

Syria: Humanitarian Briefing via VTC

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What's In Blue

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On Monday (29 June), Security Council members will convene an open videoconferencing (VTC) meeting, followed by a closed VTC session, on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock is scheduled to brief. Susannah Sirkin, a civil society representative, is also scheduled to brief on attacks on health facilities in Syria and the need for accountability in this context.

Lowcock is expected to brief on the Secretary-General's bi-monthly report related to the implementation of Security Council resolutions on the humanitarian situation in Syria. The precarious humanitarian situation has been compounded by Syria's worsening economic outlook and the collapse of the Syrian pound. According to OCHA, the Syrian pound has been devalued by 105 percent since the start of May and by approximately 360 percent since June 2019. This has resulted in a steep rise in the price of food, medicine and other goods. According to data from the World Food Programme, some 9.3 million Syrians are considered food insecure. Security Council members are likely to ask about the impact that the worsening economic situation is having on the overall humanitarian situation in the country. In his bi-monthly report, the Secretary-General has noted that because Syrians are now finding it difficult to meet basic needs, they are likely to become more reliant on humanitarian assistance.

Some Council members are also likely to raise the issue of sanctions, potentially asking Lowcock to provide an assessment of their impact on Syria's humanitarian situation. While some Council members, including Russia and China, will reiterate the Secretary-General's call in March for the "waiving of sanctions imposed on countries to ensure access to food, essential health supplies, and COVID-19 medical support", others, such as Germany, the U.K. and the U.S. are likely to argue that critical humanitarian goods and medical supplies are not subject to sanctions.

As has been the case in the past three monthly briefings, Lowcock is likely to update the Council on the impact of COVID-19 in Syria. Although Syria has reported few cases of COVID-19, with the Ministry of Health confirming 178 cases throughout the country and none in the north-west as of 18 June, concerns about the pandemic persist. Council members are likely to ask about the preparedness and response planning that OCHA has been undertaking to develop a country-wide response to COVID-19. They may also inquire about the degree to which the pandemic has further aggravated the country's already deteriorating economic situation. Lowcock may highlight the potential impact of COVID-19 on especially vulnerable groups—such as displaced populations and those living in overcrowded camps for displaced persons—and discuss the challenges presented by Syria's lack of testing capacity.

Another issue that will probably be addressed is the situation in both Syria's north-west and north-east. According to the Secretary-General's 14 May review of the UN's cross-line and cross-border humanitarian operations, of the 6.2 million people living in areas not under Syrian government control, 4.2 million concentrated in Syria's north-east and north-west have acute humanitarian needs. According to OCHA, of the four million people living in north-west Syria, an estimated 2.7 million people are internally displaced, in dire need of humanitarian assistance, and rely to a large extent on cross-border deliveries.

Lowcock is likely to inform the Council that the ceasefire in the north-west in and around Idlib is holding, despite reports of low-level violence and ceasefire violations. Nevertheless, humanitarian needs remain high in the area, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance in the north-west through the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa border crossings is at record levels, with a 130 percent increase between April 2019 and April 2020.

As OCHA continues to scale up its COVID-19 response and the economic situation deteriorates, the needs are unlikely to diminish. As such, Lowcock is likely to reiterate that there is, in the words of the Secretary-General's 14 May report, "no alternative that can match the scale and scope of the current cross-border operations" and that it is essential to renew the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa border crossings for 12 months in order to ensure unhindered delivery of much-needed assistance. Lowcock is likely to tell Council members that failure to renew resolution ~~2504~~ would sever an essential lifeline to all Syrians living in the country's north-west. Resolution ~~2504~~ renewed the authorisation of cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria through two border crossings (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa) for six months, but did not re-authorise the Al Yarubiyah border crossing between Syria and Iraq or the Al Ramtha border crossing between Syria and Jordan.

In the north-east, cross-line air shipments of health supplies have been ongoing. On 14 June, the World Health Organization announced the delivery of more than 80 tons of emergency medical supplies to support the health system in the region. However, according to the Secretary-General's report, "distributions of WHO medical items did not reach the majority of facilities that previously depended on deliveries via the Al Yarubiyah border crossing". Lowcock may reiterate his previously stated view that a "combination of more cross-border and cross-line access is required to sustain, and preferably increase, humanitarian assistance". Some Council members are likely to ask what steps OCHA has taken to engage with Syrian authorities to increase cross-line delivery, while others may want to hear more about reports that the Syrian government has imposed administrative hurdles to more effective and timely delivery of assistance into the north-east.

Discussions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance in the north-east and north-west come against a backdrop of negotiations on the renewal of resolution 2504, which expires on 10 July. According to press reports, the initial draft resolution proposes the re-authorisation of the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa border crossings with Turkey for 12

months; it also calls for the re-authorisation of Al Yarubiyah for six months until 10 January 2021 with an option for an additional six months if the Council determines that the effects of COVID-19 warrant it.

It is unlikely that Council members' positions will shift from what they were during the negotiations on resolution 2504. While there appears to be support for the contours of the zero draft by a majority of Council members, some members have expressed scepticism about the need to re-open for Al Yarubiyah. Speaking during the 29 April Council briefing, Russia's Permanent Representative urged Council members "not to waste their time on looking for a way to advocate, explicitly or implicitly for getting Al Yarubiyah back".

The recent public reporting on the announcement by the Russian Federation that it would no longer participate in the humanitarian notification system may also be raised by some Council members. The humanitarian notification system (also known as the "deconfliction mechanism"), according to OCHA, is "the exchange of information by humanitarian actors with military actors in order to...avoid potential hazards for humanitarian personnel". According to press reports, Russia informed OCHA on 23 June of its intention to withdraw from the mechanism. Some Council members are likely to ask about the impact that this decision could have on the safety of humanitarian workers.

Russia's announcement comes in the aftermath of the 6 April Board of Inquiry (BOI) report into attacks on sites in north-west Syria that had been included on a "deconfliction" list; the Secretary-General transmitted a summary of the report to the Security Council that he also released publicly. The report analysed seven attacks on hospitals, schools and camps for internally displaced persons, and offered conclusions on six of these attacks; in the case of the seventh, the BOI determined that it did not have a mandate to review and investigate the matter as it was "unable to establish that the [As-Suqylabiyah] Hospital received support from the UN", despite the World Health Organization's provision of "material support to the Hospital around the time of the incident".

Regarding the six attacks that it did investigate, the BOI found that it was "highly probable" that they were "carried out by the Government of Syria and/or its allies" in four of the incidents, by the "Government of Syria" in one incident, and by an "armed opposition group" in another. Speaking to the Security Council on 16 June, Russian Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia spoke at length about the report's findings, concluding that Russia's "analysis of the summary of the [BOI] report leads to one more conclusion: the deconflicting mechanism has more than just gaps — to put it mildly — but it is used for misinformation" and the Board itself had been created based on "false data".

Finally, Council members will hear from Susannah Sirkin, Director of Policy and Senior Advisor at Physicians for Human Rights, a civil society organization that, among other things, "documents the deliberate targeting of health care systems and personnel" and seeks accountability for perpetrators of such attacks. The organisation has worked extensively in a number of countries on the Council's agenda, including Syria. As evidenced by the above-mentioned announcement by Russia of its withdrawal from the "deconfliction mechanism" and based on previous Council discussions on attacks on healthcare facilities, the issue remains a divisive one for the Council.

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