

Saving future generations from the scourge of war in Syria

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Thank you, Mr President, and thank you to our two briefers, Mark Lowcock and Susannah Sirkin.

Mr President, I think we all feel that it is deeply frustrating that we come here each month. But it is better that we come than that we don't come. And however harrowing, it is better that we hear what is happening in Idlib than we don't hear. And however difficult, it is better that, than we let denial take hold. Yes, we would like to act. The responsibility for the fact that we don't act lines with just three member states of the United Nations – one of them a P5 member. What is happening in Idlib makes a mockery of P5 responsibilities.

Ahead of Astana on 1-2 August and with last week's Political session cancelled, there is an opportunity today, Mr President, to get at the facts and to ensure that crimes don't go unrecorded. We have heard from OCHA. We've heard from Physicians for Human Rights.

Carnage on the ground, communities tend to rebel, children saving children and then dying in the attempts. These are all breaches of International Humanitarian Law. And Ms Bachelet has made clear that those criminally responsible will be held accountable. The Syrian and Russian units bombing Idlib ought to pause at that.

It may not come today, but justice will come. If I may borrow a very famous phrase and use it in a different context, “The arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends towards justice.” The units taking part in military action against hospitals and medical facilities and personnel need to heed that warning.

I have a number of questions today, Mr President. I am used to the questions not being answered, but I am going to keep asking them because I think they go to the heart of what is happening.

I would like to know what is being done by the protagonists, Syria and Russia, to protect civilians on the ground, notably children.

I would like to know how they know – or claim to know – where the terrorists are, given that we heard from OCHA there are 100 civilians for every terrorist fighter.

And I would like to know how their forces go about distinguishing between terrorists and civilians, given the overwhelming number of civilians.

And I would like to know what part they believe of International Humanitarian Law allows terrorists to be attacked with no regard to those civilians because I read all the Geneva Conventions at the weekend, Mr President, and I can’t find a single line in the conventions, or the additional protocol. By the way, Syria has not ratified the additional protocol. But I cannot find a single line that justifies attacking civilians on the scale we are seeing in Idlib to get at terrorists.

And I would like to know in particular – you know we had a briefing from a Russian military general the other day – I would like to know what do the Russian and Syrian military doctrines and rules of engagement say about IHL and the principles of proportionality, distinction and neutrality in respect of Idlib. I would like to know what the Russian and Syrian rules of engagement are. I would be very happy to have the Russian general back, Mr President, if he can answer those questions. And I would like to know what is the explanation from Russia and Syria as to why the de-confliction mechanism is not working, why hospitals and facilities that have given their coordinates are being hit.

And I would like to know how the Syrian authorities claim that these hospitals and facilities don’t exist or have been decommissioned when the UN, and PHR, and others have seen them and are in touch with their doctors.

And one has to ask, Mr President, who is more likely to be believed: the UN or the protagonists on the ground? And I hope, Mr President, that we can actually get some concrete answers today.

For the rest, I wanted to join those who have so far called for an investigation into UN de-conflicted sites. It is of the utmost importance to establish clearly the circumstances of the attacks through a transparent and credible investigation. I welcome what the Under-Secretary-General said about the UN being able to give its information to the two UN mechanisms already in existence. I think that is very important.

I would also like to raise the letter from the Syrian Permanent Representative of 16 July. Under that International Humanitarian Law, just because a hospital or clinic has been “decommissioned” or “ransacked” does not mean it can be attacked with impunity. I have said before, Mr President, if – and it is a big if – but if a hospital is being used as a military target, then the Geneva Conventions – the ones that the Syrians have ratified – require that warnings be given. No warnings are being given. The Syrian PR’s letter admits to attacks on hospitals. It’s hard to deny, Mr President, that that is a war crime and it deserves the utmost, deep investigation so that those units responsible, those military commanders responsible, and the politicians who give them their instructions, can be brought to justice.

A couple more words, if I may, Mr President. I agree with those speakers who are concerned about Rukban. We appeal to the authorities to let the convoys in. We also share those sentiments about the political process. There needs to be a credible and sustainable political process. The Constitutional Committee is but one step. Many more steps need to be taken and reconstruction assistance from ourselves and our partners will not be available in the absence of a credible political process. And in the absence of reconstruction, Syria cannot be rehabilitated into the international community. And I think that is an important point.

Lastly, if I may, Mr President, the Charter requires us to act to save future generations from the scourge of war. What part of that is not understood by Syria and Russia in respect of Idlib today?

Thank you.

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