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Seventy-fifth year

8738th meeting

Friday, 28 February 2020, 4 p.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium)

Members:

China	Mr. Zhang Jun
Dominican Republic	Ms. Morrison González
Estonia	Mr. Jürgenson
France	Mr. De Rivière
Germany	Mr. Heusgen
Indonesia	Mr. Syihab
Niger	Mr. Abarry
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Ms. King
South Africa	Mr. Matjila
Tunisia	Mr. Ladeb
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Allen
United States of America	Mrs. Craft
Viet Nam	Mr. Dang

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 4.05 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, to participate in this meeting.

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

I wish to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres, to whom I give the floor.

The Secretary-General (*spoke in French*): If I may be permitted, Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo will brief the Security Council on behalf of the Secretariat.

(spoke in English)

However, I would like to say a few words to express my deep concern about what I believe is the changing nature of the conflict in Idlib. The Council is well aware of the desperate humanitarian situation in the region, namely, following the most recent offensive. But beyond the desperate humanitarian situation, I think that it is important to acknowledge that the conflict has changed in nature and we have witnessed a very significant escalation in the past few days.

I want to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to Ambassador Nebenzia of the Russian Federation and Ambassador Sinirlioğlu of Turkey, who have always made themselves available to me, not only allowing the necessary contacts but also facilitating other contacts with the two countries that have been very useful in my commitment to follow the events very closely.

Indeed, if one looks at what has happened in recent days, knowing that there was a telephone conversation between the Presidents of the Republic of Turkey and of the Russian Federation this morning and a Russian delegation in Ankara, which met the day before

yesterday, yesterday and today, without, as far as I am informed, a solution having been found, I think that all this creates an environment in which the risk of an uncontrolled escalation, given the number of forces in Idlib and surrounding areas, is something that cannot be taken lightly.

When I have been insisting on the need to stop the fighting and for a ceasefire, I have therefore been taking into account not only the humanitarian consequences of the fighting — and of course any escalation would inevitably have more desperate humanitarian consequences — but also the enormous risk that a potential escalation could in itself represent a conflict of a different nature that could have a much more tragic impact.

I would now like to ask Ms. DiCarlo to brief the Council.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank the Secretary-General for his presence and his remarks.

I now give the floor to Ms. DiCarlo.

Ms. DiCarlo: The security situation has continued to gravely deteriorate in and around Idlib. Let me recall some of the key events.

In the past nine days, Syrian Government forces, with the support of the Russian air force, have continued to advance, taking a large swath of villages in southern Idlib. Air strikes also continue in both front-line areas and population centres far removed from the fighting. During the same period, non-State armed groups launched a counter-attack in eastern Idlib, retaking the city of Saraqib, which they lost to Syrian Government forces in recent weeks. That action cut off the Syrian Government's control of the strategic M5 highway. Turkish forces reportedly played a supporting role in the operation.

Delegations from the Russian Federation and Turkey resumed their talks in Ankara from 26 February. Those discussions have continued until today, along with presidential contacts by telephone.

On 27 February, there were strikes on Turkish troops inside Syria. The Turkish Minister of Defence noted that 33 Turkish soldiers were killed and 32 wounded by strikes that Turkey has attributed to the Syrian Government. Russian Ministry of Defence officials confirmed that an unspecified number of Turkish soldiers, who they said were co-located with

non-State armed groups, had been hit by Syrian Government shelling. Turkish Defense Ministry officials have noted that after the strikes on Turkish soldiers, Turkey targeted Syrian Government positions with aircraft, weaponized drones and artillery. We strongly urge Russia and Turkey to build upon their previous agreements to secure a fresh ceasefire for north-west Syria.

These latest developments are unfolding in the context of a broader military escalation that was already devastating for civilians in the north-west. For months now, bombing and shelling by the Government of Syria, supported by its allies, has continued in the so-called de-escalation zone of Idlib. Strikes have been launched on populated areas from both air and ground, seemingly without regard for civilians.

Nearly a million people have been displaced since early December, many multiple times, including more than 560,000 children. They are fleeing north, away from the intensifying aerial and ground bombardment and into ever-shrinking areas where they still hope to find relative safety.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has verified that at least 1,750 civilians have been killed since last April. The actual number is probably higher. A total of 351 civilians have been killed in the last two months alone. While the majority of those civilian deaths — 94 per cent — have occurred in opposition-held areas exposed to bombardment by pro-Government forces, 6 per cent occurred in Government-held areas. This serves as a reminder that Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, which is designated by the Council as a terrorist organization, and other non-State armed groups have also struck populated areas indiscriminately. Civilians are being killed in camps for internally displaced persons, schools and hospitals. This is happening in plain sight, night and day, day in and day out. Hospitals destroyed, schools destroyed, people's lives destroyed, and it is happening under our watch.

We continue to come before the Council with an ever-growing record of destruction and atrocity. The Secretary-General has consistently expressed alarm at the dangerous escalation in north-west Syria.

The United Nations has countless times reminded all parties that any attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure are simply unacceptable. We have repeatedly called for a ceasefire. We have reaffirmed to

the parties that all military operations must respect the rules of international humanitarian law. If such horrific acts and tactics persist despite global outrage, is it largely because their authors do not fear accountability and justice?

Civilians in Idlib are living under daily threat and terror, seeking refuge from airstrikes and volleys of shells and mortar rounds. They are not asking for a pause in the fighting. They are asking for an end to the killing. We must all assume our responsibility to do all we can to stop this violence.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. DiCarlo for her briefing.

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

Mr. Allen (United Kingdom): We welcome the attendance and briefing by the Secretary-General today and, of course, by Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo. We share the Secretary-General's concern at the gravity of the situation and the real risk of escalation and echo his call for an immediate ceasefire.

The Council has met so often over the past few weeks to express its horror at the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Idlib. Indeed, we met only yesterday to discuss the suffering of the Syrian people, caused by the merciless and disproportionate campaign being waged by the Syrian regime and its Russian backers — the 948,000 people displaced in the last three months, the men, women and children living in tents in the open air, the children literally freezing to death and killed in attacks on hospitals, schools and makeshift camps. We called in the name of humanity for those waging this offensive immediately to cease hostilities. Yesterday we warned of the recklessness and brutality of the Syrian and Russian offensive and the risk that they could escalate conflict further.

It is therefore with deep concern and regret that because of those reckless and reprehensible attacks on Turkish positions only hours after the conclusion of yesterday's meeting, it has been necessary to call another meeting today. But meet we must. As members of the Council, we all have a duty, under the United Nations Charter, to take primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and therefore to seek to prevent further escalation of what is already a dangerous and fraught situation. It is clear that the only way forward is an immediate cessation of

hostilities and provision of humanitarian relief. I hope that all members of the Council will agree with that today.

Let me say that we were shocked and appalled to hear of the tragic deaths of at least 33 Turkish soldiers as a result of those attacks yesterday. We condemn those attacks, and we express our deepest condolences to the Turkish Government and people, with whom we stand in solidarity as allies today.

We are gravely concerned about the impact on civilians of any further escalation in hostilities. The bombing, shelling and fighting not only directly cause civilian suffering, but they also hamper the aid effort, magnifying the scale of this disaster. It is the civilians, in desperate need of food, water, health care and assistance to survive the cold of winter, who suffer the most. It is vital that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners continue to be able to deliver cross-border aid and that humanitarian and medical actors are able to provide assistance to all those in need in the north-west in safety.

As we have said before, it is clear that the Astana format is not capable of achieving a lasting cease-fire. The fatal flaw in the Astana format is Russia's uncritical support for the Syrian regime and its continued disregard for previously agreed ceasefires and agreements, as well as its disregard for international humanitarian law and the fate of Syria's people. We must therefore support the United Nations and Special Envoy Pedersen in securing a ceasefire in north-west Syria, in close consultation with the relevant parties and the Security Council. We call on all Member States to work with and support the United Nations in achieving this goal.

Responding to Syria's and Russia's increased offensive against the Syrian people, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said today that: "There is no justification for such blatant disregard for international law or basic human decency".

Syria and Russia must immediately turn off this offensive. Russia should prioritize the Syrian people and the safety of the region over the interests of the murderous cabal at the heart of this conflict.

Mrs. Craft (United States of America): The United States is not here today to listen and discuss. We are here to speak directly and without qualification.

The United States condemns in the strongest possible terms yesterday's attacks on Turkish troops.

Those attacks were wholly unjustified, senseless and barbaric. Our deepest sympathies are with the loved ones of the 33 Turkish soldiers who were killed.

In the days ahead, the commitment of the United States to our NATO ally Turkey will not waver. Turkey has our full support to respond in self-defence to the unjustified attacks on Turkish observation posts that resulted in the deaths of their own forces. We have now seen Russia and the Al-Assad regime violate Astana ceasefire agreements on three separate occasions: first, in eastern Ghouta, then in Dar'a and, finally, in Idlib. This attack should serve as the final nail in the Astana format coffin. It is a format broken beyond all repair, and we cannot return to it. We cannot entrust it with the vital work of establishing a new ceasefire.

With that in mind, the United States calls for an immediate, durable and verifiable ceasefire in north-western Syria. As Secretary Pompeo has stated, a permanent ceasefire is the answer to this conflict. We call for the Russian Federation to immediately ground its warplanes, and we call for all Syrian forces and their Russian backers to withdraw to the ceasefire lines first established in 2018. As President Trump has made clear, the Al-Assad regime, Russia and Iran must halt their offensive before more innocent civilians are killed and displaced. To that end, we also urge the Secretary-General to do everything in his power to broker a ceasefire, as the United Nations must play a central, active role if we are to avoid even greater escalation.

Today's meeting is, of course, about the reckless and serious risk that the Al-Assad regime and Russia's offensive places on the security of a NATO ally, but it is not only about that. We sat in this Chamber yesterday (see S/PV.8734) and heard the stories of the people of Idlib, whose daily existence has been reduced to the simple task of survival. Amid the Russian airstrikes, the chill of the Syrian winter and the pangs of unending hunger, the Syrian people are desperate for aid; they are begging for relief and they are praying for deliverance. That is just enough. I said yesterday that each country represented here has a choice to make. It is a choice we are confronted with again today. So I am going to ask again: Are we going to sit back and watch? Are we going to remain silent, or will we deliver? How many more babies have to freeze to death before we raise our voices and say, "Enough"?

And so, this is the message of the Trump administration today. To the relentless violence against

innocent women, children and men; to the obstruction of life-saving humanitarian assistance; and to the embrace of unforgivable cruelty toward the Syrian people, we say: “Enough. Simply enough.”

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank the Secretary-General for his presence among us and, above all, for his tireless commitment. I thank Ms. DiCarlo for her briefing.

The Council met yesterday on the humanitarian situation in Syria, in particular in Idlib (see S/PV.8734). Today is our sixth meeting on Syria this month. The situation is serious. The escalation is happening. It is urgent to put an end to the offensive of the regime, supported by Russia, in Idlib.

France is extremely concerned about the recent developments that took place in Idlib yesterday. The French Minister for Foreign Affairs today conveyed his condolences to his Turkish counterpart, Mr. Çavuşoğlu. He reaffirmed France’s solidarity with Turkey following the attack carried out against Turkish forces in north-western Syria. On behalf of France, this afternoon I wish to reiterate those condolences and that solidarity. Mr. Le Drian also condemned the repeated violations committed by the Syrian regime and Russia of international humanitarian law, and the undermining of the commitments made in autumn 2018 concerning de-escalation in Idlib province. The fight against terrorist groups cannot justify the massive violations of international law that we are witnessing at Idlib.

We therefore call for an immediate de-escalation, echoing the appeal of the Secretary-General. A new escalation would be in no one’s interest and would further threaten international peace and security. That would exacerbate an already dire humanitarian situation, even on the scale of the Syrian conflict. Nearly a million people have been displaced since December in Idlib province. This would increase the risk of dispersal of terrorist fighters.

In recent days, France has made a commitment, together with Germany, to contribute to a de-escalation of the violence. The President of the Republic and the Chancellor discussed it with President Erdoğan and President Putin last week. France will spare no effort, in conjunction with its partners, to achieve de-escalation. Our priority must be to work collectively to put in place an immediate cessation of hostilities in Idlib. We call on the Syrian regime and Russia to end the military offensive in the north-west of Syria, to fully respect

their obligations under international humanitarian law and to return to the ceasefire arrangements of the fall of 2018 so as to put an immediate and sustainable end to hostilities. The commitments made must be kept by everyone, especially by Russia.

Efforts to achieve a ceasefire must be collective. Russia must pursue negotiations with Turkey in order to achieve a de-escalation in Idlib and allow the revival of the political process. The Astana framework has shown its limits and it cannot in any case encompass all the dimensions of the settlement of the crisis or replace a process led by the United Nations, which enjoys full international legitimacy in that respect. This is why it is essential that the Secretary-General and his Special Envoy continue to work to achieve an immediate, lasting and verified ceasefire, in accordance with the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015). They must also devote themselves to the resumption of the inter-Syrian process, which alone can lead to a settlement of the Syrian crisis, and which must now tackle the question of elections, refugees and detainees.

Finally, I recall the urgent need to respond to the humanitarian crisis and to work towards a political solution. France will continue to mobilize at the humanitarian level, on a national basis and with the European Union and its Member States. Everything must be done to guarantee humanitarian access, including through cross-border assistance. I welcome the Secretary-General’s initiative to deploy an emergency mission to Idlib in the days ahead. We also welcome the efforts made by Syria’s neighbours to assist the Syrian refugees.

Finally, the political process cannot be reduced to constitutional discussions, which today serve as a screen for the regime to pursue its strategy limited to military reconquest. The Special Envoy of the United Nations must take note of this and address head-on the most pressing political questions, starting with the de-escalation in Idlib and the conditions for the organization of the elections to be held this year and next.

Ms. Morrison González (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We come to this Chamber with deep regret and deep concern. Despite the continued calls for a cessation of hostilities in the face of growing human suffering in the north-west of Syria, we are here once again. We thank the presidency for acceding to our

request to convene this meeting today. We understand that the current situation calls for it.

The situation of extreme tension that is developing before us foreshadows an uncertain panorama for the civilian population. The Dominican Republic therefore demands an immediate cessation of hostilities, maximum restraint on the part of all belligerent parties and protection for the civilian population. Humanitarian workers in the field must be given the opportunity to fulfil their task of addressing the needs of civilians in a safe, complete and timely manner, before it is too late. Without their presence on the ground, the catastrophic situation of these people could quickly become the saddest human tragedy of recent times. We offer them our most meaningful and determined support for their commendable work. As the representative of Indonesia said yesterday, “[t]hey are our real heroes” (*S/PV.8734, p.15*). For that reason, and for them, we are here.

There is only one Council, not two; there is only one Charter, not two. And there is only one humanity, and it is in crisis right now. Let our sense of humanity — of shared responsibility for peace — be the only thing that drives our actions.

Our position in this Chamber today, for all of us without exception, must be to seek a diplomatic solution to the current military offensive and to protect the civilian population. Our inaction will be unjustifiable. No tactical or military objective will prevail in the face of the suffering of almost a million displaced persons, half of whom are children. We can do more.

We call on the Russian Federation and Turkey to redouble their efforts and recommit to the Sochi ceasefire agreement and to its full implementation. Have no doubt that the Dominican Republic will support every effort to that end. Accordingly, we stress the need for the United Nations, playing its unique and irreplaceable role, to support those efforts as well. We echo the Secretary-General’s urgent appeal and his assessment that the most pressing need at this time is the cessation of hostilities before the situation gets out of control.

Finally, we are saddened to see the families of all the fallen, Syrians and Turks — sons, husbands, brothers, parents and friends — who, together with the civil authorities, are paying too high a price for a conflict whose only solution, we know, is political. It is in their name, and in the name of all Syrians of goodwill, that we ask once again for an end to be put to this tragedy.

Mr. Heusgen (Germany): It was only yesterday that we spoke in this Chamber, and we did not think that we would be meeting again today. But we are witnessing a dramatic escalation in Idlib. The situation is becoming more worrying — more than 30 Turkish soldiers have been killed. Germany strongly condemns the attack. We express our deepest condolences to the Turkish Government and the families of the victims. We stand in full solidarity with Turkey.

We see a risk for a wider regional escalation. I can only repeat what we have said numerous times in this Chamber: we demand that Syria immediately stop its military offensive against civilians and against Turkish forces. Further, we demand that Russia end its support for the military offensive by the Syrian regime.

There is no military solution to the Syrian conflict or to other conflicts on the Security Council agenda. There are no military solutions; there are political solutions. Whenever these military solutions are undertaken, it is always civilians that are the victims. We see this in Syria, in Yemen and in Libya, where, also today, we saw attacks on civilian targets in Tripoli.

The impact of the ongoing air strikes of the Syrian regime and its allies on the civilians in Idlib are abhorrent. I wish to quote German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas who said yesterday in this Chamber: “[I]ndiscriminate attacks against civilians are war crimes. Those responsible must be held accountable” (*S/PV.8734, p. 8*). He also said, “Conducting counter-terrorism measures does not absolve anyone ... from respecting international humanitarian law” (*ibid.*).

The Syrian regime and Russia must fully abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law and should return to the 2018 ceasefire arrangements and end the hostilities. We also call on Russia to continue negotiations with Turkey to bring about a de-escalation in Idlib and facilitate the start of a political process.

We have said this again and again — we need a humanitarian ceasefire and we need it now. Germany, together with France, as my French colleague just said, is ready at the highest levels to work towards that goal with Russia and Turkey.

The hope for a lasting ceasefire emanating from the Astana format appears to have been in vain. As others before me have said, the Astana format does not work. We also call on the Secretary-General to continue his engagement, and we very much appreciate his presence

in the Chamber today, which is proof of his commitment to this issue. We encourage him to personally continue to try to find a ceasefire without delay.

A sustainable solution to the Syria conflict — I can only repeat this again and again — can be achieved only through diplomatic efforts. We need to go back to resolution 2254 (2015). We need to reach this political solution under the auspices of the United Nations. The Constitutional Committee must succeed. Instead of investing in bombs, warplanes and fighting, Russia should invest in these peace talks. Instead of making cynical remarks about failing radiators, Russia should invest in and support the humanitarian efforts and assist the people who are suffering under the horrendous attacks by Syria with Russia's backing.

My Minister made it clear yesterday:

“[W]e must step up our efforts to find a political solution. A regime that has been killing and torturing its own people cannot bring lasting peace and stability to Syria, and reconciliation without accountability for the terrible crimes committed will not work. Those who continue to fight in this war should finally realize that” (*ibid.*, p. 9).

Mr. Jürgenson (Estonia): Yesterday morning, our Russian colleagues told us here in this Chamber that the Astana format is working (see S/PV.8734). The same afternoon, however, we witnessed another attack against Turkish troops in Idlib, where at least 33 Turkish soldiers lost their lives. I offer my deepest condolences to our good colleague Feridun Hadi Sinirlioğlu, the Government of Turkey and the families of the victims.

These forces were in the area as part of a de-escalation agreement from May 2018, which was an effort that emerged from the Astana format. With yesterday's attack, it has now completely lost its meaning. Our thoughts are with Turkish families today, as they have so long been with Syrians in Idlib and elsewhere, who have suffered from an intense bombardment since the beginning of the offensive three months ago. There is no justification for the ongoing military campaign of the Syrian regime, backed by Russian armed forces and airplanes. Together with the European Union (EU) and most other members of the Security Council, we demand an immediate cessation of hostilities in Idlib.

Fighting terrorism by waging terror against a civilian population must stop. Granting unimpeded

humanitarian access to millions in need remains a priority for us in the next weeks and months.

As alternative ways to ensure peace and stability in Syria have failed, this is now the moment when the Security Council needs to act. Unfortunately, the resolutions calling for a nationwide ceasefire have so far been blocked. In the light of what has happened, we urge Russia to reconsider its position and allow a chance for a humanitarian truce. Estonia and the EU remain determined in their calls on Damascus to abide by international humanitarian law and provisions of resolution 2254 (2015).

Finally, in the light of an ongoing attack, we repeat here our determination to ensure accountability in Syria. As our British colleagues have put it on multiple occasions, those who have committed crimes will be held accountable not only collectively, but also personally. Initiatives such as the General Assembly's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, the Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and the Secretary-General's board of inquiry will all help us to collect evidence and uncover truth.

Mr. Syihab (Indonesia): We thank the Secretary-General for his remarks and Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo for her briefing.

Let me begin by expressing our serious concern over the worsening situation due to the escalation in Idlib. During yesterday's humanitarian meeting (see S/PV.8734), Indonesia clearly emphasized the urgent need for all key countries in the conflict to immediately cease hostilities. Today we would like to reiterate that call.

The intensification of hostilities has worsened the humanitarian situation in the north-west. More individuals are displaced and their lives are increasingly at risk. We endorse the Secretary-General's statement today that the most pressing need is an immediate ceasefire before the situation gets entirely out of control. We urge a continued dialogue to de-escalate conflict between key countries.

Indonesia appreciates the ongoing efforts made by and talks among various parties with the aim of ending the violence. These dialogues, however, need

to be immediately implemented and translated into impactful action to achieve a sustainable ceasefire. The current priority must be the civilians. Indonesia echoes the Secretary-General's call on all parties to fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian law and to avoid any additional resulting harm to civilians, including civilian infrastructure.

As the need for humanitarian assistance increases, the international community also needs to support the immediate delivery of emergency assistance, shelter support, food, non-food items and other logistical support. The provision of humanitarian deliveries requires timely, safe, unimpeded and sustained access by the United Nations in order to reach all civilians in need in the north-west and in other areas of Syria. Indonesia encourages and supports enhanced cooperation between the Syrian Government and the United Nations in this regard.

The Security Council indeed has a critical role to play in supporting the humanitarian efforts in Syria. Once again, my delegation underlines the importance for the issues of humanitarian assistance not to be politicized by anybody.

To conclude, Indonesia extends its strong support to the work of Special Envoy Geir Pedersen in engaging the Syrian parties, as well as other key countries, to try to unlock progress on the political track, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Matjila (South Africa): I would like first to thank the Secretary-General and Rosemary DiCarlo for their briefings on the unfolding situation in north-western Syria.

Let me begin by stating that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Syria. As with any conflict, in the end all sides must come to the table to negotiate a long-term, peaceful settlement for the benefit of all. Syria is no exception.

South Africa is deeply concerned at the escalation of violence in north-western Syria and the further deterioration of the situation. It is essential for all parties to exercise the utmost restraint in order to prevent the further inflammation of tensions. We support the Secretary-General in his call for an immediate ceasefire and for the parties to step back from the edge of direct military confrontation.

All parties must adhere to their obligations under international human rights and international

humanitarian law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. As we have stated in the Council previously, the increase in violence has a devastating knock-on effect on the humanitarian situation. We cannot expect innocent civilians in the region to endure any further hardship or threats to their safety.

The Council must be united in calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Syria, for all sides to exercise maximum restraint so as to prevent a further escalation of hostilities, and for the parties to adhere to their international obligations under international humanitarian law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians

South Africa reiterates its position that the only way forward is an inclusive Syrian-led and Syrian-owned dialogue aimed at achieving a political solution that is reflective of the will of the Syrian people, based on the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015). The violence must stop and negotiations must begin. We hope that the ongoing discussions between Russia and Turkey will bear fruit.

Mr. Zhang Jun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): The Chinese delegation wishes to thank Secretary-General Guterres and Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo for their briefings.

China has been following the developments in Idlib very closely. The Idlib problem is rooted in the control of Idlib by terrorist forces. The parties concerned should continue to seek a comprehensive, long-term solution to the Idlib problem through dialogue and negotiations. In that process, Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territory integrity must be upheld.

We have noted that the leaders of Russia and Turkey maintain close communication. That Syrian issue has its complicated background. The Council must act in an impartial, objective and comprehensive manner to create enabling conditions for a political settlement of the Syrian crisis.

Terrorism is the common enemy of the international community. According to the Secretary-General's report, terrorist forces systematically harm civilians, journalists and medical workers in Idlib. Eradicating the forces of terror is a necessary requirement for the restoration of peace and stability in Syria and the region. Listed terrorist groups should be resolutely crushed in accordance with the relevant Council resolutions

and international law. The safe haven established by terrorist forces in Syria should be liquidated.

At the same time, counter-terrorism operations should be cautious not to harm civilians. The origin of weapons seized in the course of counter-terror operations should be investigated and the channels for supplying weapons to terrorists should be cut off. Measures should be taken to prevent foreign terrorist fighters from fleeing to other countries and regions to continue to wreak havoc.

China is deeply concerned about the overall humanitarian situation in Syria. China supports the efforts of the United Nations to assist Syrian refugees and displaced civilians. The living conditions of the Syrian people are very difficult as a result of years of war, dilapidated infrastructure and economic sanctions. The international community should provide the United Nations with adequate funding and resources to ensure the provision of humanitarian supplies to populations in need throughout Syria. We note that the Syrian Government has taken a number of decisions to assist international humanitarian relief operations. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs should actively communicate with the Syrian Government and prioritize the channels it has provided to carry out humanitarian relief operations and address the needs for medical supplies in north-eastern Syria.

China supports the Syrian Government in its reconstruction efforts in areas where the security situation is relatively stable as well as its work to clear explosive remnants of war, which is conducive to improving the humanitarian situation on the ground.

The United Nations should continue to make progress on a Syrian political process that is Syrian-led and Syrian-owned in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). With regard to the Syrian political process, it should be up to the Syrian people themselves to find a solution, free from external interference.

China supports the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Pedersen, strengthening his communication with the Syrian Government and making full use of the platform of the Constitutional Committee in an effort to make new progress.

Mr. Dang (Viet Nam): I thank the Secretary-General for his remarks and Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo for her briefing.

As we have stated our positions on issues relating to Syria on many occasions, I will not repeat them all. In the light of the recent developments, I would like to highlight the following.

First, we are deeply concerned about the most recent escalation of the situation in north-western Syria and even more concerned about the terrible risk of a more serious and uncontrollable conflict in the next few days. We would therefore like to reiterate our support for the Secretary-General's call for an immediate ceasefire. We welcome the ongoing exchanges among the relevant parties at various levels. We nevertheless urge all parties to exercise maximum restraint and strengthen dialogue to find a feasible solution to the conflict in this area. That is needed more than ever before.

Secondly, our consistent position is that the conflict in Syria must be settled through a political solution in accordance with the principles of international law, the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution 2254 (2015). We fully support the important facilitating role of the United Nations, including that of Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, as well as any viable diplomatic efforts, bilateral and multilateral, towards peace and stability in Syria.

Thirdly, we are of the view that the deteriorating situation in Idlib is now too great a burden for millions of civilians to bear. Humanitarian concerns must be addressed and humanitarian work must be facilitated, including through feasible ways and means that can ensure the timely delivery of aid.

We must spare no efforts in fighting against United Nations-designated terrorists and terrorist organizations but we must combat them in a way that defeats their purpose. We must therefore uphold international law, the Charter of the United Nations and international humanitarian law. The protection of civilians must be our top priority.

Mr. Ladeb (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we would like to welcome the Secretary-General, who is present with us. We also thank Under-Secretary-General Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo for her briefing.

As the Secretary-General said in his remarks today, we are following with deep concern the escalation in north-western Syria and the expansion of military operations there. We call on all parties to exercise restraint and to continue their communication

efforts to achieve a ceasefire. The continued and expanded escalation is a genuine threat to civilians. It exacerbates the humanitarian situation and causes increased suffering.

We reaffirm the need to respect international humanitarian law and to spare civilians and civilian infrastructure. We urge all sides to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian and medical assistance to all those in need.

We would also like to express our condolences to the families of those from Turkey and Syria who have died. We reaffirm our position that there is no military solution to the crisis in Syria. The only sustained solution is a political settlement in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) through the resumption of a political process.

Today we would like to emphasize that the military option will further complicate the situation and cause more suffering to the population. We therefore support the current contacts between the relevant parties, the appeal of the Secretary-General and the efforts of the United Nations. We hope that all such efforts will lead to an immediate ceasefire, which is the most urgent priority at the moment.

Mr. Abarry (Niger) (*spoke in French*): Through you, Mr. President, I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his introductory remarks and Ms. DiCarlo for her briefing, which, unfortunately, describe the serious situation currently in the Syrian Arab Republic.

The conflict has changed not only in nature but also in intensity, as the Secretary-General rightly said. On behalf of the Niger, we call on Russia and Turkey to continue the dialogue. We trust in their ability to find a compromise so as to stop the current escalation, for, otherwise, even the slight hard-won gains in humanitarian terms will be jeopardized. While the Syrian Government has the right to fight terrorists, whose presence on its territory no one doubts, that must be done in compliance with international humanitarian law. We deplore the loss of lives in recent days and extend our deepest condolences to the grieving families.

Yesterday, in this very Chamber, the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Executive Director of UNICEF, supported by United States Ambassador Craft, spoke from a mother's heart about the tragedy in Syria, the victims of which are women and children (S/PV.8734). We must listen

to their poignant call to put an end to this tragedy unfolding in Syria before our very eyes. It is time to do something; it is time to act. In that regard, we support the tireless efforts of the Secretary-General and of certain countries to stop the dangerous deterioration that has been taking place in Syria in recent days.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the Secretary-General for his remarks and Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo for her briefing.

The situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone has deteriorated and remains very tense. We continue our contacts with our Turkish colleagues, at both the inter-ministerial and the highest levels. President Putin and President Erdoğan had another telephone conversation this morning. It was agreed to arrange a face-to-face meeting in the very near future, in early March, when the schedules of the two leaders will allow it.

The Russian delegation is currently in Ankara and is intensively negotiating ways to stabilize the situation. We are therefore continuing our contacts within the Astana format. We are convinced that if the military, diplomats and representatives of security services participating in the Astana format focus on basic agreements with regard to the Idlib de-escalation zone, it will pave the way for changes on the ground in the very near future.

Yesterday, there was an incident with the Turkish military, not at the observation post, as our United States colleague told us today. Turkish soldiers feel completely safe at the observation posts. The incident took place near the village of Balyun, which is outside the observation post. The Russian Defence Ministry made detailed comments in which it confirmed that the Turkish and Russian forces on the ground are in constant daily contact. The Turkish forces, in real time, informed the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic about the location of Turkish soldiers in the Idlib de-escalation zone. Those coordinates were conveyed by Russia to the Syrian Armed Forces to ensure the security of Turkish soldiers when responding to terrorist attacks.

As noted by the Defence Ministry, the coordinates transmitted yesterday made no mention of the areas where the Turkish soldiers later died. As soon as it became clear what had happened, the Russian side took exhaustive measures to cease hostilities and to ensure

the safe evacuation of the dead and injured. In order to prevent speculation, the Defence Ministry confirmed that the Russian air forces had not used combat aircraft in that particular area.

We regret the fact that the Turkish soldiers died, just as we regret the deaths of Syrian soldiers. We are convinced that respecting the agreements reached, including on de-conflicting, will help avert such tragedies in future. Our military forces on the ground stand ready to continue to work towards that goal.

Both in discussions with our Turkish colleagues and in the Security Council, we have reiterated that we are committed to the Sochi memorandum of 17 September 2018. I should like to recall for the Council the essence of those agreements: the separation of the opposition from terrorists; the creation of a demilitarization zone free of jihadists, so that no one can shell civilian facilities, Syrian army positions or Russian military bases from there; and the provision of unhindered access to the M4 and M5 highways, which are vital to the Syrian economy, humanitarian assistance and all the people of Syria. We share that goal with our Turkish colleagues. We are well aware of the challenges that we will face in achieving those goals, but together we can make them a reality.

I should like to underscore that the Sochi decisions are temporary because, as the Sochi memorandum of understanding states, they refer to the national territory of Syria and its sovereignty and territorial integrity, which the parties must respect and which is guaranteed by the Charter of the United Nations.

In recent months, terrorists, mainly from Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, seized Idlib and ramped up their incursions against civilians, the population in neighbouring populated areas and Syrian forces. In response to the ongoing violations of the ceasefire from within the Idlib zone, the Syrian army has the right to retaliate and clamp down on the terrorists. We cannot ban the Syrian army from upholding the commitments made in Security Council resolutions on an uncompromising fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. I would underscore here that this is taking place on its own territory, the territory of sovereign Syria — no one else's territory. Today Rosemary DiCarlo reminded us that Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham is designated recognized as a terrorist organization by the United Nations, as well as Russia, Syria, Europe, the United States and Turkey.

In this regard, we would once again draw the attention of colleagues and everyone who is closely following the situation in Idlib that attempts are being made to justify the terrorists' actions. Unfortunately, that is happening at the level of officials, including representatives of the United States of America. An argument is being made that Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham members are not actually terrorists but patriots and revolutionaries, simply because they are fighting the legitimate Syrian authorities. We deem such statements to be unacceptable and very dangerous.

It is unfortunate, but today such statements seem to be taken as a call to action. Recently, a well-known non-governmental organization decided to hold an interview with the leader of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, Al-Julani, who said that the activities of the group are changing and that it is starting to focus on combating the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic rather than terrorist attacks. My Syrian colleague asked yesterday, when talking about the calls for a ceasefire, why no one had spoken to Bin Laden or Al-Baghdadi? He noted that he did not recall such people being interviewed by Western journalists.

To be frank, we have some questions about the weapons that the terrorists are using. The Russian Defence Ministry regularly provides such information, which is available on various websites. There are video clips and photos, and it is clear that the fighters are armed with the latest versions of Western military products: drones, armoured vehicles, small arms and light weapons, missiles, and anti-tank and anti-aircraft equipment. Those weapons are used against Syrian and Russian forces and against civilians.

I would warn our Western colleagues against repeating their past mistakes, when in order to achieve their geopolitical goals of regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Libya, they relied on the use of terrorists, hoping that the latter could be controlled later, once their geopolitical aims had been achieved. This is historically unprecedented. We urge all our colleagues to bear in mind the fact that it is impossible to make deals with terrorists, especially in the context of reaching a settlement in Syria.

We have repeatedly underscored the need to pool our efforts to combat terrorism and to cooperate in order to de-escalate tensions. We are prepared to cooperate with all who genuinely desire to do so. It is important for this understanding of the need for cooperation to be

demonstrated at all stages, not just when we urgently need to resolve crises.

I should like to remind the Council that in 2003, when Iraq was bombed on trumped-up charges, our United Kingdom and United States colleagues did not speak of cooperation. Libya, following the NATO operation carried out in violation of Security Council resolutions, has de facto fallen apart. They are trying to do the same to Syria. We once again reiterate our call for the parties to be guided by the interests of the region rather than by narrow geopolitical interests, which are often incompatible with the interests of the people who live in the region, whom they supposedly care so much about.

The President (*spoke in French*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Belgium.

Yesterday's strike against the Turkish contingent in Idlib, in which dozens of Turkish soldiers lost their lives, represents a dramatic turning point in the already alarming situation in Idlib. We strongly condemn this attack and convey our condolences to the Government of Turkey and the families of the victims.

We are following with great concern these new developments, which pose a major threat to international peace and security. The parties must weigh the implications.

As we know, Turkey is present in Idlib on the basis of the 2017 Astana agreement and the 2018 Sochi memorandum of understanding, which created a de-escalation zone around Idlib. Syria and Russia have on numerous occasions violated those ceasefire agreements. Each time those violations contributed to the humanitarian disaster on which we met just yesterday, under the presidency of our Deputy Prime Minister (S/PV.8734). I wish to reiterate that humanitarian access must absolutely be respected.

The Secretary-General described the situation in Idlib as a man-made disaster, and we could not agree more. The situation, with a million people living in appalling conditions, could have been completely avoided if the parties had respected their own commitments. The situation will only get worse if Syria, supported by Russia, does not stop its offensive immediately, otherwise it will once again be the Syrian people who pay the price.

We therefore once again call on Syria and Russia to put an end to the military escalation. Without urgent action, the threat of an even greater escalation is increasing by the hour.

We support the efforts of the Secretary-General and encourage him to continue to spare no effort to achieve an immediate and lasting ceasefire.

Finally, the political commitment of the Syrian authorities is vital in order for the cycle of violence and instability to finally stop in the region. The only path towards stability is a credible and inclusive political solution facilitated by the United Nations, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I welcome the presence of the Secretary-General at this meeting and I thank him for his responsible introductory remarks. I also thank the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs for her briefing.

At the fourth round of meetings, hosted in the Kazakh capital on 3 and 4 May 2017, the Astana guarantors agreed, as my colleague the representative of Russia has said, on establishing de-escalation zones in my country for six months as a temporary measure. At the end of that meeting in Astana, the guarantors, including the Turkish regime, asserted their firm commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic and agreed, inter alia, to the following, as per an official Security Council document: take all measures to ensure a ceasefire on the part of all parties to continue fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Da'esh, the Al Nusra Front, Fath al-Sham and all other individuals, groups, proxies and entities associated with Al-Qaida or Da'esh, as designated by the Security Council, in and out of the de-escalation zones. The three guarantors, including the Turkish regime, had to take measures by 4 July 2017 to separate the armed opposition groups from the terrorist groups that I have just mentioned.

On 3 May 2017, the same day on which Astana agreement was concluded, my Government announced its support of the Russian initiative on the de-escalation zones in order to stop the bloodshed of the Syrian

people and to ensure, to the extent possible, a return to normal life. The Government stressed that it would pursue its war against terrorism — namely Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front and other associated terrorist groups.

On 17 September 2018, the Sochi agreement provided for the establishment of a demilitarized zone in Idlib province and parts of rural Aleppo and Hama, while the Turkish regime committed itself to withdrawing armed groups and terrorist organizations from that region, including the Al-Nusra Front and other associated groups, to disarming them by 15 October 2018 and to ensuring normal traffic on the M4 and M5 highways by the end of 2018.

My Government welcomed that time-bound and temporary initiative. It was the result of intensive consultations between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Russian Federation. We once again stressed that we would continue combating terrorism until we had liberated every inch of our territory, whether through military operations or local reconciliation. That is the substance of a formal Council document on the Sochi agreement.

Although we, our friends and other countries demanded that the Turkish regime honour the commitments to which I have just referred within the timeframe set in the Astana and Sochi agreements, the Erdoğan regime, which does not abide by international legitimacy, reneged on them. Along with its terrorist organizations, Erdoğan regime exploited the de-escalation agreements in order to bolster their presence and capabilities, especially in the Syrian areas adjacent to Turkey, and to impose a sustained terrorist reality at the cost of our people's suffering in Idlib, Aleppo and rural areas of Hama and Latakia, where they have endured crimes committed by those terrorist organizations. The victims of those crimes, as I explained yesterday, are civilians, humanitarian workers and everyone who dares to reject the practices of the terrorist groups. In the north-west, there have been repeated demonstrations against the practices of Turkey-supported terrorist groups, including plundering, looting, killing, kidnapping, detentions, torture, rape, the imposition of taxes, the stealing of produce, the pillaging of archaeological items, human trafficking, and the looting and selling of humanitarian aid.

Two years after the Astana agreement and a year and a half after the Sochi agreement, the Turkish regime

maintained observation posts on Syrian territory with the ostensible purpose of monitoring terrorist activities, preventing continued terrorist crimes and repelling attacks on the positions of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Russian forces. However, the Turkish regime turned those posts into operating rooms for supporting terrorist organizations. Proof of that is the fact that Turkish soldiers were killed far from those observation posts, as they were supporting terrorists.

In her briefing today, the Under-Secretary-General confirmed what I have noted by saying that Turkish forces played a supporting role in terrorist operations against Syrian forces in Saraqib. In furtherance of its constitutional and national duties, relevant Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism, the Astana agreement and the Sochi agreement, the Syrian Arab Army and its allies launched a precise military operation to rid our people in Aleppo, Idlib and the surrounding areas of terrorist organizations and to restore State authority and the rule of law to areas controlled by the Al-Nusra Front. The latest report (S/2020/53), dated 20 January, a copy of which I have with me today, contains the twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team presented in accordance with resolution 2368 (2017). I will now read out the following paragraph from page 3 of that report:

“Idlib Province, in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, remains dominated by groups affiliated with Al-Qaida but also plays host to relocated ISIL fighters and dependents. Parts of Iraq, especially the area of Anbar Province bordering the Syrian Arab Republic, also represent a permissive security environment for the movement of ISIL fighters.”

They controlled the entire Idlib province. However, the Syrian Arab Army and its allies have succeeded in liberating large swathes of land, including more than 140 towns and villages, from the control of cannibals and the sponsors of international terrorism, who immerse themselves in the values and concepts of international humanitarian law which they learned from terrorist and extremist schools and academies. After all these efforts in counter-terrorism, some are now demanding that the Syrian army should go back to the lines of 2018.

My country condemns in the strongest terms the practices of the Turkish regime and its aggression against Syria in support of terrorism, entertaining the

illusion of reviving the bygone Ottoman sultanate. We categorically reject the claims of the Turkish regime that its aggression against my country is a form of self-defence, a way of implementing the Adana agreement concluded between our two countries in 1998 or any other illusionary pretexts.

Speaking of self-defence, members of the Council are aware that the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations ended its work two days ago. The Mexican delegation proposed a good idea, namely, not misusing or misinterpreting Article 51 of the Charter. No one objected to the proposal except for the Turkish delegation. Indeed, the Turkish delegation opposed the Mexican proposal. It is the Erdoğan regime that violated the Adana agreement, as well as its commitments under the Astana and Sochi agreements. It has disregarded good-neighbourliness and Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism.

I told the Council yesterday that the Erdoğan regime has even used water as a terrorist weapon (see S/PV.8734). It cut off water supplies from the city of Al-Hasakah, which is host to 600,000 civilians, who were deprived of water. This regime has for years been recruiting, supporting, training and arming thousands of terrorists, including foreign terrorist fighters from more than 100 countries, according to United Nations reports. Turkish intelligence received them at Turkish airports and allowed them to infiltrate the shared borders between Turkey and my country. Turkish intelligence planned the crimes to be committed by those terrorists and provided them with military, political and media support. It then brought them together, integrated them into the Turkish forces and used them in its aggression in the north-east and the north-west of my country. It then transferred some of them to Libya and the Horn of Africa.

My country categorically rejects the Erdoğan criminal regime's targeting of Syrian civilians as fuel in its unrestrained war against my country, and its use of civilians as a way to pressure the Governments of European countries — to blackmail them and drag NATO into its childish adventures — to expedite the accession of Turkey to the European Union or to allow Turkish citizens to enter European territories without visas. We call on European countries to honour their commitments under international law and human rights instruments. We call on them not to get involved in shameful deals or political bazaars with the rogue Turkish regime at the expense of the Syrian people.

In the past few days, we have witnessed the fighting of the Turkish army whose leaders Erdoğan dismissed in 2016, claiming that they had orchestrated a coup. He has transformed the Turkish army from a secular force into an arm of the Muslim brotherhood, fighting with terrorist takfiri groups in Syria and Libya, in violation of international law, the Charter, Security Council resolutions and the Sochi agreement.

It is regrettable that some continue to commend the Turkish regime while ignoring its crimes, such as transforming humanitarian delivery mechanisms, as contained in resolution 2504 (2020) and previous resolutions, into corridors for bringing in thousands of troops and military equipment, including tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters and all sorts of arms and munitions, along with chemical weapons.

My country is fighting terrorism on our territories. Idlib is in Syria; it is not in Turkey or on NATO territories. It is not in Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany or California. My country is fighting terrorism on its own territories, not on the territory of another country. We are determined to use all legitimate tools to address the Turkish aggression in support of terrorism. We protect our people and defend the unity of Syria, our sovereignty and our independent national decisions. The Security Council must shoulder its responsibilities to put an end to the adventures of the Erdoğan regime, which threaten international and regional peace and security. As the Secretary-General has said, this is what the Charter and international law require.

In conclusion, I ask the States that called for convening today's meeting to answer the following questions. Does the presence of the Turkish forces on the territory of my country constitute a military aggression and a form of occupation or not? The Turkish regime seeks to impose Turkish practices and raise the Turkish flag on the Syrian areas that it occupies. It seeks to change the names of our streets to Turkish names, impose Turkish curricula in our schools and loot our wealth, resources and monuments. Is all that in accordance with international law or not? Have the Security Council's approaches to combating terrorism and maintaining international peace and security, in accordance with the Charter, changed or do some want to replace the Charter with a new, non-consensual and controversial document? Is there a remnant of credibility in the Security Council that allows the Member States that have entrusted it with its powers to continue to rely on the Council?

It has become apparent that the aim of this meeting is to target the Astana format and distort the concept of international law — nothing else. If there had been any commitment to international law, as my colleague the British representative has said, his country would have never invaded and destroyed Iraq. It would not have killed a million Iraqis, stolen Iraq's national museum and resources, or destroyed its infrastructure. If there was an international law at that time to prevent the invasion of Iraq by the United States and Britain, we would not have reached this situation and Libya would not have faced what it is facing today.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. Sinirlioğlu (Turkey): I thank the Secretary-General for his statement and Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo for her briefing.

It has been only 24 hours since we discussed the situation in Syria in this Chamber (see S/PV.8734). Yet new and grave developments warranted the Security Council's further attention today. Yesterday, around the time the Council was in session, a Turkish military convoy was targeted by a series of air strikes for a duration of five hours. This heinous attack took place in the vicinity of the village of Balyun, in the Idlib de-escalation area. The convoy was deployed to reinforce a Turkish observation post and some of the fortifications. As a result of a series of air strikes that took place yesterday afternoon, we lost 34 soldiers. In addition, a significant number of members of the Turkish Forces were wounded.

The radar tracks show that regime and Russian aircraft were in formation flight during that time. Let me underline that the Turkish forces that were attacked were alone in that area. The logical conclusion therefrom is that they were deliberately attacked. We had prior coordination, in writing, with Russian forces about the location of our convoy. And air strikes continued despite the warnings we immediately issued, right after the very first attack. Even the ambulances that were sent for wounded soldiers were targeted. This was a belligerent act of aggression against Turkey. In self-defence, Turkish forces responded in kind.

The Turkish contingent attacked yesterday had been deployed in accordance with existing de-escalation arrangements in Idlib to ensure the security of our military personnel serving at observations posts; to protect civilians against the regime's aggression; to

ensure rapid and uninterrupted humanitarian access to those in need; to prevent mass displacement movements into Turkey and beyond; to preserve the de-escalation area status of Idlib; and to contribute to the establishment of a nation-wide ceasefire, as called for by resolution 2254 (2015). These were the parameters of the Sochi memorandum of 17 September 2018. Our aim is to return to the status quo ante established then.

We continue our dialogue with Russia on that basis. In fact, another Russian delegation was in Ankara yesterday, on the very day of this dastardly attack on Turkish forces. Today, President Erdoğan spoke with President Putin. We have made it clear to the Russian side once again that we will not abandon our observation posts and we will continue our military reinforcement.

We have a moral responsibility, at least, to protect the helpless, desperate children of Idlib. Some may interpret de-escalation of violence to mean that all forces are equally responsible for de-escalation. Following that logic would mean leaving those civilians defenceless and at the mercy of the regime. In that case, it is clear what almost 5 million people in the area would do — they would flee the country. But this is exactly what the murderous Al-Assad regime wants. There is no doubt that the regime and its backers aim at depopulating Idlib.

Yesterday's events are a stark reminder that the regime is hell-bent on continuing its attacks to intimidate Syrian civilians and destroy the Syrian opposition and the prospects for a political solution. Today, the Turkish presence in Idlib represents hope for the millions of civilians stuck in that area and the only bulwark against the regime's crimes against humanity. The Turkish presence in Idlib is the only reason why millions of Syrians can remain in their homeland without fear. It needs to be clear to everyone that our soldiers sacrificed their own lives to save the lives of civilians in Idlib. The Turkish presence in Idlib is also the sole guarantee for the continuation of humanitarian assistance.

These are exactly the reasons why the regime and its backers are targeting the Turkish armed forces. The regime and its backers want to drag Turkey into their dirty war because Turkish soldiers stand in the way of the regime fulfilling its dream of a military solution. But there is a miscalculation here; the regime and its backers have for years been used to killing innocent civilians and members of the opposition. They should make no mistake — this time, they have targeted

the Turkish armed forces directly. Some warlords in Damascus may not know the difference. Some extremist mercenaries fighting along with the regime may not know the difference. If they want to learn the hard way, they will. Turkey does not want war, but Turkey will not hesitate to use force if and when its security is threatened. Any provocation and harassment will be retaliated against by all means.

Turkey has been displaying the utmost restraint to avoid direct military confrontation. But this is a fight between right and wrong. Turkey is undertaking these efforts on behalf of the international community in order to protect millions of civilians, mostly women and children. Most members of the Council have thanked us for our tireless efforts. What we want from them is not only their gratitude; we want them to share in the responsibility. The fate of millions of civilians is our joint responsibility. It is time for the Security Council to say, "enough is enough". The Council has to stop the regime's war crimes and reckless behaviour, which pose a direct threat to international peace and security. The international community should not remain indifferent to the developments unfolding in Idlib. Otherwise, there will be repercussions on a much wider scale across Europe, in the region and beyond.

As to the previous speaker's statement, I would like to emphasize that it is a disgrace that he is still sitting behind the Syrian nameplate and telling us shamelessly that millions of Syrians, including the newly uprooted 560,000 children, are terrorists. He is not a legitimate representative of the Syrian people and he is not worthy of my response.

The President (*spoke in French*): There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

Before adjourning the meeting, as this is the last scheduled meeting of the Council for the month of February, I would like to express thank all members of the Council for their cooperation during what was not only a particularly busy month but also a very productive one on several matters. I would also like to thank the Council secretariat for its continuous, highly effective support. I would also like to thank the teams of conference service officers, interpreters, translators, verbatim reporters and security staff for their work.

As we end our presidency, I know that I speak on behalf of all Council members in wishing the delegation of China good luck as it assumes the presidency for the month of March.

The meeting rose at 5.40 p.m.