

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and Emergency Relief
Coordinator Stephen O'Brien remarks to NATO Deputies Committee**

Brussels, 28 November 2016

As delivered

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here today to discuss the importance of the protection of civilians – including the forcibly displaced - in today's crises.

I thank in particular Secretary General Stoltenberg for his high level engagement with the United Nations and Assistant Secretary General Alvargonzález for taking NATO-OCHA relations forward.

Certainly I think I should start by commending NATO for its continued engagement with humanitarian actors, and, in particular, for the relationship that has evolved with OCHA.

OCHA and NATO have a strong history of civil-military coordination, going back well over a decade. This relationship was strengthened during the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, when NATO deployed military forces in support of the humanitarian effort, and in Afghanistan where OCHA and ISAF forces maintained an open and substantive dialogue, as well as during the Libyan crisis, where OCHA and NATO exchanged liaison officers to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers operating inside Libya. The relationship has continued to strengthen – both in headquarters and equally important if not more, in the field.

Over the years, OCHA and NATO have worked together to better prepare for future crises – through joint training and exercises; providing input to doctrine and policies; and by maintaining dialogue and sharing lessons learned. This has resulted in improving civil-military relationships and has enhanced coordination and our common understanding when we find ourselves operating in the same geographic space. It has also helped to improve the understanding of the specific roles, responsibilities and capabilities of each actor.

I certainly look forward to furthering our dialogue, information-sharing and exchange of lessons learned for years to come, while continuing to maintain clear distinction between our humanitarian and military roles and activities. I encourage NATO to continue to engage with us and other humanitarian actors. Today is a testament to that.

We gather here at a time of unprecedented global suffering and fear. The scale of humanitarian deprivation today is greater than at any time since the United Nations was founded:

A record 130 million people are now dependent on the United Nations tonight and our many partners for protection and survival.

More than 65 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes as they flee violence or persecution. Of those, 40 million are internally displaced. Half of the displaced are children. Many unaccompanied minors are the face of displaced people.

These figures are truly staggering. Trying to safeguard lives, protect well-being and restore the dignity of the world's most vulnerable people is obviously at the heart of humanitarians' work. The ecosystem of actors coming together.

To do so, we called for US\$22.1 billion to assist the world's most vulnerable 96 million people this year, but just 46 per cent of this has come through near year-end.

There has never been a greater need to protect civilians in conflict. Today's wars are characterized by an extensive disregard of the protection of civilians by State and non-State actors. From Aleppo to Sana'a, from Juba to Kabul, women, children and men in conflict zones are deliberately or recklessly killed or maimed by barrel bombs, napalm, suicide bombs and sniper fire. They are tortured, sexually assaulted and abducted. Children are forcibly recruited and starved to death. This is all happening on our collective watch. We need to find ways to better prevent and end these violations and find a way to hold the perpetrators to account.

We welcome NATO's endorsement this year of an overarching protection of civilians' policy, which will integrate protection of civilians in the planning and conduct of NATO and NATO-led operations and missions. This policy is based on lessons learned over many years of operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Adopting this policy reaffirmed NATO's commitment to respect and uphold international humanitarian law and human rights law.

Through this policy, NATO will adopt measures to mitigate civilian harm in the planning and conduct of operations, as well as in the training of NATO and partner forces. Crucially, it will also promote dialogue and exchange of best practices and lessons learned with partner nations and organizations.

As the focal point within the UN system for humanitarian civil-military coordination, OCHA recognizes the high level of cooperation and mutual understanding between NATO and the humanitarian community through their interaction on the ground. This mutual understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities in emergencies needs to

be continuously revisited and reinforced, which serves the best interests of people in need.

I encourage NATO Member States to sustain this constructive dialogue with OCHA and the broader humanitarian community, as well as to seize this opportunity to incorporate protection of civilians' considerations into their own individual military policies, doctrine, education and training. Put civilian protection at the heart of ongoing and future operations, for the erosion of respect for international humanitarian law undercuts the very moral and legal foundations of our international order.

Among the civilians caught in the crossfire or directly targeted in today's conflicts are aid workers, who risk being attacked, killed, detained, kidnapped and injured as they try to reach people in need. One of the most deplorable trends in today's conflicts has been the surge in attacks impacting medical personnel, facilities, transport and equipment. I am sure you read about the attack on the aid convoy that took the lives of 20 humanitarian aid workers in Syria in September. In 2014 and 2015, 594 attacks against medical care were reported across 19 countries, killing 959 people and injuring 1,561, according to the World Health Organization.

These attacks not only single out the wounded and the sick, as well as those who valiantly put their own lives at risk to help them, but they also disrupt medical care provision long after fighting has stopped.

In Syria alone, where Physicians for Human Rights has documented 360 attacks on 250 medical facilities and more than 730 medical personnel killed, the entire healthcare system has been crippled, with almost half of health clinics and hospitals not fully functioning. In eastern Aleppo, I can tell you there are barely any functional hospitals left.

Many of these attacks may amount to war crimes. Hospitals and health clinics are sanctuaries under international law and all fighting parties, whether state or non-state, are bound by an obligation to respect and protect medical workers and facilities, as well as the wounded and the sick.

The UN has repeatedly demanded an end to these attacks. We spelled out the actions required from Member States and warring parties in a briefing to the Security Council in September to prevent attacks from happening; to investigate alleged abuses; and to follow through and ensure accountability when violations occur. UN and humanitarian organizations will support these actions through training, raising awareness, data collection and analysis.

For our part, OCHA will be glad to assist NATO in addressing the protection of medical care and mitigating the humanitarian consequences of hostilities as it rolls out its protection of civilians' policy. The United Nations Secretary-General's recommendations on the protection of medical care in armed conflict, recently transmitted to the Security Council, are very much in line with this policy and provide valuable suggestions to further develop certain aspects.

I will now turn to if I may some of the pressing protection and humanitarian challenges that we currently face in **Syria, Afghanistan, Libya and the Ukraine.**

As the senseless conflict continues in **Syria**, the world's worst humanitarian crisis continues to grow. Some 13.5 million people need life-saving assistance and protection across the country; 11.3 million of them are forcibly displaced. We are particularly concerned for the almost one million people who are besieged, including 275,000 people in eastern Aleppo, and the further 4.5 million in hard-to-reach areas, all of whom desperately need food, clean water, and medicine. Fighting parties – particularly the Syrian Government and its backers – continually block our access to these people through bureaucratic and other impediments. The UN has developed a four-pronged plan to evacuate people in urgent need, bring in medical supplies, food, and rotate medical personnel. Support of this plan is critical to save lives. We call on all with leverage, to influence warring parties in Syria to allow aid in, in line with the laws of war. But ultimately only a political solution will deliver civilians from this barbaric violence and this medieval practice of siege.

An upsurge in violence in **Afghanistan** this year has displaced a further half a million people bring the total displaced to one million, and caused 8397 casualties this year alone – one third of them children. We are greatly concerned about the increase in civilian casualties attributed to pro-Government forces. Migration is a strong indicator of Afghans' fragility: Afghans represent 14 per cent of the over 330,000 migrant or asylum-seeker arrivals in Europe in 2016.

Once a middle-income country, 40 per cent of people in **Libya** – or 2.4 million in total – now depend on aid to survive. A breakdown in law and order has left Libyans in fear of abduction, killing, arbitrary detention, and forced recruitment of children. The economy continues to deteriorate amid the political quagmire, while health care has ground to a halt. Eighty per cent of health workers have fled the country and most facilities have shut down. Many desperate migrants and asylum seekers attempt the dangerous crossing to Europe from Libya, with 3,649 dying this year alone.

In **Iraq**, even before the Mosul offensive, the humanitarian crisis was one of the most complex in the world, with 3.1 million people internally displaced and 10 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. As the military operation to recapture Mosul continues, concerns remain very high for those still inside the city. Reports of atrocities committed by ISIL against civilians are received daily. Adherence to international humanitarian law, and ensuring the safety of civilians is central to all military action, is of utmost importance.

And finally to **Ukraine**, which is approaching its fourth year of conflict in the east, affecting 3.7 million people, 2.7 million of them beyond Government control. Civilian deaths and injuries continue to mount as does the damage to houses, hospitals, schools and infrastructure. While aid deliveries continue, they are hampered by bureaucratic impediments and insecurity. Despite this, and an appeal that is just 29 per cent funded, aid workers reached 80 per cent of people in need in Government-controlled areas this year.

These and other conflicts have driven more people out of their homes since the Second World War. We welcome NATO's continued efforts to rescue migrants and asylum-seekers in distress in the Mediterranean through its Maritime Group – thank you. NATO must remain focused on the humanitarian objective of these rescue efforts, in compliance with international law, so that the current political climate does not lead to the return of rescued migrants and asylum-seekers into unsafe regions.

Ultimately, political solutions are integral to bringing about lasting peace in each of these crises.

We must also collectively shift our lens to put protection at the heart of our response. In so doing, we must recognize that vulnerable people, including the 65 million people who are forcibly displaced, require not just quick-fix humanitarian solutions but long-term political, development, socio-economic support and psycho-social support. This is the only route for vulnerable people to re-attain self-sufficiency, dignity and normalcy in their lives so they can be agents for their own futures. This was an integral part of the World Humanitarian Summit.

I look forward to sustaining our constructive dialogue to produce meaningful and lasting changes for the most vulnerable people. We can all be advocates for affected people by pulling together to ensure that no one is left behind.