

Eyes on Idlib

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Thank you very much Madam President. Thank you to the Special Envoy. Thank you very much to John Ging, and thank you Minister for being with us today.

This is a terrible situation and I think what we're hearing today is very strong support for the primacy of the political process, but also a very strong appeal for there not to be an all-out military offensive against civilians in Idlib and I'd just like to echo those two things right up front before I go into the bulk of my remarks. And I think the French Representative put it very well when he talked about the importance of this issue for international peace and security.

I wanted to begin again by thanking the Special Envoy and his team for everything they do and obviously OCHA. We're very grateful to those humanitarian organizations and workers who are making tireless efforts in the most difficult circumstances to provide aid to people across Idlib. And once again we're reminded of the importance of cross-border assistance as a critical lifeline for civilians who otherwise cannot be reached.

We very much support the urgent diplomatic efforts being made by Turkey and the UN to deal with Idlib, both on the civilian side and on the humanitarian side. The fate of nearly 3 million people is at stake and we would very much appreciate, Madam President having a briefing on Astana. I suspect that's not possible today, but if it were possible to get a briefing from DPA, we hope - indeed we urge - Russia and Iran to use their influence to live up to their commitments to uphold the de-escalation arrangements they have agreed and to reach a negotiated way forward with Turkey. And if there is anything that my government can do to assist in that process then we will happily do it.

On the military situation, like other speakers, we're very concerned at the reports in the last few days of dozens of Russian air strikes against areas of Idlib. Local monitoring organizations have reported 38 civilian casualties as a result of these strikes on 4 September alone. I've already said that nearly 3 million civilians are at risk of their lives in Idlib. The UN estimates that there are at a maximum 15,000 fighters for the terrorist groups, which is 0.5 percent of the total population. So we too in Britain know what it's like to suffer from terrorism, but those figures are very small, as the Minister said about the doctrine of proportionality, discrimination and precaution.

The Secretary-General has been clear that the systematic use of indiscriminate weapons in populated areas may amount to war crimes. We should be crystal clear about this. There are more babies in Idlib than there are terrorists. And I think that should give those engaging in military action pause for thought.

Last time we discussed this issue, Madam President, the military side, we were in the Consultations Room and then I read out our understanding of which Syrian military units are in the vicinity of Idlib. And echoing the Secretary-General's call, I'd like to read these units out in the Chamber and I'd like to make very clear that if there is a major offensive against civilians with massive civilian casualties in Idlib, then these are the people that the international community will be holding accountable for those abuses and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

Our understanding is that the overall head of the Syrian army is the Minister of Defence General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, but the primary unit deployed to the Idlib area are the Fourth Armoured Division to the west side of Idlib and Mahir-al-Asad is the overall commander of that unit, but we believe that Major General Ali Mahmoud is the Deputy Commander. We understand the Republican Guard are probably deployed to the east side around Abu Duhur and their commander is Major General Talal Mahkluf. Tiger Forces are likely deployed to the southeast side and their commander is Brigadier General Suhayl 'Tiger' Hasan. And then we think that there are also 2nd Corps and 5th Corps units in the area and the commander we know about for that is Major General Aous Aslan. So as I say Madam President there is a major offensive against Idlib. Then, in addition to the Syrian regime, these commanders, these units will be held accountable by the international community.

If I may, Madam President I'd like to say a word about the aid package for Idlib. The United Kingdom has announced an additional aid package to ensure that the most vulnerable can get medical treatment, food, water and support that they desperately need.

\$15 million of new aid includes support medical centres and mobile clinics and psychological support. And we are also backing a new technology which provides civilians with early warnings in the hope of saving lives in communities bombarded by airstrikes. Thanks to this we believe we've been able to warn more than 2 million people and to have reduced casualties by up to 27 percent in areas and the heavy bombardment. But really donors should not have to do this, Madam President. Donors are not a substitute for the Syrian regime with Russian support stopping their campaign against their own civilians.

And I'd like to conclude by just saying once again that we support Turkey's efforts to reach a peaceful solution and avert a humanitarian catastrophe. We call on Russia to do more to restrain the Syrian authorities from attacking Idlib and to bring about de-escalation and we call on all parties to respect international humanitarian law.

I won't touch on chemical weapons because we dealt with that in this chamber yesterday, but I did want to end by echoing what the Equatorial Guinea Representative said about the primary importance of the political process bringing an end to this cruel war. Thank you Madam President.

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