

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria

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As delivered

Thank you, Madam President. I hope you can all hear me.

I returned last week from a visit to Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, my first mission to the region in my new capacity.

The visit offered an opportunity for candid and constructive discussions, including in Damascus with Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad and his Deputy, Bashar al-Jaafari, and in Ankara with Presidential Spokesman Kalin as well as the Deputy Foreign Minister there.

My primary conclusion from my visit is that humanitarian needs in Syria are greater than they have ever been, as many people told me, even though we may read about it less in the front pages of newspapers.

The latest assessments tell us that this is the case. As authorities in Damascus reminded me, an estimated 13.4 million people across Syria require humanitarian assistance. This is a 21 per cent increase compared to the year before and the highest since 2017.

And the lived reality in Syria is even more dire than figures can describe. My visit, during my time in Syria, to Aleppo gave me a first-hand glimpse.

I spoke there with women, men and children about the profound effects of more than ten years of conflict. Children asked for help to learn, to receive health care, and for fuel to survive the upcoming winter. Women-headed households spoke of the challenges they have in finding income, almost none of them having such income available, as well as for their families to survive.

And thanks to a Syrian NGO supported by the Syria Humanitarian Fund, a nearby clinic in the areas that I visited provides life-saving care, including for children with cancer. And I met a

young boy suffering exactly from that terrible affliction. And it does this with limited electricity, with limited running water or medication.

Patients, and of course their families, must travel from the outskirts of Aleppo city, where I was visiting, to receive the treatments, assuming they are even available.

Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers anguish – and indeed, they spoke to me about this – over their separation from family members, many located across front lines nearby. Families live with daily heartbreak because of a lack of documentation, safe passage and security guarantees, which prevent family reunion.

Madam President,

I also learned in these discussions about the protracted water crisis affecting many parts of Syria.

And this was brought up by Syrian as well as Turkish authorities in Damascus, Aleppo, Ankara and Antakya alike.

People simply do not have clean water. And the lack of access to safe water is disproportionately impacting the general health and reproductive health of women and girls.

There is a human right to water, which entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, accessible and affordable water. And established mechanisms over the many years for managing transboundary water issues are no longer tenable, and this impasse must be removed.

And you can see the consequence of this – the lack of electricity leading to the absence of schooling, leading to the difficulties in clinics. You can see the cascade of consequences of this problem also affected, of course, by climate change. We need to work together, as I mentioned to all those I met, to find an agreed solution to this particular problem.

Madam President,

Donors remain generous in their support for the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan – which is, at \$4.2 billion a year, the largest and most expensive plan worldwide. And I have no doubt of the basis of needs, but I also observe the quantity desired.

Humanitarian needs, of course, tragically outstrip available resources. Only 27 per cent of the response is funded. Just over a quarter of the people in need in Syria have a chance of meeting their needs through this humanitarian operation.

And even if this total increases in the coming months, through the response and generosity of donors – which I hope it will – funding is not keeping pace with the growing needs of Syrians. This is a fundamental and objective reality.

Communities that I met are determined, of course as elsewhere, to restart their lives, yet desperately need early recovery support to do so. Children want to learn, families want to prosper, and young adults want to work. They want support, as anywhere else in the world, to find their own dignified path to a better future.

Greater investment in resilience activities is an important way – one of the few ways – to do just that. Put another way, failure to invest in resilience activities will, of course, inevitably lead to greater humanitarian need and greater tension.

Early recovery and livelihoods programmes, as I saw, are already an essential part of the humanitarian response in Syria and have been the subject of the debates in this Council, of course, recently. The UN and its partners, and perhaps particularly its partners, help students have drinking water in their schools, displaced families are provided more sustainable accommodations, and farmers to replant their fields, with the focus on livelihoods.

However, much, much more needs to be done to put people in Syria on the path towards recovery. And this is the essential part of my conclusion from this visit. The UN and its partners need to design new programmes. Authorities need to facilitate even more activities. And of course we need donors to invest further in early recovery.

I think I'm right in saying that early recovery assistance is about 10 per cent of the overall Humanitarian Response Plan, and this needs to be increased if the essential access to basic services is to be met.

Such activities should be based on assessed and objective needs and should be in addition – in addition – to ongoing and urgently needed relief efforts. It's not either/or; it's both/and.

And many people I spoke to – of course, Syrian families, but also people in the humanitarian community who have been there these past ten years – spoke to me that the needs have never been greater, and the needs have never been more urgent.

Self-reliance, in Syria as elsewhere, is the best way to help the people of Syria to regain a sense of the future in Syria, in addition to all the many other issues that must cloud their future.

Madam President,

I returned from Syria with some positive news. While in Aleppo, the World Food Programme completed the first cross-line operation, as I'm sure you know, into north-west Syria since 2017, four years ago. The operation transported food rations for some 50,000 people in need to a warehouse in north Syria, in Idleb.

I met an OCHA staff member – I was in Aleppo by chance on that day – who described to me the tension on both sides of the front line, as those initial trucks crossed from government-controlled areas across no man's land into north-west Syria.

That mission required considerable effort, trust, negotiation. Tragically, it cost a Syrian soldier his life, when he was killed by a landmine at the last checkpoint in the operation.

So I, as I'm sure you do, commend all parties involved for taking this important step. The cross-line operation, much discussed in this Council, shows the United Nations and our partners' resolve to assist people in need through all possible modalities and with all efforts.

But much more is needed. The WFP food supplies need to be distributed, and are sufficient to only cover a fraction of the enormous food needs in north-west Syria.

Moreover, the challenges faced highlight both the difficulty in deploying cross-line operations and the reality, I'm afraid to state very clearly, that cross-border operations conducted from Turkey remain the most efficient and predictable way to reach millions of people in need.

Nonetheless, the UN aims to build on the WFP operation and experience. An inter-agency cross-line operation is being planned, with the view to deliver more varied assistance to people in need in north-west Syria.

And of course, Madam President, I would be happy to update this Council on these processes when you meet next month.

Madam President,

My visit to Damascus was, as you all know, also coincided with continued tensions, if that's the right word, in southern Syria, particularly around the neighbourhood of Dara'a Al-Balad.

I discussed these issues with the Syrian authorities and others, and the need for the protection of civilians, the need for humanitarian access and the well-being of over 36,000 people displaced in recent hostilities.

News about the recent agreement is welcomed. The ceasefire is an important development. We will need to see how this develops, and we will need to hope that it develops in the right way. It's important that the terms of the agreement be honoured, and that the restoration of humanitarian access which we hear about is also welcomed and sustained.

Food distributions resumed across the governorate this week, and emergency assistance entered Dara'a Al-Balad. Most displaced persons have reportedly returned to the area. And I don't want to say this without any sense of the tragedy that affected the population in that governorate and in Dara'a Al-Balad, in the many weeks of the crisis that overtook their lives.

Further assessments are planned in the coming days to assess outstanding humanitarian needs, and we will of course use those assessments to guide future relief efforts.

Madam President,

To sum up, and it is a very simple conclusion in humanitarian terms, Syria is caught in a downward spiral. The country will continue to be a place of tragedy so long as the conflict continues. Need and suffering will continue to grow in the near term.

I came away with a renewed commitment and conviction to identify, develop and invest in sustainable and effective ways to help. And I realize the complexity of that, and I realize the sensitivity of that. But this is what we owe, in this Council and in the countries that are represented here, this is what we owe to the people of Syria, because at the moment we are not meeting those needs. They continue to suffer, and those children that I met in that classroom in Aleppo continue to have an uncertain future, and it is our job to bring some kind of consolation in that future.

Thank you, Madam President.