

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

**Statement to the Security Council on Syria**  
**New York, 24 February 2016**

*As delivered*

Mr. President,

Next month, we will mark a grim anniversary: the brutal conflict will have torn Syria apart for five long years. It has been a relentless period of violence and destruction. The Syrian people have seen their country reduced to rubble, loved ones killed or injured, and millions of people displaced, either inside the country or in the region and beyond. They have suffered far too much and for far too long. The international community watched on as Syria became one of the largest and most destructive crises of our times, with the majority of the population – some 13.5 million people – in dire need of protection and humanitarian assistance.

The announcement by the chairs of the International Syria Support Group, the United States and the Russian Federation, of a nationwide cessation of hostilities scheduled to come into effect this weekend is a welcome development and a long-awaited signal of hope to the Syrian people. I echo the call of the Secretary-General for the parties to abide by the terms of the agreement to bring about an immediate reduction in violence as a first step towards a more durable ceasefire and to create the conditions necessary for an increase in humanitarian aid.

Mr. President,

I would like to take this opportunity to update the Council in detail on the most up to date information on humanitarian access.

As of 17 February, United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoys have reached the following towns as part of the Four Towns agreement:

- Madaya: 62 trucks reaching 40,000 beneficiaries
- Zabadani: three trucks reaching 1,000 beneficiaries
- Foah and Kefraya: 18 trucks reaching 20,000 beneficiaries

The convoys have proceeded without any major security incident. Although there have been delays in delivery as parties disagree over the terms of the agreement.

The second and last part of the deliveries is tentatively planned for 28<sup>th</sup> of February. The United Nations have supplies ready to be loaded and delivered. Facilitation by all parties – including the relevant letters from the Government of Syria – must be provided.

As part of the agreements facilitated through discussions in Munich earlier this month, we have been able to deliver 62 trucks in Madimayet reaching 40,000 people. There is another convoy planned to Madimayet – this must happen this week. Again this requires facilitation by all parties, including the relevant letters from the Government.

Despite these achievements, the process of delivery has not been straightforward. For example, the second Madimayet convoy left the warehouse on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February at 8pm local time. By Tuesday at 1am local time, we still had trucks waiting outside the checkpoint to enter the town. Brave and dedicated humanitarian workers slept in trucks, in adverse weather, waiting patiently to get help to the people that needed it.

Eventually, supplies were delivered and the team worked through the night to unload the supplies. Their bravery and commitment is humbling and I salute them all.

I would like to remind the Council that Madimayet is a mere 15-20 minute drive from central Damascus. There is no reason why this mission should take over 48 hours to reach the people that need help. It is a clear violation of the safe, unhindered, unimpeded access that this Council has continually called for through its resolutions and other statements.

Finally, in Kafr Batna in Eastern Ghouta, 15 trucks delivered assistance to 10,000 people. Again, this was not without complications: My team received approval from the Government at 5.30pm on 21st February to deliver assistance to over 44,000 people in several towns in Eastern Ghouta. After extensive negotiations, the UN team finally departed in the afternoon on the 23 February. And was only actually able to deliver to one town: Kafr Batna. The date of the next convoy is yet to be approved. Again, I insist on immediate approval to allow these convoys to deliver.

We need immediate approval to the next round of convoys which will deliver to Eastern Ghouta, Homs, Aleppo and southern Syria.

Mr President,

Health supplies for some 30,000 people have been denied for the convoys by the Ministry of Health. The Resident Coordinator will submit an official request to the Government for all medical items that were removed to be included in future convoys.

The Resident Coordinator is also putting together a proposal to the Government of Syria to reduce the number of procedures and the length of time needed to have inter-agency convoys move. Humanitarian operations cannot continue to be bogged down by unnecessary and unacceptable restrictions, obstructions and deliberate delays that are costing people their lives. The number, scope and complexity of bureaucratic and other obstacles that are placed in the path of simple aid deliveries are staggering. To move a single truck, United Nations teams on the ground need to acquire multiple layers of approvals from officials at various different levels, necessitating repeated rounds of negotiations over everything from the target location, amount and type of aid supplies, date, time and the route to take. When approvals are forthcoming, they

are often not respected or adequately implemented. In order for people in dire need to receive the assistance they so desperately require, the system must be urgently simplified.

Mr President,

The United Nations has also begun to use airdrops as a means of humanitarian delivery in Syria. Although there are a number of operational risks associated with airdrops, we recognise that there are benefits to this approach in some areas of Syria as a last resort.

Earlier this morning, a WFP plane dropped the first cargo of 21 tonnes of items into Deir Ezzor. We have received initial reports from the SARC team on the ground that pallets have landed in the target area as planned.

In summary, the United Nations and its partners have reached 110,000 people in besieged areas. We have approval to reach a further 230,000 people, including through the airdrops in Deir Ezzor. But we are still waiting for approval an additional 170,000.

We expect those approvals to happen immediately.

More broadly, the use of siege and starvation as a method of war must cease immediately. The main responsibility for doing so rests with parties maintaining the sieges, but it is shared by those that put civilians in harm's way by using them as shields for military activities in besieged areas.

Mr President,

I cannot emphasize enough how high the stakes are at this moment in the conflict. The Syrian people – who are rightly sceptical of the international community's desire and ability to bring about an end to this hideous war after years of inaction – need to see an immediate difference in their daily lives on the ground because, up till this point, it is they who continue to bear the brunt of this crisis as violence has become more widespread, systematic and extreme. Since the start of the year, thousands of civilians have been killed, injured or displaced as a result of airstrikes, barrel bombs, shelling, mortars, rockets, car bombs, improvised explosive devices, and suicide attacks day after day right across the country.

This month alone, it is estimated that several hundred people have been killed and over 70,000 displaced due to intense aerial bombardment in Aleppo Governorate. Heavy fighting and aerial bombardment also continued in other parts of the country, including parts of Idlib, Homs, Rural Damascus and Dar'a. All too often this included attacks on civilian infrastructure and basic services – including medical facilities, schools, bakeries, places of worship and IDP camps, with a devastating impact on hundreds of thousands of civilians. On 15 February, on one single day, seven health care facilities were attacked in Idlib, Aleppo and Dar'a, reportedly by Government and allied forces. Numerous civilians, including medical staff, were killed and injured and the facilities largely destroyed. In Idlib alone, it is estimated that some 40,000 people will be left without access to medical services as a result.

Designated terrorist groups have similarly continued their indiscriminate attacks on civilian-populated areas. A few days ago, car bomb attacks claimed by ISIL reportedly killed over 155 people in Damascus and Homs city. In January, similar attacks in the same locations killed dozens more. Meanwhile, non-state armed groups continued their shelling on populated-areas of Damascus, killing and injuring many civilians over the last weeks.

Mr. President,

It is hard to believe that this conflict can be resolved as long as there continues to be a complete absence of protection for civilians. The agreement on cessation of hostilities must finally and unequivocally produce what this Council's resolutions and the basic tenets and obligations under international law could not achieve so far: an immediate end to all targeted or indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, and enhanced protection of civilians. Enough is enough. This brutality must be brought to an end.

Mr. President,

Despite the intensified fighting, the United Nations and its partners have continued to scale up assistance to people in need, albeit at great personal risk. Last month, the United Nations and its partners reached millions of people in need with assistance through all available routes. The World Food Programme, for example, delivered food for 3.6 million people; UNICEF provided water, sanitation and hygiene supplies for over 2 million people, and WHO delivered nearly 660,000 treatments.

This month, significant amount of supplies were delivered through cross-border operations authorized by this Council. During the first three weeks of February, food assistance reached some 960,000 people, representing a 48 per cent increase compared to the same period in January. Health supplies were also delivered for some 300,000 people in February. Large multi-truck convoys are crossing the three border crossings of Bab al-Salam, Bab al- Hawa and Ar Ramtha on a nearly daily basis. We will continue to stay and deliver, but we do remain concerned about the impact of fighting and insecurity on humanitarian access and operational space, in particular to eastern Aleppo city. This fragile access to people in need must be safeguarded at all cost.

Mr. President,

Let me be frank. While the United Nations and its partners are ready to take advantage of any opportunity to reach people in need, granting access should never be dependent on political negotiations or ad hoc deals on the ground. Protecting civilians and facilitating humanitarian assistance are legal obligations that are incumbent on all parties to the conflict at all times and for all types of assistance. It is a fundamental and irrefutable tenet of international humanitarian law and it must be respected.

In that regard, I once again call upon the Government of Syria to urgently approve the over 40 outstanding requests for inter-agency convoys to deliver assistance to hard-to-reach and

besieged areas. I also call upon non-State armed groups and listed terrorist groups to fulfil their obligations.

Mr. President,

In the Syrian conflict, there are no winners; everyone is losing. But the highest price is paid by Syrian men, women and children who are witnessing their country, their homes and their families being torn apart. This war has to end. Much as we try, the delivery of humanitarian assistance can only address the symptoms, not the root causes. The international community and the parties to the conflict must seize the momentum created around the nationwide cessation of hostilities to bring a political solution to the crisis. I cannot stress enough that we must not let this opportunity pass. We cannot take away this glimmer of hope from the people that need it the most.

Thank you.