European External Action Service (EEAS)

EU Statement -- United Nations General Assembly: Secretary-General’s Briefing on Syria

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30 March 2021, New York -- Statement on behalf of the European Union by H.E. Mr. Silvio Gonzato, Deputy Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations, at Secretary-General’s Briefing at the UN General Assembly on Syria

Mr. President,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union.

The Candidate Countries the Republic of North Macedonia*, Montenegro*and Albania*, the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, align themselves with this statement.

Two weeks ago, we commemorated a sombre anniversary: 15 March 2021 marked ten years since peaceful protests began throughout Syria. The regime’s brutal repression of the Syrian people and its failure to address the root causes of the uprising has resulted in an escalated and internationalised armed conflict. The conflict is far from over.

The dire human rights and humanitarian situation in Syria calls for the continuous full attention of the UN bodies. The EU condemns the persistent, widespread, systematic and serious violations and abuses of human rights and all violations of international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict, in particular by the Syrian regime and its allies. The EU continues to call upon all parties, in particular the Syrian regime and its allies, to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, and to permanently cease indiscriminate airstrikes and shelling on civilians, civilian objects and critical infrastructure. Here, allow me to reiterate our condemnation for the attack by the Syrian regime on 21 March against a medical facility in northern Aleppo. The EU recalls the need for a complete, immediate and nationwide ceasefire in Syria, in line with the call by the Secretary General, his Special Envoy and UNSC resolutions to guarantee the protection of civilians on the ground and from airstrikes.

All those responsible for breaches of international humanitarian law and human rights law, some of which may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held accountable. The EU reiterates its call to have the situation in Syria referred to the

International Criminal Court. In the absence of this avenue for international justice, the prosecution of such crimes under national jurisdiction, where possible, as done in Germany, and the recent initiative of the Netherlands and Canada represent an important contribution towards securing justice for the victims.

The EU continues to support efforts to gather evidence with a view to future legal action, including under national jurisdiction where possible. We reiterate our continued full support to mechanisms to fight impunity, including the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) for Syria, the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team and the Commission of Inquiry.

As reported by the Commission of Inquiry tens of thousands of civilians arbitrarily detained in Syria remain forcibly disappeared, while thousands more have been subject to torture and ill-treatment, the use of chemical weapons, sexual and gender based violence or death in detention. While highlighting the especially vast scale of the Syrian regime's severe detention practices, the report also sheds light on the responsibilities of all parties to the conflict. As noted in the report, insofar as violations are committed in areas under its effective control, Turkey should abide by relevant international humanitarian law as well as human rights treaty obligations.

The EU continues to voice strong concern about reports of social and demographic engineering in areas throughout Syria, inter alia in parts of the northwest and northeast. The EU insists that the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their places of origin can only be encouraged if it can take place in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner, in line with the parameters defined by UNHCR and in accordance with international law.

The EU remains committed to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian state, and recalls that any sustainable solution to the conflict requires a genuine political transition in line with UNSCR 2254 and the 2012 Geneva communiqué. We stand ready to enhance dialogue among all international actors with influence in the Syrian crisis, and call on them to join forces to reaffirm and consolidate strong support for a political solution as well as for the tireless efforts of UN Special Envoy Pedersen to advance all aspects of UNSCR 2254 in a comprehensive approach. The EU will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition is firmly under way.

Full, equal and meaningful participation of women will also be fundamental for sustainable peace, in line with WPS resolutions.

Without credible progress and as long as the repression continues, targeted EU sanctions on leading regime members and entities will be renewed at the end of May.

The EU will not allow Syria to be forgotten. This is why we are co-hosting with the UN the fifth Brussels conference on the future of Syria and the region. The Conference aims to consolidate international support towards a political solution to the conflict, to mobilise

financial support for the Syrian people in Syria and in the region, and to support neighbours and hosting communities.

As the largest humanitarian donor across the whole of Syria with €24 billion provided by the EU and its Member states since 2011, the EU reiterates the need for full, unhindered, safe and sustained humanitarian access including the need for cross-border access for humanitarian assistance. We also reiterate our concern regarding the administrative and security restrictions imposed by the Syrian regime. The conference will highlight the need to renew and broaden the cross-border resolution in the UNSC in July, which preserves a vital lifeline into Northern Syria, echoing the SG's call for more humanitarian access and consensus on this crucial matter in the Security Council.

The EU would be prepared to support free and fair elections in Syria in accordance with UNSCR 2254 and under supervision of the UN, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate. Last year parliamentary elections or the presidential elections later this year do not fulfil these criteria and therefore cannot contribute to the settlement of the conflict nor lead to any measure of international normalisation with the Syrian regime.

The Syrian people continue to have the full political and humanitarian support of the European Union, in the pursuit of a peaceful and sustainable future.

Thank you.

* The Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

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