

Working to protect the four million lives at stake in Syria

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Thank you very much, Madam President. Thank you once again to the Special Envoy and for all the work his team are doing. And thank you very much to Rajaa Altalli for being here today and sharing your story. I'm very sorry for the suffering that you and your family have experienced.

Like others, you know, we thank the Special Envoy for his tireless efforts to bring peace to Syria, but the breakdown of talks during the second Constitutional Committee meeting is extremely disappointing. And as we all know, these long-awaited meetings require serious engagement and commitment from all sides if they're going to succeed. We support Mr Pedersen's position that the government and opposition co-chairs need to agree an agenda before a third round of the committee can be convened. But we regret attempts by the Syrian authorities to introduce conditions widely accepted as unnecessary to intentionally stall the talks. And we call on the authorities to respect the rules of the Committee and to return to negotiations.

We are also concerned that the Syrian authorities appear to be disassociating themselves from the Constitutional Committee in official statements and in the media - this suggesting that the Syrian delegation represents “the point of view” of the Syrian regime, as is not the regime itself. I’d therefore like to ask Syrian representative to allay these concerns by reaffirming to this Council that its delegation to the Constitutional Committee is indeed the, “government delegation.”.

Now, we understand that Mr Pedersen is not able to share all full details of negotiations and progress towards the reopening of talks during these briefings, not least because of time constraints. But we do believe that there would be merit in considering other means by which Mr Pedersen could keep the Council apprised of the details.

If I may, I’d like now to turn to what Ms Altalli told us. Again, thank you for your briefing. The United Kingdom has always been clear that the political process should reflect broad and diverse cross-section of Syrian society. We need to remain mindful that a successful political settlement in Syria goes well beyond the Constitution. It’s crucial that all elements of Security Council Resolution 2254 be taken forward in tandem, and this includes creating conditions for refugee return, preparations for free and fair elections in 2021 and the release of detainees.

We are thus deeply concerned to hear of the arrests of 174 people who returned to Homs from Rukban IDP camp. This happened despite having obtained clearance from the Syrian authorities and guarantees they will be exempt from persecution. The Syrian authorities and Russia need to stay true to their word and respect the promises they have given.

And on torture, I don’t think I can put it better than the German representative did. These are truly horrific cases and unacceptable and they need to stop.

Special Envoy, you have our support in advancing all the other baskets of the political process. I would like to reiterate that the United Kingdom will not consider providing any reconstruction assistance without credible, substantive and genuinely political process firmly underway.

I’d like now, Madam President, to turn to Idlib, where we remain extremely concerned about the continued airstrikes. We note reports on 2 December of attacks on the markets of Saraqeb and Maarat an Numam which have killed at least 14 civilians. Attacks on hospitals, such as in Qah IDP camp on 20 November and other civilian infrastructure are inexcusable and they go against the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law.

And furthermore, Madam President, it’s unbelievable that the Syrian authorities would conduct more such attacks given the ongoing Board of Inquiry investigation. And the United Kingdom looks forward to the Board of Inquiry’s update to this Council.

In northeast Syria, we welcome the fact that the ceasefire continues broadly to hold, but we’re concerned by reports of an attack near a school in the YPG-held Tel Riphath, which killed at least 10, including eight children. We call on all parties involved to respect the

ceasefire and their obligations towards civilians and international humanitarian law.

I'd like to say a word, in closing, about Syrian refugees. Syrians have a right to return to their homes voluntarily, in safety and dignity, in line with international humanitarian law. We support the UN judgment that conditions in Syria are not yet conducive for safe and dignified return.

Finally, Madam President, the United Kingdom, as a member of the Global Coalition, is proud of its role in the successful fight to liberate the territory held by Daesh in Syria and Iraq. We remain committed to securing the enduring defeat of Daesh. Much remains to be done and we cannot lose sight of the threat they pose, even without territory that keeps dangerous and pervasive ideology needs to be eliminated.

Explanation of vote by Ambassador Karen Pierce, UK Permanent Representative to the UN, at the Security Council briefing on Syria

Thank you very much, Madam President. I'd like to echo what the Belgian ambassador said. It is a sad and sorry day and a truly dreadful day for the people of Syria. It's a day I hope that the Council will never repeat. And I just want to say again to the minister from Kuwait how much we appreciate the efforts your delegation has put into this. And I am only sorry that you should have to be here to see this.

Madam President, the United Kingdom made two votes today. We voted for the first resolution because UN cross-border assistance remains critical to the 4 million people who depend on it for lifesaving assistance, as critical today as it has been since 2014, when the resolution has been allowed to pass each year until now.

Madam President, the Russian Federation and China gave no credible explanation for their veto or for the cynical attempt to score political points by tabling a second resolution that halved the number of crossings and halved the length of time. There is no justification for this. Indeed, the Secretary-General said that a further deterioration of an already extremely difficult humanitarian situation for people throughout Syria, where over 11 million people remain in need of assistance.

So no one could pretend, Madam President, that things were improving on the ground. I listened very carefully to what the Russian representative said, and I heard him say that they were motivated "purely by the humanitarian aspect." Madam President, even by known standards, this is breathtaking in its hypocrisy. The veto of the first resolution and the tabling of the second are not acts that address humanitarian concerns. They don't meet OCHA's formal written request to the Council. They don't help the millions of ordinary citizens in Syria whose lives are now in jeopardy. And they certainly don't help the UN or the cause of multilateralism.

Madam President, now the responsibility is on the Syrian and Russian authorities. It is they who will now be responsible for the people whose lives hang in the balance. I hope the Russian taxpayers are feeling generous.

Madam President, the United Kingdom voted against the Russian text because we will not negotiate with a gun held to our heads over a cynical offer that would save fewer lives than we know is needed and that the UN very clearly set out was necessary. But it's important even at this juncture to look ahead, given how many lines remain at stake.

Therefore, Madam President, the United Kingdom hopes that the council can pass through this sorry episode and can return to discussion ready to identify a productive and effective way through that meets OCHA's needs before 10 January when the current mandate expires.

I have said in this chamber before that Russia should not play dice with people's lives. Four million lives are at stake, Madam President, and we need to keep that critical fact before us as we try and sort out this dreadful mess.

Thank you.

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