



Security Council

Seventy-fifth year

Provisional

8707th meeting

Wednesday, 29 January 2020, 10 a.m.

New York

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Dang	(Viet Nam)
<i>Members:</i>	Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
	China	Mr. Zhang Jun
	Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
	Estonia	Mr. Jürgenson
	France	Mrs. Gueguen
	Germany	Mr. Heusgen
	Indonesia	Mr. Syihab
	Niger	Mr. Abarry
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Ms. King
	South Africa	Ms. Goolab
	Tunisia	Mr. Baati
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Allen
	United States of America	Ms. Norman-Chalet

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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20-02121 (E)



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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: Today I want, first, to express my alarm about the dire and deteriorating humanitarian situation affecting women and children, in particular in the north-west of Syria owing to the intense bombing, shelling and other fighting that we are all seeing; secondly, to update the Security Council with regard to the humanitarian response in the north-east following the adoption of resolution 2504 (2020); thirdly, to update the Council on the situation in Rukban; and, fourthly, to draw attention to the impact of economic challenges on the humanitarian suffering in Syria.

First, hostilities have escalated in recent days in the Idlib area, particularly around Maarat Al-Numan, Saraqib and western Aleppo. The fighting in those areas appears to be more intense than anything that we have seen in the past year. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet, has said, civilians continue to be subject to intense bombing and shelling. On 11 January, at least 20 civilians were reportedly killed in air strikes in Idlib. On 21 January, eight civilians were reportedly killed in Kafr Taal, in western Aleppo, after an air strike struck near their home. Overall, in the week from 15 to 23 January, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented incidents in which at least 81 civilians, most of them women and children, were killed as a result of air and ground-based strikes. That total is in addition to the more than 1,500

civilian deaths that OHCHR has verified since the escalation began in late April.

The most alarming reports have come from southern Idlib, where hundreds of air strikes by the Government of Syria and its allies have been concentrated. Meanwhile, non-State armed groups continue to shell Aleppo city, killing or injuring dozens of civilians. Routes to the north and west of Saraqib, including around Ariha and other locations along the M4 highway, are clogged with vehicles as people seek to flee the bombing and the front lines in search of safety. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are at risk and are therefore running away.

Most of the affected people — more than 99 per cent — have been moving from southern Idlib to other locations in non-Government-controlled areas. Our assessment is that at least 20,000 people have moved in the past two days. Some 115,000 left in the last week. Nearly 390,000 have fled in the past two months. Many families are moving multiple times. They arrive in a place thought to be safe, only for the bombs to follow, so they are then forced to move again. That cycle is all too familiar in north-west Syria. On 12 January, Turkey and the Russian Federation announced a ceasefire, but it did not hold. The Government of Syria opened three crossing points to facilitate the movement of civilians into Government-controlled areas. Initial reports from the Russian Federation suggest that 400 civilians crossed through those crossing points.

The violence in north-west Syria is deplorable. As High Commissioner Bachelet warned,

“[w]omen, men and children simply carrying out everyday activities at home, the workplace, in markets and at schools are being killed and maimed in senseless violence.”

It is imperative that all parties agree to an immediate cessation of hostilities in and around the Idlib de-escalation zone.

Amid the ongoing fighting, humanitarian organizations have provided food assistance for more than 1.4 million civilians and health supplies to treat almost 200,000 people in recent weeks. That has all come in through the cross-border operation, as reauthorized under resolution 2504 (2020). That remains the only way to assist the more than 2.8 million people in need in north-west Syria.

Efforts by humanitarian organizations within Syria to provide cross-line assistance, including those by the

Syrian Arab Red Crescent — with which I discussed the issues last week and whose work I continue to support — have not yet been facilitated by the parties in control. The cross-border humanitarian operations have staved off a massive humanitarian catastrophe in the north-west, but let us make no mistake about it: civilians are still suffering terribly.

Under current conditions, humanitarian responders do not have the capacity to meet the level of need that we are seeing. We are receiving reports of tensions mounting because of the inadequate humanitarian response. Families recently displaced and currently sheltering on roadsides, under thin sheets of plastic, in makeshift shelters or in unfinished buildings have been making desperate appeals for more support.

I talked to Syrians in Idlib again last week. Other United Nations staff continuously have similar conversations. People feel increasingly under siege as the bombardment follows them from place to place. They are traumatized, and they feel totally abandoned by the world. They do not understand why the Council is unable to stop the carnage among a civilian population trapped in a war zone. Their message to those present is essentially the same one I relayed when I briefed the Council on 30 July: “[w]e are afraid. Please help us. Make it stop.” (*S/PV.8589*, p. 5).

The most urgent need is to protect the civilian population and scale up the humanitarian response. In order for that to be possible, I call on all parties to facilitate safe and unhindered access for humanitarian workers and supplies to address civilians’ essential needs. Humanitarian organizations are also trying to help civilians get out of harm’s way. On 25 January, non-governmental organizations helped relocate 1,800 civilians who had asked for help to move to areas under less imminent threat. Following negotiations with the United Nations, the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic has provided assistance with a “humanitarian pause” along specific routes to facilitate the safe passage of civilians and humanitarian staff. Such life-saving operations are necessary and of some value, but, fundamentally, they underscore the basic requirement, which is for the fighting to stop.

Secondly, the humanitarian situation in the north-east remains difficult. Some 70,000 people are still displaced following the military operations that we saw in October. An additional 90,000 people are living in

camps for internally displaced persons, including more than 66,000 in the Al-Hol camp. Those vulnerable populations are among the 1.8 million people in the north-east who need humanitarian assistance. An average of 850,000 people in need received assistance on a monthly basis in 2019 from within Syria, and that number increased significantly during the course of the year.

Nonetheless, with the removal of the Al-Yarubiyah crossing point, the World Health Organization forecasts a reduction in the medical services available and a growing shortfall of medical supplies. Some 400,000 medical items planned for delivery are stuck on trucks in Iraq and unable to cross. The Secretary-General has asked members of the Council for their support in reaching agreement for those items to be brought in. But as of today they remain in Iraq.

The United Nations continues to advocate with all stakeholders, including the Government of Syria, to ensure reliable and adequate supply lines and humanitarian capacity in the north-east. In that regard, an agreement among the relevant parties to reopen the M4 highway remains crucial. No United Nations convoys containing medical supplies have gone from Damascus to the north-east this month. There were three airlifts in December; there have been none so far in January. In the so-called Operation Peace Spring area, a cross-line assessment mission to Ras Al-Ayn originally planned for earlier this month has not yet materialized due to conditions imposed by all parties regarding the composition of the mission.

Experienced United Nations humanitarian staff are not surprised by any of that. The difficulty of crossing lines with essential aid, or moving goods and staff through contested areas, is something that we have become all too familiar with over the course of the nine years of the conflict. As requested in resolution 2504 (2020), the Secretary-General will report to the Council by the end of February on the feasibility of using alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reaches people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes and in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Thirdly, turning to Rukban, based on available estimates, nearly 20,000 people, some 50 per cent of

the population, left the Rukban camp in recent months. Reports indicate that several thousand more people still in Rukban wish to leave. Efforts by the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to facilitate voluntary departures have not been successful. In the meantime, the United Nations continues to advocate for the relevant parties to find durable solutions for all Rukban residents.

Fourthly, the economic situation in Syria poses increasing hardship on civilians across the country. In January, the Syrian pound continued to depreciate on the informal market. In some areas, it traded at more than 1,100 Syrian pounds to the United States dollar. That is half the value of six months ago. Syrians going out to buy food are finding fewer items in their markets, including those looking for basics such as rice, oil and sugar. Most available items cost more than ever — the price of bread, for example, has increased by more than 50 per cent in some areas in recent months.

Analysis suggests that food security in Syria worsened over the past year. Aid agencies try to ensure that the most vulnerable populations have adequate nutrition. The World Food Programme supports 4.5 million people across Syria on a monthly basis with general food assistance, and I am grateful for the voluntary contributions from donors that make that possible. But any further deterioration in the Syrian economy will leave even more people vulnerable and in need of assistance in the year ahead, so continued support from donors is vital.

Let me return, finally, to my initial point about north-west Syria. The parties to the conflict and those with influence must stop the fighting. Unless the current hostilities stop, we will see an even greater humanitarian catastrophe. I hope that the Council will take every step to avert that.

The President: I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those Council members wishing to make statements.

Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium): I will deliver this statement on the humanitarian situation in Syria on behalf of the co-penholders, Germany and Belgium.

I would like first to thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his important briefing today. We also extend our gratitude to all humanitarian and

medical workers throughout Syria, specifically to those operating in the dangerous environment of north-western Syria.

We are deeply concerned about the safety of the 4 million civilians in north-west Syria, especially following reports of ongoing air strikes and shelling. Over the last months, and in particular since last weekend, the ongoing military offensive has again intensified and is causing further immense human suffering, in the midst of winter. This continues to result in death, displacement and destruction, as described by Mark Lowcock just now. Once again, we would recall that there are humanitarian obligations that need to be observed and that there are rules to warfare.

Civilians have the right to be protected from the horror of war, and warring parties have the obligation to ensure their protection. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has reported that more than 1,500 civilians have lost their lives since April, when the current military escalations began. We condemn the loss of civilian lives. Since 1 December, an estimated 390,000 people have been displaced. In the past two weeks alone, 160,000 have been displaced. The vast majority, about 80 per cent, are women and children.

Since the beginning of this military offensive, hospitals, schools, markets and places where internally displaced persons are located have been destroyed by airstrikes; some of those places had been de-conflicted, meaning that the parties attacking them were well aware of their location. Again, over the past weeks, locations in Idlib where civilians sought shelter or care have been hit. Those attacks are unacceptable.

We, the co-penholders, condemn this violence and call for accountability for those responsible. In this regard, we support the work of the board of inquiry as well as that of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria.

Once again, we call for an immediate cessation of hostilities. We condemn the attacks perpetrated by Security Council-designated terrorist groups; however, as stated earlier, counter-terrorism efforts can never absolve parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction and proportionality.

On 10 January, the Council prolonged the cross-border mechanism, ensuring the flow of humanitarian

aid to the people of Idlib. We said it then and we will say it again today: we were extremely disappointed at the fact that the Al-Yarubiyah crossing point could not be renewed owing to opposition by one Member State.

Al-Yarubiyah was an important crossing that was actively used. It enabled the flow of medical aid into the north-east of the country, with 1.4 million beneficiaries in 2019. Three weeks ago, there was no viable alternative to that crossing. The Council has tasked the Secretary General with looking into potential alternatives to that crossing point, and we look forward to the report that will be published in February.

In other parts of Syria, the situation also remains dire. In Al-Hol camp, more than 65,000 people continue to receive humanitarian assistance, yet the situation remains deeply concerning. In Rukban, several thousand people remain stuck in the camp, in a desperate situation. The United Nations and its partners must be able to help them leave in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner, or to provide assistance to those remaining in the camp.

Finally, resolution 2504 (2020) calls upon all parties to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2020. That resolution was endorsed by the Council and all its members just a few weeks ago. It is high time for all parties to the conflict, especially the Syrian authorities, to live up to that obligation, and we therefore call on all Member States to fully implement it as a priority.

Ms. Norman-Chalet (United States of America): I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing this morning.

Since the Council met last month (see S/PV.8694), the humanitarian crisis situation in Syria has significantly deteriorated, as we have seen and heard. The lives of millions of civilians are now at even greater risk, as the combined forces of the Al-Assad regime, Russia, the Iranian regime and Hizbullah escalate their offensive to cement a military, not a political end to the conflict in Syria.

Russia has denied principled humanitarian aid for those in need throughout Syria for more than eight years. Now, with China blindly following its lead, Russia has escalated its campaign to restrict humanitarian access in Syria through a cynical and politicized effort to undermine the cross-border resolution (resolution 2504 (2020)). The step taken by Russia and China on

10 January to drastically reduce aid delivery is part of a clear strategy to completely sever the cross-border lifeline on which 4 million people rely. We cannot let that happen. The Council must work with, not against, humanitarian partners on the most important task at hand: ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches the millions of civilians in need across Syria, including in the north-east, where more than 1 million lives hang in the balance.

The closure of the Al-Yarubiyah crossing halted approximately 40 per cent of United Nations medical equipment and supplies to civilians in north-east Syria. At Al-Hol camp, the amount of critical medical supplies was cut overnight by 60 to 70 per cent. Other items that routinely crossed Al-Yarubiyah included kits that help combat water-borne illnesses, supplies for child protection and educational activities that reach thousands of traumatized children, and life-saving nutrition services for tens of thousands of children and pregnant women. These entirely preventable cuts in aid confirm what we already know: there is not a single good reason for that border crossing to have ever been closed. The United States looks forward to the Secretary-General's report to the Council, which should include a clear and specific analysis of whether or not there are feasible alternatives to Al-Yarubiyah. We expect that the report will document the access restraints facing United Nations agencies and other humanitarians operating in the country.

There are those on the Council who question why United Nations aid cannot simply be delivered in a rapid, unhindered manner through Damascus. The answer to that is clear. The Al-Assad regime is using humanitarian aid as a weapon of collective punishment against Syrian civilians — a strategy that, sadly, is not new. Take for example the situation at the internally displaced persons camp in Rukban. It required enormous effort to convince Russia and the regime to agree to three humanitarian deliveries in the past 18 months. We cannot allow Rukban to serve as a model for how we deliver aid in Syria, where Russia and the regime time and again refuse, restrict and delay the delivery of life-saving aid to a population entirely reliant on humanitarian assistance. The Council should not accept such a bleak reality for the millions of Syrians counting on us to ease their suffering.

That brings me to another disturbing example of the Russians and their ally, the regime, knowingly exasperating humanitarian tragedy. As we have just

heard, in the past two days alone, as a result of the offensive in north-west Syria, 20,000 civilians were forced to flee their homes in Idlib and western Aleppo, due to a barrage of air strikes and artillery fire launched by the combined forces of the Al-Assad regime, Russia, the Iranian regime and Hizbullah. Those air strikes have continued unabated, striking more than 50 communities since 14 January and killing at least 50 civilians. Russia and the regime are writing their military strategy in Syrian blood.

The United States offers its full support to the United Nations board of inquiry mandated to investigate attacks that have struck United Nations and United Nations-supported facilities in north-west Syria, for which the regime and Russia are overwhelmingly responsible. We will continue to support the board of inquiry and its work and encourage all Member States to do the same. The United States remains eager to work with its partners in the Council to ensure unhindered humanitarian access to all Syrians, regardless of who controls the territory.

Mrs. Gueguen (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mark Lowcock for his briefing. As Mr. Lowcock said, our immediate priority is to do everything in our power to end the offensive under way in Idlib.

France strongly condemns the intense bombing by the regime's air force and its allies in Idlib governorate. The fight against terrorist groups cannot be used as a pretext for indiscriminate bombing, which primarily affects civilians. The hospital in Sarjeh and ambulances and infrastructure belonging to the White Helmets have all been the target of strikes. It is shocking and unacceptable that health facilities and schools remain the target of attacks, in breach of international humanitarian law. The report submitted on 16 January by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, documenting violations of children's rights in Syria (A/HRC/43/CRP.6), is telling. Government forces deliberately attack schools and use them for military purposes, thereby not only committing war crimes but also ruining the future of a generation deprived of education. Those responsible for such violations will be held accountable.

The worsening humanitarian crisis is extremely worrisome. Three million people, nearly 80 per cent of whom are women and children and nearly 400,000 people who have been displaced since early December,

are exposed to daily attacks by the regime and its allies. In that context, we must focus our efforts on three priority areas.

The first is immediate de-escalation. We call on the signatories to the Idlib ceasefire agreement — first and foremost Russia — to resume strict compliance with their commitments and ensure an effective ceasefire in the north-west, with a view to ending hostilities.

The second is the protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel, as well as civilian infrastructure. Respect for international humanitarian law is non-negotiable. The board of inquiry established by the Secretary-General to investigate the attacks in the north-west, which we fully support, must shed light on the incidents.

The third is ensuring safe and unhindered humanitarian access by ongoing cross-border assistance. France will continue to help the Syrian population. In that regard, an additional €5.27 million in emergency aid was made available at the end of last year for civilians in north-west Syria, via the United Nations Cross Border Humanitarian Fund, based in Gaziantep.

I would also like to return to the issue of the consequences of resolution 2504 (2020), on cross-border humanitarian aid. Make no mistake, as Mark Lowcock underscored earlier, the resolution, adopted by the Council on 10 January, which is essential for providing humanitarian assistance for 3 million people, has also seriously reduced the ability of the United Nations to provide medical aid and vital medicines to those in need in north-east Syria. The loading of eight to 10 World Health Organization trucks, whose convoy should have passed the Al-Yarubiyah crossing-point in mid-January, is on hold in Erbil. There is no reason that those medicines and trauma and surgical kits should not reach victims in urgent need across the border, from Iraq or from Damascus. It is a matter of life and death for them, and is a gross violation of the principle of the impartiality of humanitarian aid, which is unacceptable.

The Security Council's mandate to the Secretary-General to present alternatives by the end of February to allow for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including medicines, to north-east Syria is therefore essential. We call on everyone to shoulder their responsibility in taking a decision based on an objective analysis of the alternatives presented by the Secretary-

General. The parties, in particular the Syrian regime, must now ensure full, safe and unhindered access for humanitarian actors to people in need, wherever they may be. In addition, I wish to reiterate that we are disappointed about the fact that the mechanism was renewed for only six months, when humanitarian operations need predictability and stability for effective planning and operations. We must reconsider the relevance of returning to a one-year mandate when we renew the mechanism in July.

I will conclude by underscoring that the ongoing offensive in Idlib jeopardizes the quest for a negotiated political settlement to the crisis, although we all know that an inclusive and lasting political solution, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), is crucial for stabilizing Syria and ending civilian suffering. We will return to that key issue later today.

Mr. Allen (United Kingdom): I also thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing. He mentioned the experience of United Nations officers and humanitarian officials for more than nine long years in Syria. Through him, we send our thanks to them for the job they have to do in such terrible circumstances.

We are appalled by the significant escalation in the Syrian regime's and Russian violence in Idlib. We remain deeply disappointed that the 12 January ceasefire barely lasted a couple of days. The human cost of the military escalation is awful. Since 1 December 2019, more than 140 civilians have been killed by Russia and the regime. Since 29 April 2019, more than 1,500 civilians have been killed in north-west Syria, with approximately half of all casualties being women and children. More than 358,000 people have been displaced as a result of the escalation in violence, and the United Nations now anticipates the possible further displacement of another 500,000 people in front-line areas.

The population density within that ever-reducing pocket is already greater than in Gaza. The humanitarian system is overwhelmed. Those innocent civilians are in urgent need of food, shelter, water, health and winterization assistance. But we continue to see air strikes and shelling on civilian infrastructure. I remind all parties, including those around the table, yet again, of their obligation to comply with international humanitarian law.

On 11 January alone, 26 communities in Idlib were affected by air strikes. Targets included schools, hospitals and camps for internally displaced people.

As recently as three days ago, an air strike disabled Al-Eman hospital in Sarja. Having repeatedly called for scrutiny of such attacks, we once again welcome the Secretary-General's board of inquiry that is investigating some of the past attacks in Idlib. We call on the Secretary-General to make its findings public. Let me also restate our call for a full cessation of hostilities and a recommitment to the de-escalation agreement.

While all eyes are on the north-west, we must not neglect those in other parts of the country who are deliberately being denied humanitarian assistance. As we all know, because of the decision by China and Russia to veto a humanitarian draft resolution, the United Nations can no longer use the border crossings into the north-east and south of Syria. The Russian Ambassador argued that the crossing in north-east Syria was not needed because humanitarian assistance could be provided from Damascus. However, the truth is that the regime is not providing these people with the aid that they require, or allowing the United Nations to do so. It is not just the north-east — communities in former opposition-held territory, such as eastern Ghouta and eastern Aleppo, are not receiving regular needs-based, quality humanitarian assistance. The Syrian regime believes that those communities are not aligned with its own politics, and so it punishes them for their perceived disloyalty by preventing them from receiving food and medicine. Russia and China, having acted to prevent life-saving aid reaching those in need, should now act to ensure aid can be delivered. We look to the United Nations, including through the Secretary-General's upcoming report in February, to highlight the gaps and challenges in the humanitarian response and help us to find a solution so that aid can be delivered where it is needed.

The United Kingdom has long supported the provision of humanitarian aid to all of Syria, including the parts under the control of the Syrian authorities. Indeed, the United Kingdom has contributed over \$4 billion since 2012. I note that 60 per cent of all contributions to the United Nations humanitarian response plan in 2019 came from the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that aid is provided on a principled basis and is getting to those who most need it, wherever they may be.

The United Kingdom is grateful for the continued work of the United Nations to find a solution for the people of Rukban, in what remain extremely challenging

conditions. More needs to be done in order to ensure the safety of the remaining residents in Rukban and those who have been leaving to seek shelter elsewhere. There has been no humanitarian assistance to Rukban since the end of September, and then we were able to provide only one month's worth of supplies. We are also concerned about the fate of some who have left the camp voluntarily. The United Nations must have permanent and open-ended access to shelters in Homs and the final destination points of internally displaced persons from Rukban. That will ensure adequate monitoring and reporting on conditions, particularly on protection and human rights issues, and we would welcome the United Nations incorporating that into its regular reporting and keeping the Council apprised.

In conclusion, the humanitarian situation in Syria remains, as Mr. Lowcock said, dire and deteriorating. The situation in Idlib is particularly worrisome, as Russia and the regime bomb civilians in the area. I hope my Council colleagues will join me in calling for an immediate ceasefire there, reiterate the importance of cross-border aid and call on the regime and those allied to them to let the United Nations do its job to save lives.

Mr. Zhang Jun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): We listened attentively to the briefing by Under-Secretary-General Lowcock. At present, a large number of people in Syria remain in need of humanitarian assistance. At the same time, the grave political, economic, security and counter-terrorism situations are complex and closely related to the humanitarian situation. In order to resolve the humanitarian issues in the country, we must take all factors into consideration and adopt an integrated approach. In that regard, I would like to emphasize the following points.

First, while scaling up humanitarian assistance, we should work to meet the basic humanitarian needs and improve the living conditions of the Syrian people by lifting unilateral economic sanctions and supporting reconstruction projects in order to address both the symptoms and causes of the issue. The Syrian Government is actively working to rebuild housing, livelihoods and medical and educational facilities. Recently, Syria's first anti-cancer drug factory was completed in the capital city of Damascus, which demonstrates a commitment to resolving the shortage of medicine caused by unilateral sanctions.

Unilateral economic sanctions and insufficient funding for reconstruction are major challenges to

improving the humanitarian situation for civilians in Syria, who are suffering from a lack of fuel, food and medicine. That is an important aspect of the humanitarian issue in Syria. I hope that the current situation will be addressed in future humanitarian briefings by the Secretariat and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). China will actively participate in the Syrian reconstruction process under the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as providing Syria with humanitarian assistance within our means, helping to train more personnel for reconstruction and contributing to the strengthening of Syria's independent development capacity.

Secondly, the international community must work together to adopt unified criteria to combat all forms of terrorism and bring terrorists to justice in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions and international law. Humanitarian and security issues in Syria are intertwined, and the elimination of terrorist forces is a necessary condition for the restoration of peace in Syria. Terrorist forces currently occupy most of Idlib, threatening the security and safety of civilians, destroying infrastructure and exacerbating the humanitarian situation, and must be resolutely fought against. The prominent issue of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and spillover effects thereof pose common challenges and threats to countries of origin, the countries concerned and the countries of the region, which must work together to tackle this scourge. According to relevant reports, in Al-Hol camp there are still cases where women are being used to provide financial support to terrorist organizations. It is important to be vigilant about various forms of terrorist support. The Secretariat should closely follow, collect and consolidate information relating to that issue and inform the Security Council in a timely manner.

Thirdly, humanitarian relief efforts should strictly comply with international law and basic norms of international relations, the Charter of the United Nations and General Assembly resolution 46/182. They should adhere to the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence while emphasizing a humanitarian nature and professionalism. They must also refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of the recipient country. Humanitarian assistance to Syria should respect and safeguard its sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and avoid politicizing humanitarian issues. The Syrian Government bears the primary responsibility for

improving the humanitarian situation in the country. OCHA should strengthen coordination with the Syrian Government and actively explore ways to increase the delivery of humanitarian assistance from within Syria, while maintaining openness and transparency and ensuring the Security Council is informed in a timely fashion. Cross-border humanitarian relief is a special relief mechanism adopted in specific circumstances. In the light of developments in Syria, the United Nations should proactively propose plans to evaluate it and make adjustments accordingly. In the search for alternatives, our priority should be to listen very carefully to the views of the Syrian Government and strengthen cooperation among all Syrian parties.

A political settlement is the fundamental way to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria. China supports the United Nations, particularly Special Envoy Pedersen, in adhering to the principle of a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process and in promoting a political solution that addresses the concerns of all parties.

In resolving the Syrian question, all parties should behave responsibly and constructively. The current humanitarian situation in Syria is the misfortune of the Syrian people, but it is also a misfortune for the entire international community. Just now, the representatives of the United States and the United Kingdom once again abused the platform of the Security Council. In their statements, they made unfounded accusations against China and other countries, which we strongly refute. I would like to emphasize that the accusations are totally groundless and unwarranted. As we all know, due to the sensitive nature of the issue of the humanitarian situation in Syria, the Security Council has conducted many rounds of consultations on the extension of the cross-border mechanism. However, owing to the failure to reach consensus, the Security Council has had to put the issue to a vote a few times. In order to avoid confrontation, China has always tried its best to seek middle ground, and we hope that we can find a down-to-earth solution. We have been communicating with all the parties concerned very closely, as I think the penholders can testify to as well.

After many rounds of consultations, we eventually found a solution. It may not be the most satisfactory to everybody, but it is the best way out of the situation at that moment, and we are very happy to have contributed to finding it. The role China played in the process has been acknowledged by Council members. Using this opportunity to accuse China is utterly unwarranted and

a manifestation of power politics. As I have just said, because of the divisions and differences on the issue of Syria, the Council has had to conduct consultations and put the issue to the vote many times, and I believe that every country is entitled to vote according to its own position. At the same time, we can see that the United States and the United Kingdom voted against the alternative draft resolution. Why do they expect other countries to vote with them? Do they think we are still in a period of colonialism and the whole world has to side with them? That time has long passed.

Furthermore, it is the United States and the United Kingdom that should take the primary responsibility with respect to the issue of Syria. China is not the problem. We are not promoting regime change in Syria; we have not bombed the country; we do not have a single soldier there; we have not occupied any oil fields or taken any assets from Syria. Therefore, the United States and the United Kingdom are not in a position to make accusations against China. They claim that they are defenders of humanitarian values, which is totally hypocritical. The entire world has recognized that hypocrisy. We hope that, on the issue of Syria, all can assume their responsibilities and avoid politicizing the humanitarian situation. We hope that the international community will make concerted efforts to find a political solution so that the Syrian people can enjoy their human rights and the humanitarian situation can improve. Making such wild accusations by abusing the Security Council will not be conducive to resolving the situation on the ground; they will only sow more discord. We hope that the representatives of the countries concerned will reflect deeply on that.

Ms. King (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines): We thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his vivid briefing.

It has been recognized repeatedly in different ways this morning that, for almost a decade, the people of Syria have had to endure the perils of war and the resulting effect of living through one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has seen. Like our fellow Council members, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines remains deeply concerned about the severity of the humanitarian situation.

Syria remains the largest refugee crisis in the world. Millions of Syrians have been forced to flee their homes and have become internally displaced, while millions more have left their homeland entirely. They are forced

to reside in extremely difficult conditions where access to basic needs, such as clean running water, is a daily struggle. For that reason, we cannot stress enough the need for safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access through the most optimal channels. We echo our support for resolution 2504 (2020), authorizing cross-border operations, having embraced the mechanism for the sake of human dignity. We look forward to receiving the Secretary-General's report on the feasibility of alternative modalities for the Al-Yarubiyah crossing by the end of February.

On the point of refugees and internally displaced persons, we must underscore that conditions should be cultivated within Syria to facilitate the safe, voluntary, well-informed and dignified return of nationals. Without stability, security and reconstruction, refugees and internally displaced persons are barred from embarking on the difficult journey of rebuilding their lives.

Hostilities continue to intensify, even in areas where ceasefire arrangements have been established. We call on the parties to exercise maximum restraint and to de-escalate and we strongly condemn attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, especially those that have caused disruptions in medical and education services. We also remind parties that operations aimed at eradicating the scourge of terrorism do not absolve them of their obligations under international law and that the fundamental principles of armed conflict must continue to be observed and respected. Accountability for acts committed in violation of international law is inextricably linked to lasting peace. It is therefore important that perpetrators be held responsible in order to prevent impunity and bolster confidence in justice. Accordingly, we welcome the board of inquiry established by the Secretary-General to investigate a series of incidents that have occurred in north-west Syria.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines appreciates that the humanitarian situation cannot be discussed independently of the political process. The conflict does not have a military solution and can be resolved only through a credible, balanced and inclusive political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. We emphasize the need for an inclusive and consultative process. We must make every effort to further dialogue with the Syrian Government on all decisions that concern the country with respect for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Such decisions should not be subject to the machinations of geopolitical interests and great-Power intrigue. Despite seemingly insurmountable challenges, the Syrian people continue to display an extraordinary resilience. It is our genuine hope that the Council's commitment to supporting the Syrian people will manifest itself in ending the conflict and ensuring a sustaining peace for Syria.

We have a burning responsibility to the Syrian people. We must help them, and we must make it stop.

Ms. Goolab (South Africa): I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Recent reports of an escalation of violence in the Idlib region of Syria and the resulting civilian casualties are of great concern to South Africa. That increase in violence has also forced the displacement of thousands of people since the beginning of 2020. Living under the constant threat of violence and displacement disproportionately affects the most vulnerable groups of society, including women, children, the elderly and those with disabilities.

South Africa calls for the utmost restraint, the de-escalation of hostilities and for all parties to adhere to their international human rights and international humanitarian law obligations with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. We once again urge all parties to abide by their commitments under the various ceasefire agreements that have been previously agreed to.

Armed groups must cease their activities, and State actors who have the ability to encourage those groups should impress upon them the need to abide by the ceasefire and comply with international law. While South Africa recognizes the right of States to counter terrorism, such actions should be in line with international human rights law and international humanitarian law obligations.

In order to address the prevailing humanitarian challenges in Syria, efforts must be geared towards facilitating humanitarian assistance. We commend the various humanitarian agencies and their personnel for continuing their essential work in challenging circumstances. Tens of thousands of people remain in camps in Syria. We have also taken note that many are seeking to leave those camps. We call on the relevant authorities to provide the necessary access to the United Nations and its partners to support those who wish to

leave, in line with the principles of a dignified, safe and voluntary return.

South Africa supported the adoption of resolution 2504 (2020) earlier this month, which extends the mandate of the cross-border humanitarian assistance programme. We note the upcoming report of the Secretary-General on his assessment of the impact of the closure of the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing for the provision of humanitarian assistance. It should be acknowledged that, for the comprehensive distribution of aid to all those in need, a cessation of hostilities and a ceasefire must be enacted.

South Africa is firm in its belief that the political and humanitarian situations in Syria cannot be addressed independently of one another. The continuation of violence and hostilities has a negative impact on the humanitarian situation, which in turn also affects political progress. Similarly, progress in the political sphere will support efforts towards ensuring that all Syrians are able to live in a safe, secure and prosperous environment free of violence.

In conclusion, South Africa remains committed to supporting the protection of the fundamental interests of the Syrian people and the maintenance of peace and stability in the Middle East in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Mr. Syihab (Indonesia): We thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his update on the humanitarian situation in Syria. We would also like to thank him for accommodating his schedule with the Security Council's on such short notice. The grim information that he just shared with us is indeed troubling.

The deteriorating humanitarian condition as a result of increased violence in north-west Syria would have been prevented, had all the relevant parties remained committed to their obligations in protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure in accordance with international humanitarian law.

My delegation believes that it is imperative for all parties with influence on the ground to ensure that the Syrian people are well protected. During the Council's briefing on the situation in the north-west in June 2019 (see S/PV.8553), my delegation emphasized that the Council needed to give the right answer when asked what would happen to the people in north-west Syria should

the violence to continue to escalate. It is frustrating to actually know the real answer to this question.

Since the resumption of hostilities, from April 2019 to 15 January this year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported approximately 1,500 civilian casualties in the Idlib de-escalation zone, including 293 women and 433 children. The number of people displaced, many of whom have been displaced multiple times, is also alarming. With camps overcrowded and the humanitarian response overstretched, concrete and sustainable actions are urgently needed. In that regard, my delegation wishes to underline the following three main points.

First, immediate humanitarian assistance — such as food, health-care services, shelter, water and sanitation, as well as winterization items — is urgently needed, not only by the people in north-west Syria but also in the north-east of the country. Many internally displaced persons in the overcrowded camps in those areas are in need of food in order to survive. Many displaced families are in need of sleeping bags and blankets to ensure that their children can survive another day during the extreme winter weather. We commend the tireless efforts of the United Nations and its humanitarian partners in addressing the urgent needs of millions of people in Syria.

Secondly, we note that the cross-border operations have continued to scale up during December and January, with more than 1,000 truckloads of humanitarian deliveries. The Council's decision to renew the cross-border mechanism with two crossing borders needs to be reviewed and assessed comprehensively, based on the actual information on the ground. Most important, it must be based on the needs of the Syrian people. We look forward to receiving by the end of February the report of the Secretary-General on the feasibility of using alternative modalities for the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing.

Lastly, safe, unimpeded and sustained access needs to be provided to the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to all requested areas, according to the United Nations comprehensive assessment of need.

Some have said that people are tired of hoping for peace in Syria. Obviously, there are reasons behind that. However, Indonesia fully believes that we should not tire of helping the Syrian people in need, and we

should not tire of increasing our efforts to alleviate their suffering.

Mr. Jürgenson (Estonia): First, I want to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his very thorough briefing on the difficult humanitarian situation in Syria.

We remain gravely concerned about the developments in the north-west of Syria. The military operations carried out by the Syrian army, and supported by the Russian Federation, have unleashed a mass exodus. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), over past two months more than 350,000 people have left their homes in the southern parts of Idlib. Most of them are now heading towards the Turkish border. Turkey is already the largest host country for Syrian refugees, with over 3.6 million Syrians residing there. As the Syrian Government consistently violates former ceasefire and de-escalation agreements, the pressure of displaced people will only grow further.

Taking these concerns into account, Estonia joins the humanitarian co-penholders Belgium and Germany in their calls for the establishment of an emergency humanitarian ceasefire in Idlib and across Syria. The fight against terrorism should not lead to the violation of human rights and dignity.

Regarding the situation in the north-east of Syria, initial reporting by OCHA indicates that there are serious concerns about the potential lack of health supplies in the area after the closure of the Al-Yarubiyah crossing earlier this month. Besides scarce aid, one of the immediate results of the closure of Al-Yarubiyah has been that the humanitarian organizations are increasingly looking to work through local partner networks. Essentially, if earlier the United Nations and Security Council had had more control over the movement of aid and goods into Syria, that is now decreasing. The help will always find the most direct way to those in need, the only difference being that we now have less information about it.

The challenges of the north-east are most visible in Al-Hol camp, where recent winter floods have caused substantial damage. Close to 3,000 tents had to be replaced in the aftermath of these heavy rains in recent months. Worsening living conditions have led to new tensions. These are highlighted by the fact, that in January alone, two murders and three attempts to kidnap children have been reported in Al-Hol camp. Similar

issues apply to the southern parts of Syria, despite getting less media attention. Waves of assassinations and kidnappings threaten renewed violence in the area.

Finally, the solution to the Syrian crisis has already been well-articulated in the resolution 2254 (2015). A nationwide ceasefire, followed by a meaningful political process, would enable the international community to engage with the Syrian authorities and bring on the reconstruction of the country full swing. Unfortunately, that road map to peace remains neglected by those in power in Damascus.

Mr. Baati (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his briefing and for his efforts at the head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Bringing an end to the violence and terrorism in north-western Syria is today an urgent necessity if we are to prevent the humanitarian catastrophe threatening 4 million people living in that region and to avoid hindering efforts to find a solution to the conflict through negotiation leading to security and stability in Syria.

My delegation is deeply concerned by the escalation of violence over the past few weeks in Idlib and neighbouring towns and by indications of renewed clashes in the region that are unprecedented in nature. In that regard, and given the humanitarian repercussions and suffering of the inhabitants of the region, Tunisia expresses its concern over the loss of dozens of lives among civilians and the increased exodus of people seeking shelter from the violence. We condemn attacks on civilians, whoever the perpetrator, including those committed by terrorist groups and their allies, such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other extremist jihadist factions. We call on all parties to respect their commitments under international humanitarian law and international law to ensure civilian protection at all times and guarantee assistance in a safe, unimpeded and sustained way so as to meet the needs of all.

We regret the violations of the ceasefire agreement concluded between Turkey and the Russian Federation on 19 January, particularly because the ceasefire — which lasted just a few days — allowed some displaced persons to return to their homes. We call on the guarantors to work to promote a lasting ceasefire in the region and to reduce tensions so as to

calm the overall situation until stability and security can be restored across sisterly Syria.

The short-term potential for breaking this current cycle of emergency humanitarian aid in Syria is very weak due to the lack of calm and the faltering political process. We believe that, despite their importance, de-escalation efforts in Idlib are only a temporary solution to the humanitarian crisis. We will not reach a lasting solution unless we find a practical, shared solution that excludes terrorist groups in Idlib and eliminates them from the region.

With regard to cross-border humanitarian assistance, I commend the solidarity of Syria's neighbours over the past few years through assistance provided to millions of people crossing Syria's borders or within the country, including through the United Nations cross-border assistance plan. Based on our experience in seeking to resolve the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Libya, we understand the burden this imposes on neighbouring countries and their societies.

My country's delegation notes the continued consultations under way within OCHA following the adoption of resolution 2504 (2020), on the continuation of cross-border assistance. Tunisia looks forward to the report of the Secretary-General, to be issued next month under that resolution, with respect to the possibility of using alternative routes and avoiding the Al-Yarubiyah crossing point.

Against that background, we believe that ending the system of cross-border humanitarian assistance will require a progressive approach, in full respect for Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, leading to the safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian assistance, pursuant to international law and the principles of humanitarian work.

Finally, the Syrian crisis is now entering its tenth year and the brotherly Syrian people are still facing indescribable suffering. My delegation reaffirms the fact that the solution cannot be a military one. The only possible way to bring an end to the suffering of the Syrian people is through a political approach, pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015), that responds to the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people to live in liberty and dignity and to maintain the unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria. That will promote security and stability in the region.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

The Dominican Republic remains concerned about the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. At the outset, we reiterate our regret at having been unable to achieve the complete renewal of the cross-border mechanism whereby millions of people receive food and health assistance. We reiterate that every humanitarian decision, in this and any other context, must be based solely on the needs of the population. Despite the urgent needs, most regrettably humanitarian action in the country continues to be politicized and apportioning blame seems to be the priority. That only serves to undermine the real capacity of the international community to fulfil its moral obligation to provide for and meet those needs in a constructive climate. It should be recalled that just as sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity are fundamental international principles, so too is the responsibility of States to protect their populations, not to cause suffering and to safeguard their livelihoods and well-being.

In north-western Syria, the ongoing hostilities are creating an atmosphere of insecurity for the civilian population, forcing them to leave their homes, without possessions, in search of protection and access to basic services. Unfortunately, not everyone has that possibility. Many remain in tents or makeshift facilities in a situation of complete helplessness. What would we say if we suddenly found ourselves facing one of those displaced by violence? Would we tell them that what we are doing is necessary to ensure their protection?

From any perspective, what is happening in north-west Syria is clearly a testament to the indifference and inability of all parties, directly and indirectly involved in this conflict, to take concrete measures to protect the civilian population. It is precisely for such situations that international humanitarian law exists. It exists to help parties to protect the life and dignity of the population.

The flagrant violations of international humanitarian law and the conventions on children, the disabled and human rights have turned the humanitarian situation in Syria into turmoil, in which the most affected are women and children. Not only have they paid the highest price in this conflict, but also we are forcing them to lose faith in organizations such as the United Nations, which is called upon to bring about a

world of peace and prosperity for all, based on the rule of law.

Calls for restraint, respect for ceasefire agreements and compliance with the laws of war seem to be falling on deaf ears. Despite their admirable resilience, the Syrian people cannot continue to be subjected to the levels of violence that still prevail. That is why we reiterate that only a political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015) and the genuine political will of all sides will make it possible to change, once and for all, the trajectory of this horrific conflict, which we believe must begin with the following measures. First, there must be an immediate cessation of hostilities and an assessment of the real impact of the partial renewal of the cross-border mechanism and the new reality on the ground needs to be taken into account. Secondly, in the same context, it is essential to ensure safe, ongoing and unhindered humanitarian access for all of Syria, particularly for the almost 400,000 newly displaced persons. The fate of those people is in the hands of us all.

Finally, the Dominican Republic reiterates its position that there is no justification for attacks on hospitals, schools and other civilian infrastructure and that no solution other than a political one can put an end to this conflict in order for Syria to follow the path of peace, prosperity and development.

Mr. Abarry (Niger) (*spoke in French*): Through you, Mr. President, I would like to convey my thanks to Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing. How can we not be concerned about the continued fighting between Government troops and armed groups in Idlib province, which, unfortunately, continues to drive civilians from their homes in this very cold weather. The 20,000 people displaced in the past few days must draw our attention.

We reiterate our appeal to the parties to the conflict to respect their obligations in terms of protection of civilians and to allow humanitarian workers access to those severely affected by the ongoing hostilities. The Niger commends the efforts of the humanitarian agencies in their daily work to provide assistance to those in need, which should be made possible throughout Syria;

We urge all stakeholders to commit to a ceasefire to give the resumption of dialogue a chance in the context of the political process. The first stage of that must be an end to the violence.

My delegation would like to reaffirm its support for the cross-border mechanism for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Syria, whose mandate we renewed on 10 January (see S/PV.8700). That aid is not being fully delivered. We must recognize that, and further efforts must be made. Moreover, that is why we eagerly await the report of the Secretary-General on that issue.

We must listen to the messages from the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs so as to respond in the best possible way to the calls for help from the thousands of women and children who are so badly in need of such assistance and are, I would say, in distress.

In conclusion, as I have said in the past, a united Security Council, particularly with regard to humanitarian matters, is an effective Council, one whose decisions take into account what is the most important, that is, life and the survival of millions of Syrians who are counting on us.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We listened carefully to the briefing by Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock but, clearly, he did not have time to stay and listen to us and the Syrian representative. That is a shame. I am sure that it would have been useful for him to hear what we have to say, and I hope that his colleagues will convey to him exactly what we have to say.

Despite the continuing trend towards stabilizing the situation in a large part of the territory, the return to Syria of a peaceful life and the restoration of the socioeconomic infrastructure, there still remain hotbeds of tension and the population needs humanitarian assistance. In that regard, we note the active participation of the representatives of the relevant United Nations bodies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and non-governmental humanitarian organizations in providing assistance to the population in coordination with the Syrian authorities.

The situation in territories that are not under the control of the Syrian Government remains extremely worrying — in Idlib, on the east bank of the Euphrates river and in the area around Al-Tanf. At the beginning of January, the Russian and Turkish forces again tried to establish a ceasefire in Idlib. However, radical groups led by the recognized terrorist organization Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham once again ignored that and continued

to shell positions of the Syrian forces and nearby towns, particularly Aleppo. The number of those attacks is as many as 60 incidents a day. Naturally, such armed provocations, which have already claimed dozens of lives and injured hundreds of civilians this month alone, cannot go unanswered. The Syrian Government forces have been forced to respond to the terrorist attacks, conduct limited operations to counteract the terrorist activity and mitigate the threats coming from Idlib.

Today, we have heard statements that duplicate one another about schools, hospitals, markets and internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps being bombed. We were given supposedly accurate figures for the number of people killed and injured. We have heard that before, word for word. I again wonder where that reliable data is coming from. Where were so many medical facilities that have already been bombed found? They now run into the dozens, if not hundreds, in Idlib province alone. The escalation in Idlib is due not to the operations of the Syrian forces but rather to the intentional provocations carried out by terrorists.

Three humanitarian corridors have been operationalized since 13 January to facilitate the withdrawal of civilians from the de-escalation zone. Temporary accommodation centres in the province of Hama have been prepared for persons without permanent residence. Unfortunately, terrorists continue to use the practice of human shields, holding civilians hostage and preventing them from escaping and shelling checkpoints. That is further proof of the position that we have repeatedly stated that the problem in Idlib cannot be resolved as long as it is overrun by terrorists who have been recognized as such by the Security Council.

The situation in the area beyond the Euphrates has improved, thanks in large part to the implementation of the Russian-Turkish memorandum of 22 October 2019. Regular Russian-Turkish patrols have been established on agreed border points. Moreover, Russian forces are undertaking energetic efforts to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, provide medical care to those in need and deliver food and basic necessities.

The most acute problem, in addition to Idlib, remains the humanitarian situation in the major refugee and IDP camps located in American-controlled areas: Rukban in the south and Al Hol in the north-east. The United Nations plan to evacuate the remaining residents of the camps has been delayed for five months due to the refusal of the fighters to give the necessary security

guarantees to United Nations personnel. Humanitarian convoys cannot resolve the problems that Rukban is facing. Furthermore, assistance often does not reach refugees but instead remains in the hands of the militants. Efforts must be continued to fully evacuate people from the camps.

Mr. Lowcock today did not give a particularly positive assessment of the cross-line assistance. We recall that the lion's share of assistance to and within Syria is cross-line aid, including to the north-east in Al-Hasakah governorate. All humanitarian agencies of the United Nations, apart from the World Health Organization, deliver humanitarian assistance to the north-east from Syrian territory.

I would also like to address the recent adoption of resolution 2504 (2020). The resolution explicitly and implicitly focuses the United Nations on cooperation and finding ways to resolve problems with the legitimate authorities of Syria, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 46/182, as it should, and international law.

Instead of whipping up passions here, we would recommend that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs establish, as quickly as possible, effective cooperation with the legitimate authorities in Damascus. That is in the interest of the United Nations and in our own interest. We expect that the February United Nations report will provide information about alternative routes for the delivery of humanitarian assistance from Syrian territory. As we have already said, an alternative to Al-Yarubiyah and the ability to deliver humanitarian assistance to Al-Hasakah governorate exist. We would like to hear about the steps that have been taken to that end and the results that have been achieved.

I would now like to offer a few statistics, which speak for themselves. One million people in Idlib are covered by cross-border assistance. The remaining 10 million people in Syria are covered by regular humanitarian programmes, as confirmed in the latest Secretary-General report (S/2019/949). With respect to the alleged lack of cooperation on the part of the Syrian Government, the number of humanitarian convoys agreed to with Damascus is steadily growing each month. The statistics were provided at the meeting of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Syria Humanitarian Task Force in Geneva.

What is stable is the financing of the humanitarian response plan for Syria, which remains at around 60 per cent. The interesting point is that as more territory comes under the control of the Syrian Government, the fewer donor contributions there are for the humanitarian response plan. The humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality were mentioned; where are they?

We agree with those who have said today that the humanitarian issue in Syria has been unacceptably politicized, including in post-conflict recovery. Some of our colleagues brag about politicizing it by imposing more requirements on the Syrian authorities. We call on the United Nations and members of the international community to join post-conflict recovery projects and to lift unilateral sanctions in the interest of normalizing the lives of Syrians — that is, of course, if members of the Council really do care about the well-being of Syrian civilians.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Viet Nam.

I wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his briefing. We highly appreciate the tireless efforts of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to deliver assistance to Syrian people in need.

We remain deeply concerned over the escalation of hostilities in north-west Syria during the past month. Continued reports of the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in that area, especially the impact on the civilian population, are of particular concern. We share the concern over the high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and civilian casualties, especially among woman and children. We are troubled by the plight of some 2.7 million people in north-western Syria in urgent need of assistance, including food, shelter, water, health care and winterization assistance. For that very reason, 20 days ago we joined other Council members in voting in favour of resolution 2504 (2020) to renew the cross-border mechanism for the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria. In order to address the situation, we would like to emphasize the following points.

First, all parties to the conflict must fully respect international law, including the Charter of the United Nations and international humanitarian law, and meet their obligations to protect the civilian population and objects. We call on all the parties to abide by the latest

ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey and to return to dialogue.

Secondly, humanitarian assistance on the ground needs to be maintained where it is needed. Humanitarian aid must go to the right people. The Syrian Government has the primary responsibility in that regard, with the continuous joint support of Member States and international organizations.

Thirdly, humanitarian work should also help create a favourable environment for the political process, reconciliation and reconstruction in Syria. At the same time, it must be carried out in full respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria.

Fourthly, Viet Nam has consistently held the position that all disputes and conflicts must be settled by peaceful means, in accordance with international law, including the relevant resolutions of the Security Council. We therefore urge all concerned parties to constructively engage in dialogue and negotiations. In that regard, we deeply appreciate the tireless efforts of the Secretary-General and his Special Envoy, Mr. Pedersen.

Viet Nam stands together with the United Nations and the international community in continuously supporting Syria's Constitutional Committee as it moves forward towards a comprehensive and lasting political solution for Syria.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Allow me at the outset to convey some good news to the Security Council and its anti-terrorism subsidiary bodies, as well as to the international community. The Syrian Arab army and its allies have liberated the city of Maarat al-Numan, which is on the road between Idlib and Aleppo. Of course, the liberation of that historic city is of the utmost importance. Now that we have eradicated terrorism from Maarat al-Numan, we must liberate the two nearby small towns Saraqib and Ariha. Only then will we be able to reopen Aleppo airport, and that is the crux of the matter. This is important information. Reopening Aleppo airport would mean that we no longer need cross-border aid operations, especially through the intelligence centre in

Turkish Gaziantep. We in the Government are working with our allies to liberate that area.

This, of course, runs counter to the plans of some who would like to continue cross-border aid operations. Reopening Aleppo airport would mean that we no longer need cross-border aid operations. From what I understood from the statements of some present, they do not want us to reopen Aleppo airport so that they can continue to interfere in our domestic affairs through cross-border aid operations.

As usual, we have heard Secretariat officials and representatives deliver identical statements on the suffering of the Syrian people in the current crisis. Some presented fabricated figures and played around with them; some spoke of 3 million or 4 million civilians in Idlib. In fact, the accurate figure is 800,000 civilians in Idlib, plus 90,000 terrorists; if we add their families, we get 300,000. So overall we have 1.1 million civilians and mostly foreign terrorists and their families. Some stated that there are approximately 3 million in the north-east of Syria, thousands in Rukban camp and thousands more in Al-Hol camp. However, over the past nine years no one, not even the Under-Secretary-General, has spoken of the suffering and the difficult living conditions of all Syrians inside and outside the country as a result of terrorism, under its various names; as a result of occupation by various occupying forces by means of various forms of aggression; and as a result of the unilateral coercive economic measures imposed by various countries. I would like to thank my friend the Chinese Ambassador for having addressed this highly important matter.

What I would like to focus on today, in our commitment to conveying to the Council the concerns of the Syrian people, is a form of terrorism that is complementary to the armed violence of the terrorist organizations designated by the Security Council and associated entities, namely, economic terrorism and the policies of collective punishment applied by some Governments of Member States to dissuade us from making our own choices and from having our own national positions.

This is in flagrant violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. It is inconsistent with the principle of sovereign equality among States. It is inconsistent with all human rights instruments and the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The tune those Western

countries are playing day and night, claiming that they want to empower all Member States and to ensure that no one is left behind. That is what they are saying. I am just repeating what they are saying — do not kill the messenger. It seems that they interpret this phrase as eliminating others so that they can move on and no one else is left behind.

Today all Syrians — around 24 million of them — are suffering. Not 1, not 2, not 10 million — 24 million Syrians are suffering under a wide array of coercive measures that affect their daily lives. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is shamefully ignoring our repeated appeals to accord this issue the importance that it deserves, at least in its reports. Even more shameful are the responses that we get from OCHA representatives in closed consultations. They say that they are not allowed to speak about this matter, as their careers would be affected or they might be punished or even sacked. That excuse is worse than the crime, especially coming from people who are supposed to be carrying out a noble humanitarian mission in a professional, impartial and humanitarian way.

OCHA has issued 64 written reports and hundreds of briefings without a single reference to the Syrian children suffering from bitter cold in schools, hospitals and homes without heating as a result of coercive measures that prevent us from importing fuel to compensate for our national oil and gas, which are plundered by the proudly American occupiers.

The American occupiers claim that they love Syrian oil and gas. Today, we heard the American Ambassador ask the Syrian Government and its Russian ally to deliver humanitarian aid to Rukban camp in the Al-Tanf area. That is what we heard a while ago from the United States Ambassador. The United States of America is occupying the Al-Tanf area in Syria, where it is protecting and arming a terrorist group called Maghawir al-Thawra, which attacked the city of As-Suwayda in the south two years ago and massacred hundreds of civilians at 4 a.m. Men, women and children were massacred, at 4 a.m. The terrorist group that attacked As-Suwayda massacred hundreds of civilians and kidnapped dozens of women and children is sponsored by the United States of America in the Al-Tanf area.

Nevertheless, my American colleague is asking us and our allies to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid

to Rukban camp and the Al-Tanf area, meaning that the Americans are occupying our territory, sponsoring a terrorist organization on our territory and then asking us to deliver humanitarian aid to that area. It is as if they, a major Power, had never heard of something called the responsibility of an occupying Power under international humanitarian law. The occupying Power is supposed to deliver humanitarian aid to civilians living in the area under occupation.

In any case, after dozens of reports and hundreds of briefings, OCHA has not reported on the newborns who have lost their lives as a result of the power cuts to incubators in some health centres and hospitals. It has not reported on other newborns who survived but were killed by coercive measures that prevented them from receiving milk and other basic nutrients. OCHA has not reported on mothers who are educating their children by candlelight. In dozens of reports and hundreds of briefings, OCHA has not reported on those who lost their lives in operating rooms because of a ban on the import of surgical thread, the anti-clotting medication used during surgeries, and basic medical equipment such as MRI and X-ray machines and others.

Nevertheless, Mr. Lowcock today deemed that the closure of Al-Yarubiyah crossing, which, by the way, is under the control of the United States of America, is what is preventing us from importing surgical thread. He also spoke of 400 different types of drugs and supplies, including surgical thread. There is therefore no other crossing that can be used to import surgical threads except the Al-Yarubiyah crossing. Is that really true? Only through Al-Yarubiyah are we able to import surgical thread? It is as though that crossing specializes in imports of surgical threads. Those are the lies we have heard today.

In the dozens of reports and hundreds of briefings, OCHA has not once mentioned people with special needs, who are affected by coercive measures. They are unable to receive artificial limbs or electric wheelchairs. In the dozens of reports and hundreds of briefings, OCHA has not mentioned the Syrians unable to import materials to meet their basic needs, such as food and medication, as a result of the sanctions imposed on the banking sector, which makes it impossible to conduct financial transactions. OCHA has not mentioned the plight of Syrians abroad, who cannot access consular services in several countries or transfer even a small amount of money to help their families in Syria. OCHA has not mentioned the fate of the tens of thousands of

Syrians who drowned in the Mediterranean at the hands of Turkish human traffickers.

Nine difficult years have passed and not once have we heard OCHA asking Germany, for instance, to allow Siemens, a German company, to supply the necessary spare parts for the power plant in Jandar, which was built by Germany decades ago. It is a purely humanitarian matter borne out of a basic need for hospitals and schools and to assist Syrian civilians. What is the point of those reports and meetings if they are unable to provide spare parts for a power plant? Has OCHA not heard the complaints of United Nations offices and international organizations operating in Syria about the effects of coercive measures on humanitarian operations? Has it not reviewed the reports issued by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia confirming the considerable adverse effects of coercive measures on humanitarian deliveries in Syria? Has OCHA not heard what Mr. Idriss Jazairy, Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures, said about the adverse effects of such measures on the enjoyment of human rights. He said,

“[s]uch coercive unilateral measures exacerbate the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people. It is hard to believe that they are there to protect Syrians”.

Should OCHA not remove its head from the sand and describe the situation as it is?

What I am talking about is humanitarian criticism about the humanitarian situation in Syria. I said all of that because OCHA reports to the Council must be in line with its noble mission. However, that is not the case. As the saying goes, do not go around fire expecting not to sweat. Whoever makes that mistake must suffer the consequences.

OCHA has not reported on many effects of coercive measures. Some in the Council might deem that issue to be a secondary one, merely as collateral damage. That is how the liars refer to it: collateral damage. It is a lovely phrase. However, such matters affect all the Syrian people, and are therefore a top priority for us and for anyone who respects the principles of international law and international humanitarian law. I assure the Council that we have no problem with OCHA as an institution. We have a problem with those controlling OCHA, who replace the humanitarian agenda of the United Nations with that based on the views of their countries. If they were honest, they would not have refused to respond to our calls to provide assistance to the 40 towns and

cities in Idlib and surrounding areas that were liberated from terrorism this month. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were liberated from terrorism, but OCHA has never provided humanitarian aid to them.

In conclusion, my country underscores that we will build on the great achievements we made in cooperation with several United Nations agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and 38 foreign non-governmental organizations authorized to work in Syria, including five French organizations, three American organizations, five British organizations, four German organizations, three Russian organizations and

others from Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Austria and Finland.

My country stresses that it is of the utmost importance to immediately and unconditionally lift all coercive measures and end once and for all the policies of economic punishment adopted by the Governments of some Member States, as they are inconsistent with international law, international humanitarian law and international human rights law. I assure the Council that, despite the pressure on the Syrian people, we will not relinquish our sovereignty or allow anyone to prevent us from making our own decisions.

The meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.