

Improving humanitarian response and ensuring political process in line with resolution 2254 in Syria

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Thank you very much, Mr President. And also my thanks to Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings and, through them, to all of their teams for their hard work in difficult circumstances ongoing.

Colleagues, we have a Security Council Resolution which should govern all of our efforts: that is resolution 2254, passed unanimously, passed with the consent and full agreement and the approval of every member of this Council. Full implementation of that resolution is the only sustainable solution to the conflict in Syria. That resolution is clear on the sequence of steps needed to achieve a political settlement.

Syrians are to convene to draft a new constitution, facilitated by the United Nations. Following this, there are to be free and fair elections administered under the supervision of the United Nations, as an objective, impartial, neutral and independent party, to ensure

the elections satisfy the highest international standards of transparency and accountability.

The charade taking place today is not part of that process. It does not come close to meeting those requirements. It is not in line with resolution 2254. The exercise taking place today is presumably designed to sustain Assad's dictatorship, but it is hard to see how it helps. Only countries which take a similar approach to their own people – depriving them of the opportunity to choose their leaders, denying them the right to participate freely in politics or even to speak their mind – will consider these to be “elections”. And judging by the company the Syrian regime keeps here in the United Nations, those countries are already in the bag.

For the rest of the UN's membership, it is a grotesque joke, perpetrated by a man who has far worse crimes to answer for, having gassed, tortured and starved a people who still will not accept him as a legitimate leader.

So what should the regime be doing, once today's distraction is out of the way? It should actively participate in the political process set out in resolution 2254. The first step should be genuine and constructive participation in the Constitutional Committee. And the regime need not wait to take confidence-building actions such as the release of political detainees or providing information to the families of the missing. My Russian colleague mentioned the very limited amnesty of 2 May; that amnesty did not include tens of thousands of Assad opponents and political detainees held for years without trial. There is rather further to go.

Mr President, let me turn now to the humanitarian situation. When this Council authorised the United Nations to deliver cross-border aid in 2014, over 10 million people required assistance. Since then, the mechanism has enabled over 46,000 trucks to deliver cross-border assistance to many millions of Syrians dealing with the worst impacts of this terrible conflict.

Seven years later, certain members of this Council suggest that the humanitarian situation has somehow moved on. And yet, there are now 13 million people in need in Syria: an increase of 2 million in just one year and 3 million higher than when we first mandated the UN to deliver cross-border aid.

We were all warned. In his report of December 2019, the Secretary General warned that the UN did not have an alternative means of reaching people in the absence of cross-border assistance. The impact has been clear.

The closing of the crossing in Yaroubiyah in 2020 means that 1.8 million people are now in need of assistance in the north east, an increase of 38% in one year. Cross-line assistance has made some progress, but has not come close to filling the assistance gap. Aid workers in the north east have faced severe shortages of PPE and COVID-19 tests, which could have been resolved quickly by the WHO through a cross-border response.

The loss of Bab al-Salam has led to a more dangerous, less efficient and less direct response in the north west. Aid and supplies must now travel across lines of control, multiple checkpoints and areas still facing conflict. Deliveries that once took six hours can now take as long as 25 days.

2.4 million people depend on aid delivered through the only remaining mandated crossing at Bab-al-Hawa. This includes food assistance for 1.4 million people monthly, nutrition assistance for tens of thousands of mothers and children, education material, and critical medical items. As we set out last month, closure of this crossing would cause the COVID-19 vaccination response to cease, directly contradicting resolution 2565, not only unanimously passed but co-sponsored by all members of the Council.

The UK welcomes continued efforts to negotiate cross-line access in the north west – all modalities, both cross-border and cross-line, need to be pursued. But as the Secretary-General set out in the General Assembly in March, cross-line convoys cannot replicate the required size and scope of the cross-border operation. Given that no cross-line mission has arrived in the north west from Damascus, cross-line assistance is not yet a viable alternative. It is reckless to suggest otherwise.

In order to meet escalating humanitarian needs in Syria, the UK therefore calls on this Council to renew the Bab al-Hawa crossing and re-authorise the Bab al-Salam and Yaroubiyah crossings, for a period of 12 months. In the time of COVID, it is our moral imperative to do so.

Mr President, my Russian colleague said that need donors should invest in reconstruction. But who will pay the huge amounts needed? Those who support Assad and protect him? Russia will not. Humanitarian aid is not a priority for Russia; according to OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, since 2018 Russia has contributed only \$36 million to the UN's Syria humanitarian appeal. That represents 0.42% of the total donated in that time. Contrast that with the huge amounts spent on military activity in Syria. Even if Russia wanted to, it may not be able to afford to. And I believe China prefers bilateral aid, tied to infrastructure and loans. I don't know, therefore, whether Syria is an attractive investment destination for China.

Since 2018, four donors – the USA, Germany, the European Union and the UK – have contributed over \$5.5 billion, or 65% of that donated to the UN appeal. They provide food, clean water, shelter, medical care, education for Syrians - wherever they are. In Assad-controlled areas. In opposition areas. In neighbouring countries. All have been clear that they cannot move to fund reconstruction without a sustainable political solution; the risks are just too high of conflict destroying investments made.

Mr President, this is the last time I will address this Council as I reach the end of my time in New York this week. It has been a great honour to serve my country here, alongside you all and others who have left the Council. I am particularly grateful for the personal friendship you have shown me. Our debates and private conversations are often not easy, but they are always essential. When this Council comes together and acts, it has real

power. We should never forget or underestimate that in our daily frustrations. I hope that in-person meetings and consultations can restart soon: our conversation, our interaction and our understanding of each other is all poorer through a screen.

I would like to conclude by thanking SCAD, led so ably by Hazmik; our interpreters, who are so professional and patient; and last but not least, the technical officers who have made it possible to meet over the past 15 months. I pay tribute particularly to the calm patience of Brian and his colleagues as I wait for the bridge to disconnect me one last time.

Finally, I want to thank my own colleagues in the UK Mission who are the most knowledgeable, innovative, hard-working and fun people you could hope to lead. None of us could operate here without the experts who sustain us all – my thanks to all of them across all our missions.

Thank you, Mr President.

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