

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

Statement to the Security Council on Syria
New York, 27 January 2016

As delivered

Mr. President,

For over five long years, the Syrian people have endured one of the most savage and brutal conflicts of the 21st century. The facts speak for themselves: over 250,000 people killed, well over a million injured, 6.5 million displaced within Syria, almost 4.6 million refugees, and much of the remaining population – some 13.5 million people – are in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

We must never forget that behind each of these figures are the individual and personal stories of girls, boys, women and men whose lives have been uprooted; whose dreams for the future have been shattered; and who have witnessed and been subjected to unspeakable fear and suffering.

This week, political talks are scheduled to begin, led by Special Envoy de Mistura. I offer him, once again, the full support of the humanitarian community in his vital endeavour. We must all get behind his tireless efforts to find a political solution to this shameful tragedy.

This political process offers a genuine window of opportunity for the international community to come together and find solutions that reduce suffering and finally bring an end to the conflict. I cannot stress enough that we must not let this opportunity pass.

Mr. President,

Since the adoption of resolution 2139 two years ago, the Secretary-General has reported month after month on the parties' disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law, their repeated non-compliance with this Council's demands on protection of civilians and humanitarian access, and the humanitarian catastrophe that has ensued. This month's report is equally as depressing as those before it, highlighting how the human and social cost of this conflict continues to spiral out of control. This vicious cycle of death and destruction carries the grave risk that it is seen as having become, in many ways, the new normal in Syria as the search for a political solution continues.

But the death, suffering and wanton destruction and disregard for the law should never be seen as ‘normal’. This tragedy is man-made. It is hideous but it is avoidable. And we – you – must come together to stop it.

Mr. President,

Every time we think we have reached the nadir of human suffering in this crisis, it continues to sink deeper and deeper before our eyes. The recent pictures of emaciated, starving children in the besieged town of Madaya seemingly shocked the collective conscience of the world. The humanitarian missions to Madaya and the similarly besieged areas of Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya, undertaken by the United Nations, the ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) over the last two weeks have delivered desperately needed food, medical and other aid sufficient for one month for over 60,000 people in total.

The original list of those requiring urgent medical evacuation was 19. All of those people have been evacuated. In fact a total of 37 people out of 400 people requiring medical attention have been evacuated. We urgently need to get more medical supplies and teams into Madaya. The last time SARC was able to enter with supplies and teams was 15 January. Many of those who remain need treatment where they are - rather than evacuation. Simple treatments and supplies can provide the care required. We do not know if there are others that require evacuation. That is why it is vital we are able to get independent medical teams in to assess the most appropriate medical care for the sick and injured.

Humanitarian conditions in these areas remain severe and critical, particularly the health of civilians in Madaya. Negotiations continue to allow the free safe passage – let me repeat safe passage - of others in both locations whose lives are at serious risk.

These negotiations – with all parties - must conclude urgently to avoid more senseless death and suffering. In the meantime, health supplies in Madaya are dwindling fast, and recent United Nations and SARC requests to the Syrian authorities for medical teams to enter Madaya must be approved without delay or hindrance. We also need similar, immediate safe access to Foah and Kefraya as conditions there also continue to deteriorate sharply.

And why do we negotiate? Why do we request safe access from all parties, but principally the Syrian government? Because although this Council has agreed a Resolution to allow for safe, unimpeded access, it does not always exist for the brave men and women on the ground trying to deliver assistance into these areas. Some simply say to me: ‘the UN should break the sieges’ – but that would be reckless. It would entail sending convoy drivers and humanitarian workers into the line of fire.

Mr. President,

To be frank, the situation in Madaya is only the tip of the iceberg. More and more people are living in areas that are under siege or are hard-to-reach than ever before. We are continually monitoring the situation on the ground throughout Syria, and based on the latest information, we estimate that some 4.6 million people are in hard-to-reach areas, subject to various forms of restrictions on the movement of people and goods that severely limit their access to services and humanitarian assistance. Of that number, we estimate that some 486,700 people are currently

living in besieged areas – 274,200 besieged by the Government of Syria, 200,000 people by ISIL; and 12,500 people by non-State armed groups, and the Nusra Front.

The continued use of siege and starvation as a weapon of war is reprehensible. The Secretary-General has said that such tactics can constitute a war crime. It must stop immediately. The primary responsibility lies with the party who maintains the siege, and routinely and systematically denies people the basic necessities of life. However, other parties that conduct military activities in or from populated areas, using civilians as shields and endangering their safety, also bear their share of responsibility for the immense suffering in besieged areas. And those of you with influence on the parties can demand it stops – I ask you to do so. Now.

Mr. President,

The indiscriminate use of weapons on civilians, residential areas, aid supply routes, as well as civilian infrastructure protected under international law continues – outrageously - with total impunity. Over the last few weeks alone, hundreds of civilians have been killed or injured in direct or indiscriminate attacks by all parties, due to the continued use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including through barrel bombs and other aerial weapons, shelling and car bombs.

For example, on 12 January, reports indicate that airstrikes on Ma'ret An-Nu'man city in rural Idleb killed 33 people, while airstrikes on Sarmada town in northern Idleb reportedly killed 29 persons on the same day. In Madimayet, Rural Damascus, at least five people were killed and 25 more injured when two mortars landed in the city centre on 23 January. Meanwhile, a recent ISIL offensive on besieged Deir-ez-Zor city has reportedly resulted in the death of large numbers of civilians and we also remain extremely concerned about the unverified reports of deaths related to severe malnutrition in the city.

Attacks on hospitals and schools continue unabated, with grave repercussions for all civilians, including the two million children out of school. In 2015, according to UNICEF, some 35 schools were attacked in 2015, with one in four schools closed, damaged or destroyed. Meanwhile, Physicians for Human Rights documented at least 112 attacks on medical facilities – an average of one every three days; as well as the death of 107 medical personnel last year.

Mr. President,

We have asked this Council repeatedly to demand that the parties to the conflict facilitate unhindered, unconditional, and sustained access across Syria, but this is simply not happening. Active conflict and insecurity are limiting factors, but all parties to the conflict continue to deliberately delay or obstruct the delivery of aid. While we continue to do everything in our power to press the parties, and influential stakeholders, to reach people in need across Syria, restrictions on aid delivery remain a routine and systematic occurrence.

Mr. President,

Despite our persistent and unrelenting efforts, our ability to access hard-to-reach and besieged locations remains severely hampered by the pitiful approval rate for inter-agency convoys by the Syrian authorities. In 2015, just over 10 per cent of the 113 requests for inter-agency convoys

resulted in the delivery of much needed humanitarian and life-saving assistance. A further 10 per cent were approved in principle, but could not proceed due to a lack of final approval, insecurity, or lack of agreement on safe passage. The United Nations placed some three per cent of requests on hold due to insecurity. And, almost 75 per cent of requests went unanswered by the Government of Syria. Such inaction is simply unacceptable for a Member State of the United Nations and signatory of the United Nations Charter.

The impact on the ground is tangible: in 2013, we reached some 2.9 million people through the inter-agency convoy mechanism, but only 620,000 this past year.

On 11 January, the United Nations requested approval from the Government of Syria to conduct inter-agency convoys to 46 besieged and hard-to-reach areas during the first quarter of 2016. As of 27 January, 16 days later, we have not received all of the necessary approvals for any of these requests. If all these convoys - which remain one of the most effective and efficient ways to reach people across conflict lines - could proceed, we could reach an estimated 1.7 million people in need today who are subjected to unnecessary and avoidable suffering due to the parties' indifference to fulfilling their basic international legal obligations.

Mr. President,

We are in a race against time. More and more people are slipping out of our reach every day as the conflict intensifies and battle lines tighten. In 2015, the UN only delivered humanitarian assistance to less than 10 per cent of people in hard to reach areas and only around one per cent in besieged areas. From our side, the United Nations remains committed to the safe delivery of neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian aid to all people directly affected by the fighting, based on need and vulnerability – never on political considerations. We stand ready to scale up assistance as soon as security conditions and more sustainable access allow. Resources are also vital, and I encourage all Member States to pledge generously at the upcoming London Conference on 4 February for the desperate people inside Syria, and for those who have fled into the neighbouring countries. The UN and its partners will only be able to do our job the best way possible when we are fully resourced.

Mr. President,

At the same time, this Council and Member States with influence must take further steps to ensure that the parties comply with their obligations under international law and the demands of the Council in resolution 2139. Specifically, this will require urgent measures now to ensure that the parties:

1. Stop targeting civilians, as well as civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities, schools, and other infrastructure and services which people depend upon for their survival, including targeted or indiscriminate attacks, as well as the use of explosive weapons or landmines in populated areas, at all times.
2. Facilitate full, unhindered, unconditional and sustained access to all people in need, including in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, for all types of assistance, including medical and surgical supplies. This must include, for example, immediate approval of the outstanding requests for inter-agency cross-line convoys by the Syrian authorities. Non-state armed groups, and listed terrorist groups, must also facilitate the deliveries they are preventing.

3. Allow freedom of movement for civilians, of all ages, to enter and exit besieged and hard-to-reach areas in safety and dignity, and permit the immediate medical evacuation of sick and wounded patients to a safe place for treatment.

Mr. President,

Even with the worsening situation and continued access challenges, humanitarian workers in Syria continue to stay and deliver aid often at great personal risk. Humanitarian organizations - UN and non-UN - are dedicating unprecedented resources and efforts to reach Syrians in need. Together, we have delivered aid to millions of people in 2015, including food assistance to nearly 6 million people per month; health assistance to almost 16 million people; 6.7 million with water, sanitation and hygiene support; and 4.8 million with basic household items.

I salute the efforts of the thousands of - mostly Syrian - staff and volunteers of the United Nations; the Syrian Arab Red Crescent; the NGOs; the first responders; and the staff of hospitals and clinics throughout the country who carry out their duties day after day, in the face of political pressure and, in some cases, violence and intimidation from the parties to the conflict. I remind this Council that each day, the United Nations and its partners are served by humanitarian heroes: Women and men who are willing to risk their lives leading convoys into conflict zones to reach the people who are so desperately in need. We should all be inspired by their example and we should all salute them. The failure in Syria is a political failure, most definitely not a failure on the part of these brave women and men and the humanitarian organisations that they represent.

I especially pay tribute to the 82 colleagues who have lost their lives in the line of duty, including an international NGO staff member, killed by an improvised explosive device in Idlib just two days ago.

Mr. President,

Let me be clear: the continued suffering of the people in Syria cannot be blamed on humanitarian organizations and staff; rather, it is the failure of both the parties and the international community that have allowed this conflict to continue for far too long. And try as we may, humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political action. The only solution is through political dialogue that reduces and ultimately ends the violence. The key stakeholders in the Syria crisis must do what has never been done up to this point and put people before politics.

On the eve of further political talks, it is my hope, and the hope of all humanitarians, that the key stakeholders finally take the bold, unselfish and courageous decisions necessary to bring an end to this ruinous war and the unimaginable suffering of the Syrian people.

Over the last 5 years, this Council has demonstrated that – when there is political will and a unity of purpose - it is capable of reaching agreement and taking decisive action to deal with the challenges of the conflict in Syria. You have taken action on chemical weapons in Syria. You have authorised cross-border humanitarian assistance. And you have taken action recently to launch a political process.

But for the millions of people trapped under-siege, malnourished and lacking basic supplies, this Council has simply not done enough. We have left those people with no hope. They believe that the world has forgotten them.

As this conflict approaches its sixth year, now is the time for those Council members with influence on the parties to put their differences aside and come together – at the most senior political levels – to find ways to improve access to the millions of Syrians that remain trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The Syrian people cannot wait any longer.

Thank you.