

Syria: Humanitarian Briefing via VTC

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What's In Blue

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Tomorrow (29 July), Security Council members are scheduled to hold an open videoconference (VTC) meeting, followed by a closed VTC session, on Syria. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock is expected to brief on the humanitarian situation. The Council will also be briefed by Amany Qaddour, a civil society representative and the Regional Director of Syria Relief & Development, a non-governmental organisation that provides medical services in north-west Syria. She is likely to address the challenges faced in the provision of humanitarian and medical assistance in Syria.

Tomorrow will be the first time Council members have held a meeting on Syria's humanitarian situation since the 11 July adoption of resolution 2533 on the delivery of cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria. Following six days of negotiations and four failed draft resolutions, resolution 2533 re-authorised the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for 12 months but did not re-authorise the border crossing at Bab al-Salam, thus further limiting the UN's delivery capacity. Given that resolution 2533 was adopted just over two weeks ago, Lowcock may offer only an initial assessment of the impact on OCHA's work of the decision to close the Bab al-Salam crossing. He is likely to brief Council members on OCHA's efforts to explore alternative routes to reach people that OCHA was previously able to access via the Bab al-Salam border crossing. As such, Lowcock is likely to explain to Council members that the closure of Bab al-Salam will increase the time, costs and risks involved in reaching areas in need. Some members may also ask about the impact that violence in Syria's north-west is having on the humanitarian situation in the area; in this regard, there have been reports of sporadic shelling, several recent attacks on joint Russian-Turkish patrols along the M4 security corridor, and Russian airstrikes in Idlib province in early July.

Council members may also ask to be updated on the situation in Syria's north-east. Council members are likely to ask Lowcock whether there have been any discernable improvements in cross-line delivery in the region.

Since Lowcock last briefed the Council on 29 June, Syria's humanitarian situation has become more dire, particularly in the north-west, as a result of both the increase in cases of COVID-19 in Syria, as well as of the country's rapidly deteriorating economic situation. On 9 July, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in north-west Syria. The case was reportedly a doctor based in Gaziantep, Turkey, who travels regularly to Syria and works at the Bab al-Hawa Hospital. Within two days, another three cases were confirmed. According to OCHA, the first four COVID-19 patients were health professionals, and steps to mitigate the spread of the virus have resulted in restrictions of movements and the suspension of routine clinical work in area hospitals. An additional 22 cases have

subsequently been identified in the north-west. As of 24 July, Syrian authorities had reported 608 confirmed cases of COVID-19 countrywide, including 35 fatalities. Lowcock is likely to reiterate concerns that he has raised during previous briefings about the potential of the virus to have a devastating impact on Syria because of the country's poor testing capacity and severely damaged healthcare system. Council members may also want to know what impact the outbreak of COVID-19 and the newly-imposed restrictions are having on OCHA's ability to deliver humanitarian assistance and on the ability of those in need to access food, medicine and healthcare.

Finally, the humanitarian situation has also been worsened by Syria's recent economic downturn, which has seen the country's currency lose nearly half of its value since the start of May, resulting in significantly higher prices for necessary goods. On 26 June, the World Food Programme announced that some 9.3 million Syrians are food insecure. Council members will probably want to know how OCHA is responding to the increased needs caused by the economic downturn. Given the contentious role of the issue of unilateral sanctions in the negotiations on resolution 2533 (see Security Council Report's series of What's in Blue stories for the week of 7 July for more on this), some Council members may also be interested in Lowcock's assessment of the impact of sanctions on the humanitarian situation.

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