Statement by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the United Nations Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

2020-02-27

“I wish for a life without war and shelling. I wish I could be successful at school.”

11-year old Amina said this to an OCHA team a few days ago. She is one of more than 500,000 children in Idlib who are displaced – many of them for the second or third time.

Children like Amina have never experienced peace.

They have never gone to school.

And now, some of them are freezing to death.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is becoming more and more difficult to put the human suffering in Idlib into words. But we all heard the shocking facts and figures that our briefers just presented. We owe them and all humanitarian workers our gratitude and full support and respect.

Mark Lowcock (USG OCHA) recently called the situation in Idlib “the biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st century”. The Executive Director of UNICEF spoke of a “child protection crisis of unprecedented scale”. And Michelle Bachelet called the current attacks on civilians “cruel beyond belief”. Germany calls on the Syrian regime and on Russia to listen to these voices, to stop ignoring the facts.

As parties to the conflict, they have an obligation to protect civilians. Instead, they are bombing civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools.

Let me be clear: conducting counter-terrorism measures doesn’t absolve anyone, especially in this room, from respecting International Humanitarian Law.

Indiscriminate attacks against civilians are war crimes. And those responsible must be held accountable.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is more that this Council can and must do to stop the suffering. First and foremost, we must ensure full humanitarian access.

The Secretary General's report on alternative access routes leaves no doubt that cross-border aid remains of vital importance. This Council needs to look at every possibility to meet all humanitarian needs in accordance with humanitarian principles.

And as co-penholders, we are committed to ensuring just that. Aid must reach those in need, including in the north-east of Syria.

The cold is a threat to thousands of people. Germany has stepped up its assistance by 25 million euros to provide shelter for those in need. And last week, the European Union also decided to increase its humanitarian support.

But we need to do more - all of us.

Secondly, a humanitarian ceasefire is essential. I discussed this with my Turkish and Russian colleagues at the Munich Security Conference a few days ago.

And together with France, we stand ready to continue working towards such a ceasefire with Russia and Turkey at the highest level.

We heard from our briefers - civilians need a break. A break from the horrors of war and they need it now.

Finally, we must step up our efforts to find a political solution. A regime that has been killing and torturing its own people cannot bring lasting peace and stability to Syria. And Reconciliation without accountability for the terrible crimes committed will not work. And those who continue to fight in this war should finally realise that.

A political solution overseen by the

UN

and in line with Resolution 2254 is the only way to resolve this conflict.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While we are sitting here, three million civilians in Idlib are in fear of their lives. 80 percent of them are women and children.

We have failed them for far too long.

We owe them a better future.

A future where children like Amina are going to school instead of hiding in bomb shelters.

Thank you!

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