critical humanitarian operations. We are approaching a point of no return. Members of the international community, particularly Members of this Council must urgently come together in support of the Syrian people.

As a matter of priority, the Security Council must find ways to reduce the level of violence and stop the bloodshed. Parties must be reminded of their obligation to protect civilians and abide by International Humanitarian Law. The consequences of violating those rules must be made clear to all. The protection of medical facilities, staff and patients in particular must be ensured at all times. Parties must demilitarise hospitals and in the conduct of hostilities they must take all precautionary measures to avoid hitting medical facilities or staff.

This Council must also request the parties to ensure the safe and unimpeded access of aid organizations to those in need in all areas of Syria. It is not acceptable that humanitarian workers continue to be targeted while bringing relief to people. If some routes are not safe, it is the responsibility of the parties to identify alternatives, including across international borders.

Mr. President,

We all look to this Council to guarantee the peace and security of the people of our world. My appeal to this Council is on behalf of the Syrian people but it is also on behalf of all of those seeking to assist them. We are losing hope. We cannot do our jobs properly. We look to you to take the action necessary to end this brutal conflict.

Thank you.