



# Security Council

Seventy-eighth year

**9291**<sup>st</sup> meeting

Thursday, 23 March 2023, 10 a.m.

New York

*Provisional*

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<i>President:</i>	Mr. Fernandes . . . . .	(Mozambique)
<i>Members:</i>	Albania . . . . .	Mr. Spasse
	Brazil . . . . .	Mr. De Almeida Filho
	China . . . . .	Mr. Geng Shuang
	Ecuador . . . . .	Mr. Pérez Loose
	France . . . . .	Mr. De Rivière
	Gabon . . . . .	Ms. Betoe Ndojombouet
	Ghana . . . . .	Mr. Agyeman
	Japan . . . . .	Mrs. Shino
	Malta . . . . .	Mr. Camilleri
	Russian Federation . . . . .	Mr. Nebenzia
	Switzerland . . . . .	Mrs. Baeriswyl
	United Arab Emirates . . . . .	Mr. Abushahab
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Kariuki
	United States of America . . . . .	Mr. DeLaurentis

## Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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*The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.*

### **Adoption of the agenda**

*The agenda was adopted.*

### **The situation in the Middle East**

**The President:** In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria; and Mr. Tareq Talahma, Acting Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

**Mr. Pedersen:** I have just returned to Geneva from Amman, where I briefed and engaged with senior officials of Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union and the League of Arab States, focusing on the way forward in the aftermath of last month's tragic earthquakes.

I had already benefited from in-depth discussions with Egyptian Minister for Foreign Affairs Shoukry Selim and League of Arab States Secretary General Aboul Gheit in Cairo, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan in Riyadh, and Jordanian Foreign Minister Safadi in Amman. I welcome the attention of the region on the crisis in Syria following the earthquakes.

Meanwhile, Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi visited Latakia, Jableh and Damascus in Syria in recent days. She met Syrian Minister for Foreign Affairs Mekdad and other senior Government officials in Damascus and on the ground in areas affected by the earthquakes.

Our messages have been the same with all those with whom we have engaged: let me share them with you today.

First, it is absolutely vital to continue to provide resources to support the emergency response to the earthquakes, while also of course continuing to support the broader humanitarian response — both in Syria and in the neighbouring countries — to the immense suffering arising from the conflict. I welcome the pledges made for the Syrian earthquake response at the recent international donor conference held in Brussels and urge early disbursement of pledges. I continue to coordinate closely with my senior United Nations colleagues, and I welcome the recent engagements in Damascus of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths. Today my colleague from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Tareq Talahma, will brief the Council more in detail on the humanitarian situation.

Secondly, we need a sustained calm on the ground, especially in areas affected by the earthquakes. The week after the earthquakes, signs of such calm emerged, with a relative lull in violence in most quarters. For brief moments, the unimaginable became real: parties on each side of the front line largely refraining from hostilities. Since then, we have seen a creeping rise in incidents: regular exchanges of shelling and rocket fire across front lines in the north-west and north-east; some cross-line raids by listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham; United States claims of rocket attacks on its troops in Deir ez-Zor; an incident in Afrin in which some armed opposition fighters fired on civilians; further security incidents in the south-west; Da'esh attacks; and further airstrikes attributed to Israel, including on the Aleppo international airport, which resulted in material damage and an airport closure that affected humanitarian operations.

My concern is not just about the harm that such violence does to civilians. We have seen in the past that small incidents can bring about a broader escalation, and that must be avoided at all costs. I have therefore been working with key stakeholders on achieving a sustained calm, especially starting in the areas affected by the earthquake in north-west Syria. It is a matter that I have raised widely, including in Damascus and with Iran, Türkiye, the Russian Federation, the United States and all the other members of the ceasefire task force that meets in Geneva. I appreciate the positive responses of key task force members to the appeal and hope that they can exert their influence to tamp

down the violence. Sustained calm will be an essential ingredient in donor confidence for support to genuine rehabilitation in areas affected by the earthquakes.

Thirdly, in the same way that we have seen moves from the various sides in the humanitarian arena, that logic can and must be applied to address post-earthquake rehabilitation and the broader political challenges. We have seen two long-closed crossing points reopened, and new openings on sanctions, showing that sides with differing views can make constructive moves. I sense from all the discussions I have had that there is an opportunity to make progress with additional moves on all sides beyond the immediate emergency. In the effort to advance the discussion, we must engage with the Syrian parties on how they can create an enabling environment for earthquake rehabilitation, and with outside actors on how they can provide enhanced resources and remove any hindrances, including those arising from sanctions. For example, the security situation, civilian protection, housing, land and property issues and civil documentation, as well as livelihoods, basic services and energy infrastructure, are all vital issues related to earthquake rehabilitation. They and other issues, such as conscription and detention, are also of vital importance to Syrian civilians in general, including refugees and internally displaced persons. There are also other issues that have featured in discussions to date. They can all be the subject of constructive work.

I believe that verifiable steps implemented mutually and reciprocally by all sides are doable and that they can enable us to move forward incrementally into post-earthquake rehabilitation and in the process to make progress on political confidence-building on issues related to resolution 2254 (2015). I should note that I will continue to prioritize the file on the detained, abducted and missing, including engaging with their families. Earlier this month, I met representatives of the Truth and Justice Charter, who relayed to me how the earthquake had further compounded their angst in not knowing the fate or whereabouts of their loved ones or if they might have been affected by the earthquakes. Meanwhile, my Deputy continued to press the issue with interlocutors during her recent visit to Damascus. I also want to take this opportunity to reiterate the Secretary-General's call on the General Assembly to consider establishing a new international body to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons.

Fourthly, we must all understand that a degree of cooperation across divides is essential if we are to

find a way forward. None of the parties — the Syrian Government, the Syrian opposition, the Western players, the Arab players, the Astana players or the other parties concerned — can move the process forward alone. Individual approaches cannot make the kind of qualitative difference that a coordinated approach can. But if all are prepared to put practical points on the table and to coordinate and work together, I believe more firmly than ever that it is possible and essential to move forward, step for step and step by step. In that spirit, I look forward to further engagement with the Government of Syria and the Syrian Negotiations Commission in the period ahead as well as in the region and beyond. The good offices of the United Nations will need strong support from all outside actors in the next phase. I also believe there is a distinct and important role in this for key regional players and look forward to continuing to closely coordinate with them and all concerned. As part of an inclusive approach, I will continue to engage with a wide range of Syrians through the Civil Society Support Room and the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, which convened in The Hague two weeks ago. Their insights continue to inform our approach.

I am concerned about the fact that the Constitutional Committee has not met for 10 months, sending a troubling message that Syrians' ability to search for a comprehensive solution is being held hostage to issues unrelated to their country. The Committee must resume its work in Geneva in a spirit of compromise and substance and at pace. The situation today is at such an unprecedented level that it calls for leadership, bold ideas and a cooperative spirit. A political solution is the only way forward for Syria. We may not be able to reach that in one step, but I believe we can progress towards it gradually. The status quo is unacceptable. The renewed diplomatic attention on Syria, including in the region, and the shared suffering of all Syrians in the aftermath of the earthquakes create new obligations and opportunities. If all parties engage, I believe they can move forward.

Last week we passed the awful milestone of 12 years since the start of the conflict. A Syrian-owned, Syrian-led and United Nations-facilitated political process supported by the international community is more essential than ever. A political solution must restore Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. We must move down

that path, even if only in stages. I am ready to use my good offices, develop proposals and convene the necessary players in an effort to help facilitate the way forward, which is consistent with my mandate under resolution 2254 (2015).

**The President:** I thank Mr. Pedersen for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Talahma.

**Mr. Talahma:** The earthquakes of 6 February and their aftermath have been a stark reminder of the speed with which tragedy can strike, altering lives in a matter of seconds. As teams continue to clear the rubble, the death toll has continued to climb, with more than 56,000 deaths currently recorded. Thousands of survivors continue to seek treatment for physical injuries as well as trauma. The physical destruction is staggering. In Syria, the World Bank estimates the total losses at \$5.2 billion, with the actual total likely much higher. The damage to housing accounts for approximately half of the estimated destruction, leaving millions of people in temporary living situations, unable or unwilling to return to their homes. The recent rain and floods have only compounded the hardship facing many families, forcing many in camp sites to relocate yet again to safer locations.

The immediate humanitarian crisis was staggering in terms of not only the speed of the destruction, but also the scale of the needs. The disaster strained existing delivery infrastructure and affected humanitarian organizations already on the ground. Unfortunately, that included the death and injury of aid workers, among them United Nations staff.

Despite those challenges, within hours of the earthquakes, the United Nations released \$15 million from its emergency fund, increasing that amount to \$40 million within days. Working with partners, we provided 2.2 million people with emergency food, ready-to-eat rations and cash transfers. We carried out more than 1.1 million medical consultations, and we provided water and sanitation services to almost 380,000 people. We continue to conduct daily missions in earthquake-affected areas, delivering assistance, assessing the structural integrity of buildings and identifying protection requirements. Blanket approvals for staff movements and assessments have already assisted those efforts.

The expanded cross-border modality has also proved essential in north-west Syria. More than 900

trucks, with aid from seven United Nations agencies, have now reached north-west Syria from Türkiye via the three available border crossings at Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai.

Much more needs to be done in the weeks ahead. Collective shelters must be decongested and consolidated. Adequate housing must be supported. Safe, voluntary and dignified returns must be facilitated. Family reunification, community awareness interventions and other protection services must be extended in order to address serious concerns, particularly regarding women and girls. Public health emergencies, in particular the ongoing cholera outbreak, must be monitored. Health and surgical services must be strengthened.

The generosity of donors is vital to those efforts. Their support, both financial and in-kind assistance, has been a lifeline for the affected communities. We welcome the European Union and international donor conference that took place in Brussels earlier this week. The approximately €7 billion pledged towards response efforts in both Syria and Türkiye will be essential to supporting the relief efforts in the months ahead.

We cannot lose sight of the reality that this immense tragedy struck millions of people in Syria already suffering the poverty, displacement and deprivation of 12 years of conflict, as Mr. Pedersen just said. Some 15.3 million people across Syria, many of whom were affected by the earthquake, have few resources beyond humanitarian assistance and protection support to meet their most basic needs.

Women and girls have paid the highest price. Targeted violence against health-care personnel and infrastructure has impeded vital sexual and reproductive health care, taking a far-reaching toll on the health and well-being of women and girls.

The pressures show no sign of easing. Food prices have almost doubled in the past 12 months. Adequate water supplies are becoming less certain in many areas. Sufficient livelihoods remain elusive for too many people in Syria.

Those deepening needs will require the continued resolve of the international community. Not surprisingly, the 2023 humanitarian response plan for Syria is the largest worldwide. Yet, at present, it is only 6 per cent funded. The generosity demonstrated in recent weeks must be extended to, and not come at the expense of, the ongoing humanitarian response across Syria to ensure

that life-saving and early-recovery assistance reaches all those in need. Further action is required to create a more enabling environment, in which humanitarian assistance can reach communities in a safe, predictable and timely fashion.

In late February, a United Nations inter-agency team delivered emergency supplies during a cross-line mission to Ras Al-Ayn town in Al-Hasakah governorate. The mission was a welcome step. We hope to see similar progress with regard to cross-line deliveries in north-west Syria soon.

Under-Secretary-General Griffiths has just concluded his second mission to the region since the 6 February earthquakes. The visit provided an opportunity to resume important discussions with Government officials and humanitarian partners about issues related to preserving humanitarian space. It also allowed for further exchanges about the efficiency and transparency of humanitarian programming in Syria.

The earthquakes brought about a disaster on top of a catastrophe for millions of people in northern Syria. We have responded to that devastation, mobilizing all available resources to deploy additional staff, raise new funds and advocate for more direct access. We will continue to do that to support all people in need across Syria, wherever they are located. The needs are great, but our resolve also remains steadfast.

**The President:** I thank Mr. Talahma for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

**Mr. De Almeida Filho (Brazil):** I am delivering this statement on behalf of Switzerland and Brazil, as co-penholders of the Syria humanitarian file.

Let me first thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Talahma for their updates. Their briefings make it clear that our work in Syria is far from over, and that the Security Council needs to continue to follow the situation there very closely.

Last week, Syria entered the thirteenth consecutive year of conflict, with one of the world's most serious and complex humanitarian crises, exacerbated by a natural disaster of major proportions. The February earthquakes struck areas heavily affected by the conflict, in which millions live in camps, informal settlements or unsafe buildings in precarious conditions. In north-west Syria, 4.1 million Syrians, including 2.9 million

internally displaced persons, were already dependent on humanitarian assistance. It is appalling that the conflict remains acute in areas in which emergency post-disaster humanitarian operations are taking place.

There is a multidimensional humanitarian crisis, compounded by food insecurity, water, electricity and fuel shortages, a lack of proper shelter and sanitation, and a heightened risk of outbreaks of new diseases, while many health facilities were damaged. Some 15.3 million people were already in need of assistance before the earthquake. Some 8.8 million people in Syria have been affected — and 500,000 displaced — by this natural disaster. An increased number of children are out of school. Many of the learning facilities that were operational have been damaged, destroyed or are now being used to provide families affected by the earthquakes with temporary shelter. In this dire situation, we need to ensure that the humanitarian needs of all affected people living in all parts of Syria are met.

As we recognize the recent constructive steps taken to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria, we reiterate that all modalities of aid, including cross-border and cross-line, need to be made available to humanitarian actors operating in the country. Assistance planned before 6 February should continue, while additional needs triggered by the earthquake have to be met.

It is encouraging that two additional crossings have been opened for the United Nations, that the flow of aid deliveries across the border has grown and that more than 937 trucks crossed Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai after the earthquakes. Unfortunately, no cross-line convoy has taken place so far. We recall that all aid modalities should be used to reach the most vulnerable.

Disruption of humanitarian operations due to damaged infrastructure or security concerns can have drastic humanitarian consequences for those who have been affected by the earthquake, but also to the wider vulnerable population in need of humanitarian assistance. It is crucial that aid flows without obstructions. Humanitarian workers need unhindered access to people in need of assistance. Switzerland and Brazil reiterate the calls on all parties to facilitate timely, unimpeded and sustainable access for humanitarian relief and personnel and to open all routes to get to all people in every way possible. We

recall that all parties must abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Humanitarian operations also need resources. We welcome the pledges made on Monday at the international donor conference in Brussels and the financial support received from the Syrian earthquake flash appeal. We further encourage the donor community to continue to contribute to the humanitarian response plan for 2023.

We are grateful for the efforts undertaken by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and all United Nations agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations, to scale up humanitarian operations under the even more challenging conditions following the earthquakes. The Security Council must also do its part, which includes putting differences aside and working constructively towards improving the living conditions in Syria.

There can be no lasting peace in Syria without a meaningful political process. After so much suffering and trauma, the Syrian people, especially children who have never experienced peace, need a chance for a better future.

I would now like to speak in my national capacity on the political situation in Syria. I will make six points.

First, we are pleased to report that the Brazilian humanitarian donations arrived in Syria, including seven tons of nutritional dehydrated food and 90 water purifiers with the capacity to produce more than 500,000 litres daily, serving more than 25,000 people.

Secondly, Brazil remains convinced that a military solution is illusory and deleterious for the future of Syria. Only a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political process, facilitated by the United Nations, with due respect for the preservation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, will bring lasting peace.

Thirdly, a comprehensive ceasefire is urgent. We condemn all terrorist activities and attacks by foreign forces, which not only continue to harm civilians and damage civilian infrastructure, but also seriously undermine the prospect of a credible political process.

Fourthly, resolution 2254 (2015) establishes a road map for a political solution to the conflict. We thank the Special Envoy for his unwavering commitment to its implementation and for his continued engagement with a wide range of stakeholders in order to try to find a way out of the current impasse.

Fifthly, we hope that the Small Body of the Syrian Constitutional Committee can resume its work as soon as possible, which involves not only a decision on the venue for the meetings but also and above all a renewed commitment to moving the process forward.

Sixthly and lastly, with regard to missing persons, grieving families must have the answers they seek in relation to the whereabouts of their missing relatives. Political will from all parties is necessary in order to address this serious and urgent issue.

In conclusion, we expect that recent signs of cooperation between the Syrian Government and the United Nations, as well as with regional actors, can contribute to a positive dynamic on this file. Brazil agrees with the assessment of the Special Envoy that the challenges faced in responding to the catastrophic earthquake are a stark reminder that the status quo is unsustainable and indefensible, and that the earthquake could be nonetheless a turning point. The coordinated action undertaken in its aftermath demonstrates that collaboration is possible. If the same logic is applied to the goal of advancing the political process, we could move towards a comprehensive resolution of the conflict.

**Mr. DeLaurentis** (United States of America): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Mr. Talahma for their helpful but sobering briefings.

The war in Syria has entered its thirteenth year. The toll of this war is unimaginable. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and many more injured. Towns, villages and neighbourhoods have been levelled. There are more than 155,000 people unjustly detained and missing, and more than 13 million people internally displaced or living as refugees. A generation of children in Syria has known nothing but war and deprivations.

In these years of war, the Al-Assad regime has never seriously sought peace. Rather, it has committed atrocities, some of which have risen to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and hid behind its patrons, Russia and Iran. The Al-Assad regime's refusal to participate in meetings of the Constitutional Committee over the last eight months, after nine rounds of meetings where the regime attended but acted in bad faith, is a clear demonstration of Al-Assad's belief that he can fight or starve the Syrian people into submission.

Special Envoy Pedersen has diligently sought to find any means to advance the stalled political process through his broad engagement with all parties in his step-for-step initiative. The United States supports that effort. As we have said previously, our full participation would require the Syrian regime to reciprocate in good faith. And yet, the Al-Assad regime appears content to stall, perhaps seeking better offers and concessions from the international community, while proposing nothing to build confidence or demonstrate that Damascus is willing to work towards peace and stability. Al-Assad must re-engage constructively in the United Nations-facilitated Syrian-led political process, consistent with resolution 2254 (2015). That is the only viable path to finding a lasting political solution to the conflict.

We caution those States that are engaging with Al-Assad to seek verifiably constructive outcomes for Syrians and the broader region. In any engagement, real steps to ensure sustained, predictable and independent humanitarian access in order to bring an end to the regime's atrocities and otherwise improve the situation for the people in Syria should be front and centre. The Al-Assad regime needs to take irreversible steps to alleviate suffering. Al-Assad is still the brutal dictator whose regime repeatedly used chemical weapons against the Syrian people, as the most recent report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons further demonstrated. His regime has conducted attacks on civilians, schools and hospitals, and has detained, tortured or murdered hundreds of thousands of people. Al-Assad is also flooding the region with captagon, spreading addiction and criminality.

The tragedy of the earthquake has not transformed Al-Assad into a statesman worthy of embrace. Only genuine, comprehensive and irreversible reform will do that. In the meantime, we will focus our efforts on improving the situation on the ground for the millions of people in Syria. The humanitarian crisis in Syria was desperate before the earthquake, with more than 15 million people in need of assistance. The United States has been the largest donor of humanitarian assistance for Syria, providing nearly \$16 billion over the 12 years of the war. The earthquake massively exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in north-western Syria, creating enormous additional needs for shelter, medical supplies, food and fuel. The United States has announced \$235 million in earthquake relief for Syria and Türkiye, including an additional \$50 million announced this week at the donor conference that

was generously hosted by Sweden and the European Union. We urge all States to help with earthquake recovery and, when possible, to work directly with the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations to ensure that assistance gets to those in need. The seventh Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, to be held this summer, will be an important moment to show our solidarity with the Syrian people and the countries that so generously host Syrian refugees.

The United States reiterates its support for the distribution of humanitarian aid through all modalities. The continued flow of United Nations cross-border aid through Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai is essential to saving lives. We applaud the United Nations for taking full advantage of the increased access it has been temporarily afforded for its humanitarian operations in response to the earthquake. We urge all parties to do everything possible to ensure sustained, predictable humanitarian access to the populations in need in Syria, and we urge against any attempt to exploit the tragedy of the earthquake for political gain. We also strongly urge all parties to facilitate cross-line aid to the north-west and to all Syrian communities in need.

We categorically reject assertions that United States sanctions are the cause of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Al-Assad's 12 years of war, abetted by his regime's mismanagement and corruption, are the obvious cause of the crisis. We also reject assertions that our sanctions, which target Al-Assad and his cronies, who have committed atrocities and abuses, hinder humanitarian assistance. Our sanctions have carve-outs that support the flow of humanitarian assistance through the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations. And since the earthquake, we have worked not only with humanitarian organizations to ensure that they can continue their work but also with foreign Governments to ensure that we can address the needs of the Syrian people. Since 6 February, we have seen countless relief and medical supplies arriving in both regime and non-regime areas, via land, air and sea, from all over the world. We continue to stand ready to assist those providing legitimate humanitarian aid if they perceive any sanctions-related hindrance to delivering assistance.

Women have been uniquely harmed by the conflict, in particular those women whose family members have been arbitrarily detained by the regime. While we are

focused on helping to address basic needs following the devastating earthquakes, at the same time we have not forgotten the tens of thousands of people who have been unjustly detained and/or missing since long before the earthquakes struck. Family members have a right to know the fates of their loved ones. The United States supports the establishment of a humanitarian mechanism to catalogue and report the whereabouts of the detained and the fate of those who are missing. We look forward to working with others to help establish such a mechanism. Nearly one year ago, Al-Assad announced a broad amnesty. We took note of that effort at the time, hopeful for real progress. While that reportedly resulted in the release of some 500 people, which was a comfort to the families of those individuals, it unfortunately left unaddressed the fate of thousands of others. We urge the regime and all actors to immediately release arbitrary detainees in a humane and orderly fashion and to share information on those who have died in detention and return their bodies to loved ones.

**Mr. Nebenzia** (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Acting Director Talahma for their briefings on the political and humanitarian situation in Syria.

We have consistently supported the Special Envoy's mediation efforts to promote a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned settlement that is based on resolution 2254 (2015), while respecting the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria, without external interference. In that regard, we believe it is important for the Special Envoy to adhere strictly to the mandate established by the Security Council, which has at its core the promotion of intra-Syrian dialogue, including within the framework of the Constitutional Committee. In that regard, we note Mr. Pedersen's work to resume regular meetings of the Constitutional Committee, without any linkage to a specific location. We believe that principled decisions on the modalities for future rounds of intra-Syrian consultations should be taken by the Syrians themselves.

The humanitarian situation in and around the Syrian Arab Republic is determined to a large extent by the consequences of the earthquake that occurred on 6 February. Regrettably, there have been reports this month that Israel repeatedly inflicted additional damage that compounded the humanitarian situation. On 7 and 22 March, Israeli fighter jets fired missiles at the Aleppo international airport, which is the closest

airport to the areas hardest hit by the earthquake, along the Syrian-Turkish border. I would like to recall that in addition to receiving international humanitarian flights, that airport is also used by the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service to transport all necessary humanitarian supplies, including medicines, to the rest of the country. Because of those Israeli strikes, aircraft arriving from third countries have to be rerouted to airports in Damascus and Latakia for some time. Humanitarian aid was then transported from those areas by road to the same province of Aleppo. Against the backdrop of the growing fuel crisis in what was once a self-sufficient country, including in oil resources, such additional costs have dealt a serious blow to the logistical capabilities of humanitarian workers, while the needs of the population continue to increase.

Another factor complicating the humanitarian situation in the country is the ongoing occupation of the resource-rich Trans-Euphrates by the United States. This glaring violation of international law does not bother Washington, which is accustomed to lecturing others. On 4 March, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States Armed Forces Mark Milley, accompanied by journalists, paid a visit to the Rumeilan American base in north-eastern Syria, showing once again that abiding by the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria is not part of the United States' plans.

Since Syria is pursuing an independent policy, the United States and its satellites deny it the right to develop independently. According to the information we have and despite the existing humanitarian exemptions, it is not possible to bring into the country heavy construction equipment, which is urgently needed for clearing rubble in earthquake-ravaged areas in Government-controlled territory. The reason given is the same as for fertilizers — that they are dual-use goods. That is a very convenient bureaucratic excuse for Washington and Brussels. We also have to deal with banking overcompliance, which undermines humanitarian efforts. Foreign companies simply refuse to contract with the United Nations. We ask the Secretariat not to cover for Washington and Brussels. Ultimately, they undermine not only the humanitarian efforts of the United Nations on the ground, but also the image of the Organization as a whole.

Since 9 February, 900 trucks with humanitarian aid have already entered territory not controlled by Damascus through the three checkpoints on the Syrian-Turkish border. According to United Nations estimates,



the number of trucks crossing the border on a daily basis has doubled compared to last year. The vast majority of them are sent to Idlib.

This shows that there is no problem with the functioning of all three checkpoints and no impediment to the United Nations visiting the rebel areas of north-western Syria, where militants are operating. As at 15 March, according to the Secretariat, there have already been 27 such missions. This month, the areas controlled by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham were personally visited by World Health Organization head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi. It turns out that, owing to the dire humanitarian situation in the region, the terrorists gladly opened the doors to all United Nations representatives, providing them and humanitarian convoys from Türkiye with the necessary security guarantees. At the same time, we hear from the Secretariat that the United Nations does not have sufficient guarantees for humanitarian cross-line deliveries from Damascus. The United Nations therefore lowers its gaze and shrugs its shoulders, despite the fact that the need for increasing cross-line supplies is directly set out in resolution 2672 (2023).

We call on the leadership of the humanitarian wing of the United Nations to stop hiding behind politically correct language, to stop pandering to terrorists and their backers and to call a spade a spade. The Al-Nusra Front does not even plan to provide humanitarian workers with access from Damascus. And since these gangsters can choose to accept humanitarian assistance from wherever they wish, it follows that the humanitarian needs of the region are not as high as we are being told.

Under these conditions, there is good reason to wonder to what extent there is a need for the cross-border mechanism. Its United Nations mandate expires soon. We have repeatedly noted how flawed this system is, as it violates the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. The hypocrisy that we are seeing with regard to cross-line deliveries increasingly convinces us that the provision of humanitarian supplies to all regions of Syria should be carried out with the consent of the legitimate Government of the country — as is the case with the opening of two additional border crossings in Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai.

In conclusion, we would like to inform the Council that on 13 March, 56 Russian children aged

3 to 17 were returned to Russia — 49 of them from refugee camps in the Trans-Euphrates and 7 from an orphanage in Damascus. That required not only painstaking preparatory work, but also negotiations with local authorities. In the course of such contacts, we reached an agreement for the return of another 200 Russian children.

We call on other States to step up efforts to bring their nationals back from internally displaced persons camps in Syria.

**Mr. Abushahab** (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen and Mr. Tareq Talahma for their important briefings.

Last week marked the twelfth year of the war in Syria. Syrians are still suffering from the horrendous consequences of that war. The recent earthquake exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Syria and added to the pain of the Syrian people. It is high time to move towards a new phase of stability and development in Syria, and for countries to turn the page on their disagreements in order to address the Syrian crisis without polarization or divisions in the international system. Traditional and hard-line positions that differentiate and discriminate between a Syrian in Damascus and a Syrian in Idlib must be set aside.

In the context of our discussion today on the humanitarian and political situations in Syria, I would like to make the following five points.

First, we underscore that security and stability in Syria will not be achieved without addressing the various security challenges and focusing all diplomatic efforts on resolving the crisis rather than simply managing it. In that regard, we reiterate our support for the efforts of the United Nations and the Special Envoy for Syria to bridge regional and international political viewpoints in order to break the current stalemate in the political track, which has become increasingly pressing.

We also support the Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire across Syria. We reiterate our rejection of foreign interference in Syria and stress the need to respect its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. In that context, we strongly condemn the air strikes that resulted in damage to the Aleppo international airport. We call on all States to uphold international law and protect civilian infrastructure, particularly in the aftermath of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Secondly, we stress that activating the Arab role in resolving Arab crises, including the Syrian crisis, is indispensable for achieving stability in the region. Syria is an Arab country, and it cannot be separated from the Arab region. Likewise, Arab countries must embrace Syria and help heal its wounds, as demonstrated by the Arab solidarity with our Syrian brothers after the disastrous earthquake. In line with our commitment to strengthen Arab and regional security and stability, my country recently hosted the Syrian President as part of our continued solidarity with the Syrian people in those harsh conditions.

Thirdly, with regard to the humanitarian situation, we reiterate our full support for the brotherly people of Syria during this critical time. For its part, the United Arab Emirates continues to respond to the difficult situation resulting from the earthquake by providing relief and medical aid as well as field hospitals to Syria and Türkiye, and by working closely with the United Nations to alleviate the suffering of those affected. To that end, we provided an aid package of more than \$300 million for both countries, including \$20 million to support the United Nations emergency response plan for Syria. In the aftermath of the earthquake, my country has also received a number of survivors from Syria in need of medical treatment for critical conditions.

Fourthly, we stress the urgency of reaching all the areas affected by the earthquake by all appropriate routes. Regrettably, in a dangerous exploitation of an ongoing disaster, no cross-line humanitarian assistance has been delivered since the earthquake. Terrorist groups are arbitrarily denying humanitarian access inside Syria in flagrant disregard for humanitarian values and principles, which is only increasing civilians' suffering. It is therefore imperative to ensure that cross-line aid is unobstructed and reaches those in need, in accordance with resolution 2672 (2023).

Fifthly and finally, we stress the importance of making every possible effort to facilitate the safe and dignified return of Syrian refugees to their homeland and to fulfil their humanitarian needs. That must be taken into consideration while implementing early-recovery and reconstruction projects. In that regard, we express our support for dialogue between Syria and Türkiye aimed at making progress on the return of refugees. The current situation in Syria cannot go unaddressed. Our brother people of Syria deserve to live in a secure and stable environment, and efforts

must be stepped up at every level to bring an end to the crisis there.

In conclusion, I congratulate the people of Syria, along with all Arab and Islamic peoples, on the beginning of the blessed month of Ramadan, hoping that it brings goodness and blessings to everyone.

**Mr. Geng Shuang** (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Acting Director Talahma for their briefings.

The humanitarian situation in north-west Syria has been a matter of particularly deep concern for the international community since the powerful earthquake struck on 6 February. The Syrian Government has opened the Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai crossing points, which has greatly improved the efficiency of the transfer of supplies. China welcomes that development and appreciates the positive interaction and cooperation between the Syrian Government and the United Nations, as well as the effective coordination work of the various United Nations humanitarian agencies.

In the next phase, the humanitarian assistance to Syria should be more organically integrated with post-disaster reconstruction, helping the Syrian side to restore infrastructure, strengthen and rebuild housing and maintain water and power supply systems. To that end, it is important to continue to promote relevant early-recovery projects. The Secretariat should consult closely with all the parties and work actively to make the appropriate plans. It will also be necessary to incorporate the clearance of explosive remnants of war into early-recovery projects as soon as possible so as to create a safe working environment for post-disaster reconstruction. At the same time, we want to point out that three obstacles have to be overcome in order to further improve the delivery of humanitarian relief in Syria.

First, no progress whatsoever has been made in terms of cross-line relief operations in north-west Syria over the past month. The Secretariat should make greater efforts to promote that relief work and report problems to the Council in a timely manner to facilitate the quest for solutions.

Secondly, given that it is an important piece of civilian infrastructure and a key hub for the transfer of humanitarian supplies, the safe operation of Aleppo airport should be guaranteed. We are concerned about the further Israeli air strike that occurred at the airport

yesterday and hope nothing similar will happen again. Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected.

Thirdly, while the countries concerned announced a temporary relaxation or suspension of the unilateral sanctions on Syria after the earthquake, such temporary measures cannot make up for the systemic damage caused by their long-term sanctions. They should immediately and unconditionally lift all illegal unilateral sanctions on Syria and stop artificially exacerbating the humanitarian disaster.

With regard to the political process in Syria, China welcomes Special Envoy Pedersen's extensive engagement with all parties on the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015), in line with his step-for-step approach. China supports a resumption of the Constitutional Committee meetings as soon as possible in accordance with the principle of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process.

We welcome the visit of the Syrian President to the United Arab Emirates and the meeting between the two Heads of State, as well as Tunisia's consideration of a restoration of diplomatic relations with Syria. We look forward to a positive outcome for the proposed meeting of the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran, Türkiye and Syria. We are confident that assistance from the countries of the region will help to boost the chances for a political settlement in Syria. We also call on more countries to take the initiative in creating a favourable external environment for a political settlement.

The current security situation in Syria remains complex. The international community must combat terrorism in Syria in all its forms and manifestations with zero tolerance. Any attempts to exploit terrorism for individual purposes will backfire and be counterproductive.

Finally, we once again urge foreign forces to withdraw all elements of their illegal military presence in Syria and to cease plundering Syria's natural resources.

**Mr. Pérez Loose** (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I appreciate the information provided by Special Envoy Pedersen and by the Acting Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Mr. Tareq Talahma.

We acknowledge the efforts of United Nations teams and their partner agencies on the ground to

continue to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Syrian population in the context of a dramatic increase in the number of homeless and displaced people. The contributions of donor States have been crucial, and in that connection our delegation supports the request of the Secretary-General to identify strategies that will enable the entire amount of the flash appeal that he made on 14 February to be collected as quickly as possible. According to figures compiled by OCHA, an estimated 8.8 million people have been affected by the earthquakes, half of them very severely. The health system is on the verge of collapse, aggravated by the growing numbers of cases of cholera, the coronavirus disease, stomach infections and skin conditions. The perception of insecurity is high, especially for women and children who survived the tragedy and have been left homeless. In addition, there is a worrisome number of children in need of nutritional assistance and access to basic services and health care.

Against the backdrop of devastation due to the war and the recent earthquakes, it is unacceptable that acts against the lives and integrity of the civilian population are being committed and that strategic infrastructure essential to citizens' basic subsistence is being destroyed, all in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. Ecuador categorically condemns the missile attacks on a residential neighbourhood in Damascus, as well as the destruction of the infrastructure of Aleppo international airport, which obstructed air traffic at a particularly sensitive time, considering the immense needs for humanitarian assistance.

The Security Council has demonstrated its commitment to identifying strategies for alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people. The adoption of resolution 2672 (2023) has kept the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing open while opening two additional trans-border crossings — Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai — following the earthquake, thereby enabling the entry of 910 trucks with humanitarian aid into north-west Syria. We urge the Government of Syria to keep those crossings open indefinitely and to cooperate with United Nations agencies. Ecuador reaffirms its commitment to continue to support initiatives that contribute to resolving the multidimensional crisis, especially through the implementation of Special Envoy Pedersen's step-for-step strategy. We call for silencing the guns in Syria. It is more important than ever for the countries of the region and the international community to now show their solidarity with the people of Syria.

**Mrs. Baeriswyl** (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I make this statement on the political situation in Syria in my national capacity. With regard to the humanitarian aspects, I echo what our colleague from Brazil stated on behalf of our two countries, and I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Mr. Talahma.

In March 2011, Syrian people marched through the streets of Dara'a and Damascus in search of reform. In many parts of Syria, the walls still bear traces of those first months in the form of graffiti that reflects not only the sadness and anger of Syrians but also their unshakeable determination to build a new future. Some 12 years after the first demonstrations, Syria remains marked by conflict. The repression of the civic aspirations of an entire generation of Syrians, the destruction of infrastructure and cultural and social ties, and the forced displacement of millions of people both inside and outside the country have changed it forever. After 12 years of conflict, the detention and enforced disappearance of tens of thousands of Syrians continues to weigh heavily on Syrian society. The issue of detainees and missing persons remains a key peace and security concern.

In the face of the gaping void left by those disappearances, and by the ashes and rubble caused by the conflict and more recently by the earthquakes, finding a political solution to the conflict in Syria remains of the utmost importance, and Syrian women have an important role to play in that regard. In order to improve women's social, material, human and political conditions in their country, we support the full, equal and meaningful participation of Syrian women in decisions that affect their future, their needs and their aspirations for the future, whether they are citizens, refugees or political or civil society representatives. That is in line with the women and peace and security agenda and resolution 2254 (2015). In that regard, we welcome the inclusive nature of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board and its efforts to promote dialogue.

As Special Envoy Pedersen recently said, "the situation in Syria is untenable, and to carry on in the same manner defies humanity and logic". Switzerland supports the Special Envoy's efforts to rebuild trust between the different parties in the current context so that this moment can be a turning point. We call for the United Nations to play an active role in the search for a political solution to the conflict, and we will continue to make Geneva available to host all types of talks and initiatives aimed at promoting a lasting peace in Syria.

Switzerland is concerned about the continued violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law committed by all the parties throughout the country since 2011. We call on all the parties to the conflict to respect their obligations in that regard in order to put an end to the disastrous situation in which civilians and the people who are deprived of their liberty because of the conflict find themselves. We remain particularly concerned about the continuing grave violations perpetrated against children. Ensuring justice and combating impunity are prerequisites for a lasting peace. In that connection, Switzerland supports, for example, the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria. We would also like to underscore the role that the Security Council can play in combating impunity. It is important to prevent such violations of international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, from being repeated in the future in Syria or elsewhere.

**Mr. Kariuki** (United Kingdom): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Mr. Talahma for their briefings and for the work of their teams.

Some 12 years ago, Syrian people peacefully took to the streets to demand freedom, political reform and a Government that respects and upholds human rights. The Al-Assad regime met those demands with a brutal assault against them. The earthquake last month added further tragedy to that crisis. The United Kingdom continues to direct our support to the Syrian people, having provided \$4.6 billion in humanitarian assistance since 2011. In the wake of the earthquake, we announced an additional \$52 million across Syria and Türkiye to fund food, medical supplies and shelter. Those resources must reach the more than 4.1 million people in north-west Syria in the most effective and efficient means possible, including through predictable cross-border access. We welcome the United Nations efforts to deliver and scale up that support. But let us not make the mistake of thinking that the conflict is over. Even after the earthquake, hostilities have resumed, with numerous examples of regime attacks harming civilians, while the billion-dollar narco-industry of captagon stemming from Syria presents a new and destabilizing risk to the region.

As the Secretary-General said on the anniversary of the conflict, the support and solidarity provided in the aftermath of the earthquake must be channelled into renewed energy on the political track. We need to

address the fundamental issues behind the conflict. An inclusive and accountable end to the conflict is urgently needed. Resolution 2254 (2015) provides the framework for delivering the sustainable and lasting peace that the people of Syria deserve. We welcome all efforts to make progress on that track, including the important engagement of Special Envoy Pedersen and Member States in the region this week. I urge all colleagues in this Chamber to play their role in delivering peace for the Syrian people.

Next week, we will hear from the Secretary-General about the plight of the families who are still searching for their loved ones and his call to consider establishing a mechanism for the missing. That is an issue that affects all Syrians on all sides of the conflict. We hope that the United Nations can come together to give them some answers.

**Mrs. Shino** (Japan): I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Mr. Tareq Talahma, Acting Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for their briefings.

I would also like to start my statement by mentioning that this month marks 12 years since the beginning of the crisis in Syria. We should not forget the tragic stories of each and every victim — the murdered and the imprisoned, the homeless and the displaced, and the trauma of the children who have known only conflict since birth. The earthquake was a nightmare on top of a nightmare. An unprecedented approach is needed to deal with that unspeakable calamity. We need a drastic expansion of humanitarian aid and long-lasting assistance for the early recovery of the area affected. Japan has already provided emergency relief supplies and humanitarian assistance amounting to approximately \$18.5 million.

As a country with a history of major earthquakes, Japan can use its experience to identify what will be needed next. The priority should be promptly addressing secondary disaster risks, including the further collapse of buildings and the spread of epidemics, and making buildings and local communities resilient to earthquakes, as Foreign Minister Hayashi highlighted in his statement at the Brussels donor conference earlier this week. Donors should therefore continue to support the Syria flash appeal and humanitarian response plan generously. We must make full use of all aid modalities and further strengthen the coordination

among all humanitarian stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations and civil society.

Japan again welcomes the agreement between the Syrian Government and the United Nations to establish two additional cross-border points to enable more assistance to reach the north-west. We also acknowledge the blanket approval by the Syrian Government of cross-line aid. We have already witnessed approximately 1,000 United Nations aid convoys carrying relief supplies that provide a glimmer of hope amid the devastation, but further cooperation is needed. At the same time, we reject military actions aimed at exploiting the emergency for selfish gain. The recent air strikes on north-west Syria and the attack on Aleppo's international airport are extremely disturbing and have seriously hindered humanitarian assistance operations.

The holy month of Ramadan is a time for reflection and self-restraint. A cessation of hostilities and a countrywide ceasefire are essential both for delivering necessary aid and for promoting political dialogue among the parties concerned. We are very worried by the lack of a timetable for convening the ninth meeting of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva, an essential piece for advancing the political process. The Constitutional Committee is the only format that can bring all actors together for dialogue, and it must not be obstructed by any Security Council member. We recognize that regional diplomatic activities have intensified since the earthquake, and we hope that will create a better environment for Special Envoy Pedersen's step-for-step and step-by-step approach to lead to tangible outcomes.

Finally, it is the Syrian people who have risked their own lives to save those buried in the rubble. It is they who must lead the political process that is needed if the dignified and beautiful country that was Syria is to be restored. It is the Council's responsibility to support that process.

**Mr. De Rivi re** (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Talahma for their briefings. I would like to underscore two points.

France has just increased its assistance to the Syrian people once again. International donors pledged €950 million at the conference held in Brussels on Monday, 20 March. France has announced an additional contribution of €7 million, bringing its assistance since the earthquake to a total of €26 million, which will

help meet the essential needs of the people affected by the earthquake. France went into action immediately, dispatching 40 tons of emergency supplies to meet the crucial needs the day after the disaster. And while the earthquake led to further displacement, half of Syria's population had already been forced to leave their homes since 2011, and we commend the efforts of the States that have been hosting Syrian refugees for 12 years. We will continue to support them, including through the seventh Brussels conference in June. We should also point out that we have several resettlement programmes with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

However, the humanitarian tragedy of the earthquake must not make us forget the realities of the war in Syria. As the Special Envoy reiterated today, a nationwide ceasefire must be a priority for all parties. In the interests of the Syrian people, who long for a lasting peace, France will stand firm and will not change its position towards the regime until genuine and sustainable progress towards a political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015) is made. The earthquake of 6 February cannot erase the regime's brutality towards its people or the war crimes that it is responsible for. So far more than 155,000 people have been disappeared, and most of them have spent time in the regime's prisons. France will continue its fight against impunity without let-up.

Systematic, large-scale corruption has reached unprecedented levels. Syria now accounts for 80 per cent of the global production of Captagon, in a State-run drug trade estimated to be worth more than \$57 billion that benefits the regime, a few businessmen close to the regime and the militias present in Syria, and that is a destabilizing factor for the entire region. France would therefore like to have more information from the United Nations on the production of Captagon.

**Mr. Spasse** (Albania): I would like to begin by thanking Mr. Petersen and Mr. Talahma for their briefings.

It saddens us deeply that every time we take the floor to speak on this file, we struggle to find the words to describe the deterioration of the catastrophic situation in Syria, which is entering its thirteenth year. The humanitarian crisis deepens by the day. More than 70 per cent of the population needs urgent humanitarian aid to survive. We commend the European Union and international donors for pledging \$7.5 billion during

the fundraising conference in Brussels on Monday this week to help Türkiye and Syria in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake.

The conflict is anything but frozen, with people being killed every day by bombs dropped from the sky, tanks or terrorist attacks. Syria remains a killing field, drenched in the innocent blood of civilians, including women and children, and with more than 100,000 Syrians forcefully disappeared or detained by the horrific Mukhabarat. There is no political process in Syria. The stillborn Constitutional Committee shows no signs of life. Seven years after its adoption, resolution 2254 (2015), a sine qua non condition for the resolution of the conflict in Syria, remains a dead letter. The Al-Assad regime is chiefly responsible for Syria's ranking as the third least peaceful country in the world, according to the Global Peace Index in 2022.

We have collectively failed to stop the Syrian regime from slaughtering its own people. We have failed to hold the regime accountable for the gravest crimes — war crimes, crimes against humanity and the repeated use of chemical weapons with total impunity. There can be no peace in Syria without securing justice and accountability.

We strongly support all attempts to force the Syrian regime to abide by the Council's resolutions and begin to cooperate in good faith to start the political transition in Syria. We strongly support the creation of a new mechanism to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, as recommended by the Secretary-General in August 2022. We strongly support the full implementation of resolution 2672 (2023) and the renewal of cross-border aid operations in north-west Syria, as well as the opening of new border-crossing points to meet the rising demand for humanitarian aid, which must never be politicized. Coming to the rescue of those most in need is the very least that the international community can do to show the Syrians that they have not been abandoned, so that they can survive and maintain their faith in humankind.

**Mr. Camilleri** (Malta): I begin by thanking Special Envoy Pedersen and Mr. Talahma for their sobering remarks. On this special day, we also wish all Muslims communities around the world *Ramadan Kareem* and *Ramadan Mubarak*.

The devastating consequences of the earthquake continue to reverberate in Syria. Six weeks later, we are still grappling with the tremendous loss of life,

the destruction of thousands of homes and the deadly consequences for the already frail and crumbling civilian infrastructure across the country. While we commend the work of the United Nations and its agencies, we also recognize the need to increase the amount of aid that is provided to north-west Syria and ensure that it arrives where it is needed as quickly as possible. We take note of the concerns highlighted by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

Enormous needs remain. Without a major scaling-up and greater support for the United Nations and humanitarian agencies in Syria, the levels of avoidable mortality are bound to rise. In that regard, Malta takes positive note of the increase in the number of trucks sent through the Bab Al-Salam crossing in recent days. The Bab Al-Hawa crossing is where the overwhelming majority of trucks have crossed to date, which further underscores the continued importance of keeping the cross-border mechanism open and operational. We also call on all parties to support and facilitate the flow of cross-line aid from Damascus to the north-west and north-east. Malta was concerned to see reports of air strikes targeting the Aleppo airport on 6 March. We share the concerns of the Resident Coordinator for Syria on the potential implications of such attacks for the humanitarian aid operation.

The Syrian conflict entered its thirteenth year this month. The reality is that no remaining actor or group can resolve this conflict alone. As years of destruction have demonstrated so vividly, there is no military solution to the conflict, but there are many areas in which progress can be made in line with resolution 2254 (2015), which remains the only viable path forward out of the current status quo. For example, the transparent and verifiable release of those detained arbitrarily in Syria, as well as the provision of information on the whereabouts and the fate of the missing and those forcibly disappeared, are within the power of the parties. Such steps would result in a true political breakthrough. We urge the Syrian authorities to allow the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit the Syrian Arab Republic and establish a field presence there. The reconvening and resumption of the work of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva would also send a positive signal, as would the development of policies and legislation on eliminating discrimination against women and girls in all spheres of life and

achieving gender equality, including through quotas and special measures.

Violence against women and girls remains pervasive. Malta calls on the Syrian Arab Republic and all parties to the conflict to strengthen the national child protection framework and to end the recruitment and use of children and prevent its recurrence. We once again reiterate our call on all parties, in particular the Syrian delegation, to engage constructively in the process. Malta therefore remains supportive of a genuine Syrian-led and -owned political process facilitated by the United Nations, with all key stakeholders working constructively and coherently for the people of Syria. In addition, we emphasize that any and all returns of Syrian refugees and those internally displaced must be safe, legal and voluntary, in line with the criteria set forth by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

I conclude by highlighting our full support for the work of Special Envoy Pedersen and his step-for-step initiative. Now is the time to break the deadlock, pursue accountability, and move towards a just and lasting peace.

**Mr. Agyeman** (Ghana): I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the African members of the Security Council (A3), namely, Gabon, Mozambique and my own country, Ghana.

We thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and the Acting Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Tareq Talahma, for their briefings. We also welcome the participation in this meeting of the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye.

The confluence of 12 years of conflict and a natural disaster of epic proportions in the middle of winter has magnified the suffering of the Syrian people. The earthquake unfortunately struck 15.3 million Syrians, representing some 70 per cent of the population, at a time when they were already in need of humanitarian support. Sadly, it has claimed more than 6,000 lives and injured many more. Hundreds of thousands have been rendered homeless in winter conditions, with more remaining unaccounted for after the disaster.

There has never been a more critical time, in which the support of the international community is as urgently needed by Syrians, as now. The exponential rise in the

number of people in need of humanitarian support following the disaster requires additional resources. All efforts geared towards rallying global support for the people of Syria should be given the needed backing by all. Accordingly, we thank all donors that have risen to the challenge to provide generous contributions, which as at 21 March stood at approximately \$312.1 million of the \$397 million needed through the Syria earthquake flash appeal. We also appreciate the efforts of the European Union and the other international donors that have pledged approximately \$1 billion in support of the earthquake relief efforts in the country. As we make an urgent appeal to the international community to help raise the remaining approximately \$85 million needed to fully fund the flash appeal, we are reminded that the country's humanitarian response plan remains more than 90 per cent underfunded. The people of Syria continue to count on our support in that regard at this time of suffering, and we must not let them down.

In the middle of the unfolding tragedy, we deplore the unrelenting military hostilities by the parties, including the terrorist attacks carried out by Da'esh and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham along the front lines. Those senseless attacks, which continue to claim the lives of civilians, are plunging Syria into deeper levels of instability. The deaths of 42 civilians, including four women and 13 children, as well as the injury of 52 others as a result of those hostilities, are deeply distressing. As always, in the context of continuing hostilities and the resulting protection concerns, women and girls pay the highest price, particularly in terms of health care. We condemn the targeting of innocent civilians and civilian infrastructure and draw the attention of all the parties to their obligation to adhere to international humanitarian law and the relevant Security Council resolutions. We remind the parties that the escalation of violence jeopardizes and undermines efforts to reach a peaceful resolution of the conflict and call on them to exercise maximum restraint, as there can be no military solution to the crisis.

Also of particular concern to us are the continued attacks by foreign forces targeting civilian infrastructure in Syria, which are protected by international humanitarian law, at a time when the country is at its lowest ebb. We condemn the air strikes attributed to Israel on 7 and 22 March, which targeted the Aleppo international airport and disrupted the distribution of critical humanitarian assistance by the United Nations and other aid agencies assisting the victims of the

earthquake in the country. We recall that similar air strikes on the same airport in September 2022 caused material damage and interrupted service delivery. We call on Israel to desist from such attacks on Syria and to resort to pacific means to address its concerns, with the support of the international community.

Given Syria's current circumstances, the need for a political solution to the conflict is ever-more urgent. Resolution 2254 (2015) remains the leading road map to achieve the desired political solution, taking into account the widest spectrum of Syrians, including the voices of women and civil society. We reiterate that the most viable avenue for sustainable peace and stability is a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned and United Nations-facilitated political process that meets the aspirations of the people of Syria.

In furtherance of the political process, the A3 is firm in its support for United Nations Special Envoy Geir Pedersen's continued efforts, including his step-for-step process, to find a lasting political solution to the conflict. The parties must therefore commit to the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015), including a nationwide ceasefire and cooperation to break the current deadlock in the small body of the Constitutional Committee.

Tackling the issue of detainees, including facilitating the release of detained vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, as well as women and children, and clarifying the status of missing persons would be a significant confidence-building measure. Advancement in that area will further contribute positively to the Special Envoy's step-for-step approach to creating a pathway for progress on the political track.

Returning to the humanitarian situation, 12 years of armed conflict have devastated the country's economy, with record-level inflation, and have weakened the local currency, while, at the same time, food prices are skyrocketing beyond the purchasing power of ordinary Syrians, with as many as 12.1 million people said to be food insecure. Social and basic services are collapsing, with power shortages, a fuel crisis and water scarcity, particularly impacting ordinary Syrians, who now have to endure a cholera outbreak on top of all that they have been through. We commend the United Nations for its cholera immunization drive and call for measures to deal with the root causes of the disease.

The dire humanitarian situation in Syria demands our urgent and collective action. With that in mind,



the A3 affirms its steadfast support for the use of all modalities to deliver aid to every person in need in Syria. The cross-border aid mechanism, as well as cross-line deliveries, remains crucial to alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people. We also commend the recent efforts to expand cross-line deliveries across north-west Syria and call on the parties to work closely with the United Nations to create a safe and secure environment for the further expansion of cross-line support. However, greater attention should be paid to the relatively more sustainable humanitarian efforts through early-recovery and livelihood activities, which may help to reduce the continued dependence on aid.

Furthermore, to ease the colossal humanitarian burden in camps, we call on States to repatriate their citizens, especially women and children, from camps in Syria, such as Al-Hol, which have been subjected to severe insecurity, in a safe and dignified manner, in line with the standards of international humanitarian law. Unfettered and unhindered humanitarian access must also be granted for the necessary support to be extended to those in the Rukban camp.

In conclusion, the A3 reiterates that resolution 2254 (2015) remains the most viable solution to the conflict. Progress on the political process will open the much-awaited pathway to peace, which can be realized only through a nationwide ceasefire and a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned and United Nations-facilitated political process.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic

**Mr. Sabbagh** (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Talahma for their briefings.

Over the past 12 years, the Syrian Arab Republic has sent hundreds of identical letters to the Security Council and the Secretary-General. It has briefed the Council countless times regarding the aggression against its sovereignty and the violations against its unity and territorial integrity, as well as the blatant interference in its internal affairs. However, those issues have not been addressed with the necessary seriousness and responsibility owing to the destructive policies pursued by three permanent members of the Security Council, namely, the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

It is reprehensible that those three countries, along with Germany, made a joint statement on 16 March (see

S/PV.9285), twisting facts and manipulating events, consistent with the campaigns to mislead public opinion that those countries have been waging against the Syrian State since 2011 and until today. In their statement, those countries sought to evade their involvement in the bloodshed of Syrians, whether through direct aggression or through their tools in the form of various terrorist organizations. They tried to exonerate themselves from the severe human suffering of the Syrian people as a result of the collective punishment policies through the blockade and unilateral sanctions that they impose, not to mention their persistent disregard in depriving Syrians of their national wealth and resources.

The policy of double standards that governs the Western mentality has distorted the facts in the Council, claiming to support Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity while never intervening to stop the repeated and systematic Israeli acts of aggression against Syrian territory, the most recent of which was the Israeli aggression that targeted Aleppo International Airport at dawn yesterday, Wednesday, 22 March. That act of aggression caused the airport to be out of service for the second time during this month, in a double crime against a civilian facility that since the earthquake has been used to support the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Those countries deplore the situation of Syrian refugees and displaced persons but ignore the fact that they directly worked to undermine the state of security and stability in which the Syrian people were living, which caused many to leave their areas of residence. We see those countries expressing their concern over illegal drug trafficking before the Council while they themselves created an environment conducive to terrorist and criminal organizations carrying out cross-border activities, which brought them sizable financial returns that helped to finance their criminal activities.

How can it be accepted that successive United States Administrations have been providing an umbrella of protection for Israel, helping it to evade punishment for its terrorist crimes, and insisting on preventing the Council from discharging its responsibilities to stop such crimes and ensure accountability for them?

How is it possible to justify the visit by the United States Chief of Staff on 4 March to a military base of United States forces present illegally in north-east Syria in a covert manner, and not condemn it as a violation of Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity?

How can we believe the claims of the United States and its allies that they are genuinely contributing to counter-terrorism efforts and implementing Security Council counter-terrorism resolutions to save the world from the scourge of terrorism, while the United States supports a base for terrorists in Al-Tanf, in south-east Syria? Together with its allies, the United States promotes a terrorist group such as the White Helmets, which is an arm of the terrorist Al-Nusra Front/Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, as a humanitarian organization.

How can we explain their refusal to take back the terrorist fighters and their families who hold their citizenship, while shirking their responsibility to prosecute and hold those terrorist fighters accountable and rehabilitate and reintegrate their families into their societies?

Syria has always called for separating issues of human rights promotion and protection from any political considerations, but some still insist on politicizing them. In that regard, I would like to refer to the campaign organized within the United Nations and led, unfortunately, by the same Western countries that follow a hostile approach to raising the issue of missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic in an attempt to launch another politicized international mechanism whose sole aim is to distort facts and increase pressure on a country that has been fighting terrorism on behalf of all the peoples of the world.

Any credible process to reveal the fate of missing persons in Syria requires knowing the fate of the thousands who were killed as a result of the military air strikes carried out by the so-called international coalition led by the United States of America during its aggression on Syrian cities. It also requires knowing the fate of those who went missing at the hands of such Security Council-designated terrorist groups such as the Da'esh organization, Jabhat Al-Nusra/Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other terrorist organizations, over more than 10 years.

In accordance with the Syrian Constitution and relevant legislation, the Syrian Government is committed to applying the procedures to search for missing persons, whether at the hands of terrorist organizations or foreign occupation forces. It strives to locate them, including through cooperation within the framework of the Astana format to reveal the fate of missing persons held by terrorist groups. Syrian law-enforcement institutions also carry out independent

investigations into each incident of missing persons where those missing persons have been registered by a complaint or an official report, especially in north-east Syria, which is occupied by the United States of America and its terrorist and separatist allies.

We have witnessed another aspect of politicizing humanitarian issues while addressing the repercussions of the earthquake that struck Syria and Türkiye on 6 February. Preparations for the Brussels donor conference to support the victims of the earthquake in Syria and Türkiye were recently made without any coordination with the Syrian Government, which represents a country that was affected by the disaster, and neither was it even invited to participate in the conference. Indeed, the organizers of the conference also excluded the participation of the most prominent national humanitarian actors from Syrian non-governmental organizations.

The politicization of humanitarian and development work in Syria is also evident in the insistence of the United States and the European Union to continue imposing their illegal and inhumane coercive measures on the Syrian people. Those measures have prevented the provision of items needed to rescue earthquake victims and support those affected by the earthquake. As for the measures of promoting exemptions for humanitarian purposes, they are refuted by facts that prove that they are ineffective and mere propaganda.

The Syrian Arab Republic is committed to providing facilities to the United Nations and international organizations with the aim of delivering support and relief aid to all affected areas by various means, including through the two additional border crossings that it decided to open by a sovereign decision to facilitate the humanitarian response in affected areas under the control of terrorist organizations, which deserves respect and support. The crossing of nearly 1,000 trucks carrying aid from the United Nations to north-west Syria is the best proof of that. To question that decision and allege that humanitarian aid is being diverted from its intended recipients is bad behaviour to undermine the efforts of the Syrian Government.

In conclusion, the Syrian Arab Republic appeals to all countries to objectively consider all expressed concerns and calls for certain countries to abandon their hostile policies, refrain from distorting the facts about the Syrian State and stop fabricating accusations against it. It also urges donors to show solidarity with

the Syrian people in those difficult circumstances and end their suffering by mobilizing financial pledges in line with the scope and severity of the damage. Overcoming the repercussions of the Syrian crisis requires that Member States have sincere political will to help Syria, support the efforts of the Syrian State and its national institutions to achieve early recovery and economic revival and to allow Syrians to build a better future for their homeland.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Ms. Ershadi** (Islamic Republic of Iran): We thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Talahma for their informative and insightful briefings.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains challenging, particularly after the recent devastating earthquake. We commend the United Nations and humanitarian agencies that are tirelessly working to provide essential support and relief to those affected in Aleppo, Hama and Latakia.

However, despite those efforts, the latest report of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs highlights that resource gaps persist and need urgent attention. We call on the international community and donors to continue providing support for humanitarian efforts in Syria.

We hope that Mr. Griffiths' recent visit to Syria on 21 March, when he met and consulted with Syrian authorities, will result in an increase and improvement in the delivery of aid and support to those in need. We applaud the Syrian Government's ongoing efforts to promote and ease humanitarian access to all parts of Syria.

We call for the full implementation of resolution 2672 (2023) with a focus on early-recovery projects that seek to rebuild crucial infrastructure, which is a necessity for all Syrians, and to improve cross-line aid operations. These efforts will not only provide urgently needed relief to the Syrian people, but also pave the way for sustainable long-term development. It is also crucial that humanitarian aid is provided impartially and without discrimination, free from politicization or any other conditions. This is vital to ensure that the most vulnerable individuals receive the assistance they require and that humanitarian efforts are not hindered by external factors. In the meantime, the international community must focus on lifting the

inhumane unilateral sanctions in order for the current humanitarian crisis to be addressed more effectively. Those unlawful measures have made it extremely challenging for the Syrian people to access basic needs, hindering their Government's ability to provide essential services and improve living conditions.

As a friend of Syria, Iran stands in solidarity with the Syrian people during these difficult days and remains dedicated to providing them with the support and aid they need to overcome their challenging situation. Iran was one of the first countries to respond to Syria's humanitarian appeals and has sent humanitarian shipments to the areas affected, including essential supplies of food and non-food items alike. Furthermore, on 9 March, our Foreign Minister led a delegation to visit the earthquake-affected area in Latakia. During the visit he reaffirmed Iran's commitment to supporting Syria and remarked that Iran will continue to be a steadfast friend to the people and the Government of Syria in these very challenging times.

Although international law prohibits the targeting of critical civilian infrastructure, and although it is always imperative to uphold humanitarian principles, the Israeli regime has continued its aggression and terrorist attacks on Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity by deliberately and systematically targeting critical infrastructure. In a continuation of its aggression and terrorist attacks, on 7 March the Israeli regime made several air strikes on Aleppo's international airport, forcing it to close temporarily. Another terrorist attack occurred just yesterday, 22 March.

Those heinous terrorist attacks have had severe humanitarian consequences for the people of Aleppo, who are already facing a humanitarian crisis, and can only worsen their situation. We strongly condemn them, as they target civilian infrastructure and violate international humanitarian law and the Charter of the United Nations, posing a serious threat to regional peace and stability. The international community must come together to condemn those attacks, hold the Israeli regime accountable for its violations and take the action needed to prevent further aggression against Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In particular, the Security Council must reject its double standards and take responsibility by explicitly condemning the Israeli regime for its ongoing violation of the fundamental principles of international law and the Charter.

If we are to ensure a lasting and effective political solution to the Syrian crisis, we remain steadfast in our belief that a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, facilitated by the United Nations, is the only viable approach to ending the crisis. While we reaffirm our commitment to the national sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, together with our Astana format partners we will continue our tireless efforts to achieve long-term and sustainable normalization in and around Syria. We also affirm our strong support for the ongoing work of the Constitutional Committee and commend the Special Envoy for his unwavering and continuing efforts to facilitate the meetings of the Committee, as well as his contacts with the Syrian parties, which represent important steps towards advancing the political process.

The illegal presence of foreign military forces in Syria constitutes a blatant violation of the Charter and international law and is the primary source of insecurity in the country. We call for the immediate and complete withdrawal of those forces, which is essential to creating an environment that is conducive to resolving the crisis and restoring peace and stability in the region.

Finally, we welcome the recent and increased diplomatic contact between Syria and its regional and international partners. Improving Syrian diplomatic relations with the region and beyond is critical to ensuring Syria's security, stability and prosperity and would especially help to ensure the safe and sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons. We stand ready to assist in that regard.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Türkiye.

**Mr. Önal (Türkiye):** I join others in thanking Special Envoy Pedersen and Mr. Talahma, Acting Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Last week the conflict in Syria entered its thirteenth year. The Syrian people continue to suffer from the ravages of war and displacement. Even before

the earthquakes, the people's humanitarian plight was intolerable, and the earthquakes have worsened an already fragile situation, rendering humanitarian needs even more acute. In the current circumstances, the continuation of United Nations cross-border humanitarian assistance is more critical than ever. As it stands, in addition to Bab Al-Hawa, the Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai crossings are also functioning. As the Secretary-General underlined last week, there is an urgent need to guarantee longer-term cross-border access to north-western Syria.

As the crisis in Syria continues, we cannot afford to remain complacent in the face of the current state of affairs. The earthquakes and post-disaster emergency needs have once again demonstrated the risks of procrastination. The political process must be reinvigorated. Resolution 2254 (2015) does in fact give us the basic guidelines for a viable political solution. In the meantime, preserving calm on the ground will be important for the smooth continuation of humanitarian efforts and for advancing the political process.

As we have come to emphasize, the creation of suitable conditions for the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees must be an integral part of our overall efforts to find a durable solution to the crisis and is indeed a collective responsibility of the international community. Türkiye remains committed to the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria and determined to disrupt the malign and separatist agendas of terrorist organizations, primarily the Kurdistan Workers' Party/People's Defence Units and Da'esh.

The plight of the Syrian people must be alleviated. It will take a multidimensional approach and the involvement of all main stakeholders. For its part, Türkiye will continue to join all international efforts towards that end.

**The President:** There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

*The meeting rose at 12.10 p.m.*