

Cease the fighting in Syria and let the aid workers in to act

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Location:

UN Security Council

Delivered on:

27 February 2020 (Transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)



Thank you very much, Mr President, and welcome to the Council today. Welcome also to the German Foreign Minister. I thought he was totally right; as he said, it's ever more difficult to put the human suffering in Idlib into words. It's so true as we see the terrible human consequences of the Syrian regime's and Russia's violence in Idlib province, which is escalating.

The Russian Representative asked why humanitarian agencies are finding it so difficult to protect people, the desperate people out in the open air at the moment. And the answer is because they're being bombed, they're being shelled, they're being attacked. It is extremely difficult indeed to provide assistance to people in those circumstances. The intensity and pace of the Syrian and Russian campaign means that civilians who are able to get out of the way in time have nowhere to go. They have no shelter. They are forced to sleep in the open air. Children are literally freezing to death.

At the last humanitarian session, we said that over 358,000 people have been displaced since the first of December. That number is now over 948,000 - 80 percent of whom are women and children. And I say to my fellow council members that we should be under no illusion that this is the worst humanitarian situation thus far in this terrible conflict. The continued attacks not only directly cause civilian suffering, but they also hamper the aid effort, amplifying the scale of this disaster.

The Russian representative also talked about terrorism, and he urged us in a different context not to exaggerate problems. I would simply note that yesterday the Russian ambassador to London stated in a media interview that terrorists make up one percent of the population of Idlib. And even if that is the case, I would simply say international law does not permit you to attack the 99 percent to handle one percent.

And we remain appalled, Mr President, that civilian infrastructure continues to be attacked. On Sunday, the White Helmets reported that Russian warplanes hit a children's and women's hospital in Balioun, in Idlib. And as the United Kingdom's Minister for the Middle East said on Monday, "The United Kingdom has condemned and continues to condemn these flagrant violations of international law and basic human decency." Let me remind all military forces on the ground, especially their commanders, that following political orders is no defence against war crimes. Accountability will come, no matter how long it takes. And I want to say as well that we look forward to the report of the Secretary-General's Board of Inquiry and we urge Secretary-General to make those findings public.

We need there to be an immediate cessation of hostilities. We strongly support the Turkish government's efforts to re-establish the ceasefire agreed in 2018. And we stand behind the Secretary-General and his Special Envoy for Syria in their efforts to stop the violence and save those many lives now in peril.

Let me turn, Mr President, to the north-east, and thank the Secretary-General for his report on implementation of UNSCR 2504 and on alternatives to the Yaroubiya crossing, as requested in 2504. That report makes clear that there is no alternative. Since the loss of the Yaroubiya crossing in the cross-border mandate, those living in areas of northeast Syria, which are not under the control of the Syrian authorities, have been denied the medicines and medical items they so desperately require. Without access through Yaroubiya or the provision of a credible alternative, medical facilities will see their stocks of vital medicines dwindle, putting their continued operation - and the Syrian patients which depend upon them - at risk.

As many have said, a particular area of concern is reproductive health stocks. We note with great concern the forecast that stocks in the north-east could be depleted by the end of March, preventing vital procedures such as caesarean sections - a preventable tragedy for Syrian women - and more widely, supplies will run out by May.

The Russian Federation have said that we can trust the authorities in Damascus to deliver aid throughout Syria. Well, let's examine that. It is, of course, welcome that in recent hours and days, the Syrian authorities have granted authorisation of humanitarian delivery. But we've heard promises before. What matters is what actually happens on the

ground. And in that respect, we need OCHA to provide regular and granular data to this Council on the Syrian regime's performance when it comes both to cross-line humanitarian aid and that within the areas controlled by the authorities.

The Secretary-General's report makes clear that responses to requests are delayed for months; even when approval is given, under half are permitted to proceed. Key medical supplies are routinely removed from convoys. In 2019, there were precisely zero road convoys from Damascus to the north-east of Syria. In areas controlled by Assad, we see humanitarian aid withheld from towns and communities deemed insufficiently loyal to the regime. So we placed little faith in promises by the Syrian authorities. But we do call upon them again to meet their humanitarian obligations and we call on their Russian protectors to make them do so.

But, Mr President, for the sake of the innocent people dying in Syria, there is no alternative to cross border access.

Now, Mr President, the United Kingdom remains the third largest donor to the UN-led humanitarian response across Syria. We've allocated \$152 million this financial year to projects implemented by organisations delivering cross-border aid, primarily into north-west Syria. Since the conflict began, the United Kingdom has committed over \$4 billion of humanitarian funding in response to the conflict, and we remain committed to providing help to those in need. We want to continue to provide this much needed assistance. We must be sure the aid is going to those who need it most, wherever they are, on a principled basis. So pending clarity about the future of cross-border operations beyond July, and given the clear interference and obstruction of aid by the authorities in Damascus, we will be looking very seriously at this question.

As set out in the chamber before, and as others here have said today, we will not consider providing any reconstruction assistance until a credible, substantive and genuine political process is firmly underway. Russia's contribution to Syria has been through military hardware and bombs on its people, not development aid. And that will have to change.

Mr President, we are facing the worst humanitarian crisis in the worst conflict in the world. Innocent men, women and children are dying and will die if nothing is done. It is in the hands of Syria and Russia to take or to save lives. It is their choice. The human and humane thing to do is to cease the fighting and let the aid workers and medics in to act.

It is in their hands, Mr President.

Published 27 February 2020