



Security Council

Distr.: General
1 April 2020

Original: English

Letter dated 31 March 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council

I have the honour to enclose herewith a copy of the briefings by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, and by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Geir Pedersen, and of the statements delivered by the representatives of Belgium, China, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Niger, the Russian Federation, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, South Africa, Tunisia, Viet Nam, the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in connection with the videoconference convened on Monday, 30 March 2020 (see annexes).

In accordance with the procedure set out in the letter dated 27 March 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2020/253](#)), which was agreed in the light of the extraordinary circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the briefing and statements will be issued as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) **Zhang Jun**
President of the Security Council



Annex I

Briefing dated 30 March by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock

My briefing today will focus on four areas:

First: the COVID-19 crisis and the potential implications, including for humanitarian operations, in Syria;

Second: the situation in the north-west, where we are delivering record volumes of assistance cross-border, but are not close to meeting the vast and growing humanitarian needs;

Third: the situation in the north-east, especially on medical supplies;

And fourth: an overview of the humanitarian situation as we now see it.

As of this morning, 10 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in Syria, including one death. Judging from other places, that is the tip of the iceberg. The virus has the potential to have a devastating impact on vulnerable communities across the country.

Syria's health services are extremely fragile. Only around half of its hospitals and primary health-care centres were fully functional at the end of last year.

As in other countries, the World Health Organization (WHO)-led response advises a focus on prevention and preparedness. That includes preparing front-line humanitarian workers, most of whom are Syrians, to interact safely with communities.

United Nations-supported surveillance and early warning systems have been reinforced across the country, in joint efforts with the relevant authorities. Preparedness and response plans have been developed and the pre-positioning of equipment and supplies, the rehabilitation of the Central Public Health Laboratory, the upgrading of available isolation units, and community engagement programmes are all under way.

But all efforts to prevent, detect and respond to COVID-19 are impeded by Syria's fragile health system, by high levels of population movement, challenges to obtaining critical supplies, including protective equipment and ventilators, and by the practical difficulties of implementing isolation and protective measures in areas of displacement, with high population density and low levels of sanitation services.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's appeal for the waiving of sanctions that can undermine countries' capacity to respond to the pandemic.

The pandemic is already further restricting our ability to access affected communities. Airport and border closures, including in the north-east, along with other movement restrictions, add to the long-standing difficulties humanitarian staff face in travelling to where they are needed.

While the COVID-19 response requires restrictions on movement, it is important that there is appropriate facilitation for movement of humanitarian workers and supplies and for medical evacuations so that local health and broader humanitarian responses can be supported.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's call, which I know Mr. Pedersen will also be talking about, for a complete and immediate nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria to enable an all-out effort to suppress COVID-19.

It is clear that this crisis can only be overcome by a truly global response.

Last week, together with the Secretary-General, the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, Henrietta Fore, and the Director-General of WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, I launched a \$2 billion global humanitarian response plan to fight COVID-19 in the world's most vulnerable countries, including in Syria. I thank donors for the pledges already made and urge them to do more. As the Secretary-General has said: the pandemic has shown that we are only as strong as our weakest health system.

Let me turn now to north-west Syria.

Again, Special Envoy Pedersen will speak about this; there has been a significant decrease in violence following the 5 March agreement.

Humanitarian needs remain enormous. Our data show clear evidence of deteriorating conditions since December. We are, for example, seeing increased rates of stunting – a consequence of child malnutrition, from which it is rarely possible to fully recover. Almost three out of every ten displaced children in north-west Syria under the age of 5 are stunted. They will live with the consequences for the rest of their lives.

A United Nations inter-agency mission to Idlib, on 2 March, saw conditions there first-hand. The mission assessment was clear: people are afraid; needs are vast and complex; local aid workers are delivering tirelessly under near-impossible conditions; but the response is overwhelmed.

The team saw hillsides dotted with tents. Overcrowding is forcing some families to take turns in sleeping outside. The team was struck by the large number of very young children among the displaced. They were told by community members that child marriage, child labour, recruitment of child soldiers and domestic violence are all on the rise.

A scale-up of assistance to the north-west is under way, thanks to donors' rapid response to our \$500 million appeal to meet the most urgent needs of almost a million civilians displaced since December. Some \$340 million has been received or pledged to date. More is needed.

Cross-border operations into north-west Syria provide a lifeline for millions of people who cannot otherwise be reached.

Deliveries are being scaled up in response to growing needs. In January and February, more than 2,150 trucks carrying aid crossed from Turkey into north-west Syria – more than double the number that crossed during the same period in 2019. We expect that almost 1,500 trucks will cross in March – a new monthly record since the start of the United Nations operation in 2014. But needs are far from being met and it is essential that travel restrictions put in place as a result of COVID-19 do not have the effect of reducing deliveries.

Alongside the United Nations cross-border operation, efforts continue to establish cross-line delivery into the north-west. They have yet to bear fruit. I call on all parties to support these efforts and to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access for cross-line missions.

I commend the work of all humanitarian organizations, whose work continues despite immense challenges. On 14 March, offices of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in Idlib City and Ariha were occupied by armed individuals. Personnel were detained and harassed, and items were stolen and destroyed. I join humanitarian colleagues in condemning this incident. The Red Crescent has also faced recent interference in its work in the north-east, including confiscation of a medical facility in Raqqah City

earlier this month. Such interference is unacceptable. I call on all parties to protect humanitarian workers and assets.

You have seen the Secretary-General's February report on the feasibility of alternatives to the use of Ya'rubiyah border crossing.

According to WHO, continuity of health services in the north-east has already been affected, leaving people even more exposed to the COVID-19 crisis.

Many medical facilities and individuals in north-east Syria who depended on medical supplies via Ya'rubiyah have not received these supplies through alternative channels.

Work to address this continues. In the meantime, we are receiving reports of significant shortages. At least seven primary health centres in rural Raqqah have gaps in their reproductive health and nutrition supplies. Other facilities report critical items in danger of immediate stockout, including emergency medicines, anaesthetics and insulin. The Al-Hawl field hospital is also reporting low levels of some medications and supplies. One primary health centre in Raqqah may be forced to close in the coming weeks. The facility treats over 3,900 patients per month, more than half of whom are children.

I therefore urge rapid action to get essential medical supplies to everyone who needs them in the north-east.

We have also seen further disruptions to services at the Alluq water station. Alluq supplies water to half a million people in the north-east, including Al-Hawl and Arishah camps. I call on the parties to find a sustainable agreement covering water pumping as well as electricity supply for Alluq and other areas that have recently had electricity cut off.

In southern Syria, insecurity has continued since my briefing to you last month, in which we paid tribute to two Syrian humanitarian colleagues from Oxfam who were killed in Dar'a that day, when their vehicle was attacked by an unidentified armed group. It is with great sadness that I report the death of another colleague in Dar'a. Ali Husein Mohammad, a science teacher and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) staff member, was killed earlier this month in violence in the town of Jilin, in Dar'a.

This month marks a grim anniversary. The conflict in Syria has now entered its tenth year.

Over half the population has been forced to flee their homes. More than 11 million people inside Syria require humanitarian assistance, including nearly 5 million children.

Nearly 8 million people do not have reliable access to food. This number has increased by more than 20 per cent since last year. Half a million children in Syria are chronically malnourished.

At the same time, people all over Syria – including in areas where hostilities have subsided – are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet. An economic crisis, mostly a result of the war but in part also a consequence of developments elsewhere in the region, has led to price hikes for several staple goods, including bread and fuel, and reduced purchasing power, forcing people to resort to ever-more negative coping mechanisms.

The economic situation will also be affected by measures taken to stem COVID-19.

The United Nations-supported humanitarian response operation continues to respond to needs throughout the country, reaching 6 million people each month on average last year. That includes support for 26 million medical procedures, monthly food assistance to 4.5 million people, emergency water, sanitation and hygiene support to almost 8 million people, and education support to almost 5 million students and teachers. I again thank the donors who pay for all this.

As the Secretary-General has said, we cannot allow the tenth year of this conflict to result in the same carnage, the same flouting of human rights and international humanitarian law, the same inhumanity.

Annex II

Briefing dated 30 March by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Geir Pedersen

We have arrived at another critical point in the Syrian conflict. After terrible violence, an uneasy calm prevails on the ground – and now, Syrians face a new potentially devastating threat in COVID-19.

The Secretary-General appealed to warring parties throughout the world for an immediate ceasefire to enable the human family to tackle COVID-19. Further to this, I have made a specific appeal for a complete, immediate nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria to enable an all-out-effort to counter COVID-19, which is a grave danger to all Syrians. This is both a humanitarian and a political imperative.

Syria is at high risk of being unable to contain the pandemic, given large-scale population movements, dangerously cramped conditions in multiple internally displaced persons camps, settlements and places of detention. Governance is weak or even absent in some areas. Years of conflict have left the health-care system degraded or destroyed. Health professionals, medical equipment and supplies are desperately lacking. I am also acutely conscious of the risk of exposure and impact on Syrian women, who are at the forefront of health and community support systems. This virus does not care if you live in Government-controlled areas or outside. It does not discriminate. It endangers all Syrians.

We need the kind of sustained period of calm that a nationwide ceasefire would ensure because we need cooperation to take place across the front lines that riddle Syria's territory – and this is needed not tomorrow, but now.

Let me remind you that, when it comes to the north-west, on 5 March, Presidents Erdogan and Putin agreed an additional protocol to the Memorandum on the Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area. They agreed that all military actions along the contact lines would cease. Since then, there has been a significant decrease in violence, especially in aerial attacks and ground operations. Sporadic incidents continue, involving all sides.

The two Presidents also agreed to establish a security corridor along the M-4 highway, with joint Turkish-Russian patrolling. The first patrols took place on 15 and 23 March – however, not on the entire stretch envisaged under the agreement. There have obviously been challenges to creating this corridor. But I appeal to all involved to not make the cessation of military activities in the north-west contingent on this aspect of the agreement. I appreciate the welcome change brought about by the Russia-Turkey agreement and actions.

I also appreciate the fact that arrangements between key stakeholders in the north-east, including Russia, Turkey and the United States, as well as Syrian parties, also continue to broadly hold.

But in both the north-east and north-west, there is a real risk of hostilities resuming. If that happened, the pre-existing dangers to civilians would be multiplied by the pandemic and the virus would spread like wildfire, with devastating effects for the Syrian people – humanitarian, societal and economic. It could rebound across international borders. All of us have a responsibility to avoid this scenario, by cementing existing arrangements into a comprehensive nationwide ceasefire.

And I believe it is possible and necessary, in that context, to discuss a more effective cooperative targeted counter-terrorism effort too, one that respects international humanitarian law and saves civilians from further all-out assaults. I note in this regard that the recent de-escalation agreement for Idlib includes specific

language that “the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext”.

A nationwide ceasefire is what this Council mandated in resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), and an effective nationwide response to COVID-19 demands it. But it will not be sufficient. Much more is needed.

The Syrian Government has taken increasingly significant steps to counter COVID-19. Large parts of the country are now under varying degrees of curfew, with public spaces closed and health-care systems preparing to the extent possible. Meanwhile, the Syrian Opposition Coalition and other de facto authorities in areas outside Government control have also taken steps. Syrian civil society, including women-led organizations, are also mobilizing against this threat. I note these efforts and urge the Syrian Government and all de facto authorities to be transparent in their reporting on how COVID-19 is affecting all Syrians.

The Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Lowcock, just briefed you on the United Nations humanitarian response. And, as I stressed in my appeal, I hope that international donors will do whatever must be done so that Syrians in all parts of the country have access to the equipment and resources needed to combat the virus and treat patients. Nothing should impede this. You will have seen the Secretary-General’s global appeal last Friday, which Mark also referred to, and I quote: “for the waiving of sanctions that can undermine countries’ capacity to respond to the pandemic”.

Within the framework of the Humanitarian Task Force, we are directly engaging concerned States so that all necessary humanitarian exemptions are available and fully utilized and that all hurdles are put to one side to urgently move the most critical items into Syria to combat COVID-19. I welcome the initial engagement by the United States with us in this regard and stress the need for utmost urgency. We will engage all others as required.

In addition to traditional donor countries, we are also engaging countries such as China and Cuba to see what they can do to render direct assistance in Syria. And we are urging all donors and partners, as well as Syrian stakeholders, to ensure that no obstacles prevent assistance reaching Syrians across all parts of the country.

Let me equally stress that full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of the country will be key. And that all modalities, including cross-border, as Mark just mentioned, will be needed to deliver humanitarian assistance and scale up prevention and protection.

I have made a special appeal for the large-scale release of detainees and abductees. This is not a new call from me. But given the risk of COVID-19 racing through detainee populations, action is urgent. Other Governments have already carried out releases on an exceptional basis due to this risk. Surely this can and should happen in Syria. I am engaging the Syrian Government specifically on this matter, including in the light of President Assad’s 22 March decree outlining amnesties and sentence reductions for certain types of detainees, as well as specific exemptions.

Beyond releases, there must also be immediate access for relevant humanitarian organizations to all detention facilities. Adequate medical care and protective measures must also be ensured in all places of detention.

Plainly, COVID-19 makes it impossible to convene Syrians in Geneva at present. But this has not deterred us when it comes to the political track. Today, I am able to inform the Security Council that, after prolonged consultations with my active facilitation, the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Government and the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Negotiations Commission have agreed that the next session of the Constitutional Committee shall have the following agenda: “In line with the

mandate, the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure of the Constitutional Committee, discussing the national foundations and principles.”

It is a good step, particularly at this time, that agreement on an agenda for a next session has been reached. We will consult with the parties to see if useful preparations can begin for future sessions while we wait to see when a new meeting will be possible.

Let me note here that, as has been clear with both Co-Chairs throughout, agreement during a next session of the Constitutional Committee on national foundations and principles is not a precondition to moving to other items. All three components can, during the next session, suggest national foundations and principles. And the discussion will move in subsequent sessions to other items of the Constitution, consistent with the mandate and the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure. I have also reminded both Co-Chairs to use agreed language when referring to the delegations, and to observe the agreed code of conduct when it comes to public statements, some of which have not been helpful recently.

Meanwhile, we are continuing to engage, often virtually, with a wide range of Syrians, men and women, including the Women’s Advisory Board and a broad spectrum of Syrian civil society inside and outside Syria.

I have long spoken of the need to build trust and confidence, of the Constitutional Committee as a door opener, and of the need for a wider process with a dialogue on mutually reciprocal and mutually reinforcing actions by the Syrian parties and by international partners. Now we face a new element in an already grave crisis: COVID-19.

For many Syrians, now in their tenth year of a conflict that still defies comprehension in the scale of suffering, brutality and devastation, it may seem hard, even slightly abstract, to focus on a global virus pandemic. But make no mistake: COVID-19 is an enormous threat to Syrians, and it demands a complete shift in mind-set from all, now. This common threat must now focus all with new consciousness and new determination on a common agenda to save the Syrian people from a new calamity.

To implement a nationwide ceasefire and help Syrians respond to COVID-19, I am ready to work with the Government of Syria and the opposition and all relevant players on the ground, as well as key countries with weight and influence who can support a scaling-up of action and ensure that the ceasefire holds. I have appreciated the initial engagement from the Syrian parties and key international players. It will not be easy, and there are no guarantees. But the Syrian people desperately need everyone to focus on their welfare now. If key players come in and can engage with the Secretary-General’s and my appeals, I think we can work urgently in a common effort. And this, in turn, would definitely help in the effort on the political track to implement Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#). I am convinced this is the only way forward.

Annex III

Statement dated 30 March by the co-penholders, Belgium and Germany, delivered by the Permanent Representative of Belgium

We want to thank Under-Secretary General Lowcock and Special Envoy Pedersen for their briefings today and we extend our gratitude to all humanitarian and medical workers in Syria.

I will limit my statement to four points:

First, we fully support the statements of the Secretary-General and of the Special Envoy on COVID-19. This virus constitutes an unprecedented threat to humanity, and its effects are potentially disastrous in Syria. Nine years of war have taken an extreme toll. Almost half of all health-care facilities have been partially or completely destroyed. There is a shortage of medical equipment and personnel. In particular, the 6 million internally displaced persons, especially those in the north-west, as well as detainees and abductees, are living in very challenging conditions and are extremely vulnerable to respiratory infections.

Therefore, we welcome efforts by the World Health Organization to provide testing kits for the civilian population in Idlib. We also echo the Special Envoy's demands for: (1) a complete, immediate nationwide ceasefire; (2) large-scale releases of detainees and abductees; and (3) full humanitarian access, making full use of all modalities and respecting all humanitarian principles. These urgent demands have gone widely unanswered in the past. Under these extraordinary circumstances, they are mandatory.

Secondly, in the north-west, the ceasefire between Russia and Turkey is fragile, yet it seems to be holding. This is positive news.

However, the Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Lowcock, in his statement, was abundantly clear on the challenges that people in Idlib continue to face and we remain very deeply concerned about their situation. Due to the military offensive, nearly 1 million internally displaced persons are living in an ever-smaller area, lacking housing, food and water. Due to the great needs, more than ever before, the cross-border modality has been used to import humanitarian aid into Idlib. We support the United Nations inter-agency mission that took place in early March and call for continued close monitoring of the humanitarian situation by the United Nations.

Thirdly, in the north-east, gaps in the influx of medical aid are becoming clear since the Council did not agree on renewing the crossing point of Ya'rubiyah earlier this year. To fill this gap, the Secretary-General, in his report, called for more cross-line as well as more cross-border access. We request the United Nations to deliver clear facts and figures concerning cross-line access throughout Syria, and, in particular, to all areas and medical facilities in the north-east. We also request more specific information about access to non-governmental medical facilities. The Council and its member States should also actively consider renewing cross-border access into the north-east. The need is evident.

Finally, we renew our call for accountability. In this regard, we strongly support the work of the Board of Inquiry, as well as the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism.

Annex IV

Statements delivered by Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council on the humanitarian and political situation in the Syrian Arab Republic

A. Belgium

Concerning the Constitutional Committee, despite the hard work of the Special Envoy, there seems to be little reason for optimism. Yes: it is positive that the issue concerning the agenda is resolved. However, the tactics of Damascus seem to be to stall the process rather than to strive for the Committee to be fully functional. Discussing process is important but the Committee's goal is to have qualitative discussions on different issues to further the implementation of Security Council resolution [2554 \(2015\)](#). This is what the Syrian people need and deserve and what is essential if Syria is to have a viable future. We call upon all parties to take this point fully to heart.

Finally, we reconfirm our position that we will not fund reconstruction before a political solution is firmly under way.

B. China

We note that, since Russia and Turkey agreed on a ceasefire arrangement on 6 March, the security situation in north-west Syria has significantly improved. We appreciate their diplomatic efforts and encourage the relevant parties to continue implementing the ceasefire.

It is our consistent position to support a political solution of the conflict in Syria. We appreciate the painstaking efforts by the Special Envoy and encourage him to continue facilitating dialogue between the Syrian parties, towards an inclusive Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process in line with Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#). We reiterate the future of the country must be decided by the Syrian people, without foreign interference.

China also pays close attention to the humanitarian need of the civilians in Syria. The humanitarian issue in Syria is very complicated and must be managed in an integrated and impartial way. We are pleased to learn the positive developments in cross-line humanitarian assistance and call for enhanced coordination and cooperation between the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Syrian Government, so as to find a lasting and sustaining solution. With regard to the cross-border arrangement of humanitarian assistance, China's position remains unchanged. We have been playing a constructive role. China did not block anything. Full respect must be given to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria.

The potential impact of COVID-19 on Syria is of growing concern, even though the current number of confirmed cases in Syria is comparatively limited. We note that the Syrian Government has taken a series of precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the virus. The World Health Organization is actively engaged. We appreciate those efforts. The Chinese Government has already provided a batch of testing kits for Syria. We are willing to continue providing assistance within our capacity to Syria. We call on other countries to do the same.

We are seriously concerned about the negative impact of unilateral sanctions on countries' capacity in responding to the pandemic, especially for vulnerable countries like Syria. Civilians and innocent people are suffering severely from those sanctions.

China supports the call of the Secretary-General in this regard. We call for the complete and immediate lifting of unilateral coercive measures. Our position is explained in detail in the recent joint letter to the Secretary-General, together with Russia, among others. We hope that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs will join the voice of the Secretary-General and High Commissioner for Human Rights in this regard.

C. Dominican Republic

We are here to discuss a situation that for nine long years has impacted the lives of millions of people: a conflict that has resulted in a devastated and broken country, both physically and emotionally; a conflict which, among other violations of international law, has seen attacks on hospitals and other medical facilities like no other; one that has forced thousands of doctors, nurses, first responders and other medical staff to flee.

It is a conflict whose only solution is political and yet, after almost a decade, it is still not on the horizon, due to the inability of the parties to let their decisions be guided only by the legitimate aspirations of the people of Syria to live in freedom, justice and progress.

Today, Syrians all across the country might be facing yet another threat, one for which they are not prepared. And they are not prepared because of the conflict. Only 42 per cent of the Syrian population has access to clean water, 50 per cent of their medical infrastructure is not operational and only God knows how many doctors and nurses are still able to work.

Even developed countries are struggling to stop the spread of COVID-19.

What might happen in Syria, particularly in the north, is just heartbreaking.

Although the cases so far are low, it is only a matter of time before COVID-19 spreads.

Therefore, we believe that the prevention efforts under way with the leadership of the World Health Organization, in coordination with the Government of Syria, are of utmost importance.

Allow me to highlight a few points:

- We fully echo the calls by the Secretary-General and the Special Envoy for a complete and immediate ceasefire all across Syria. We recognize the reports that the 6 March ceasefire has held. As we have already said before, we are cautiously optimistic and hope that this ceasefire will be sustainable and long-lasting. This Council must remain attentive to how the situation on the ground develops and follow the signals and movements of the forces present there. We reiterate that a complete ceasefire, as mandated by Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), needs to be in place to allow a credible political process and for the people of Syria to live a dignified life once and for all.
- We also wanted to touch on cross-border assistance. We just heard from Mark that, in the north-west, the cross-border operation has once more proven to be essential for the survival of millions of people. We greatly appreciate the whole humanitarian community, those on the front lines, mainly Syrians, for dedicating their lives to serve those most affected.
- We are particularly concerned about the situation in the north-east, where United Nations-coordinated medical assistance is absent, and information that water supply has been disrupted for almost half a million, including in the Al Hol

Camp. Therefore, we would like to propose that all relevant parties take all possible measures to expedite the response in that area. If that includes reopening the Al-Yarubiya Crossing, then we should all support it. These are extraordinary times that require extraordinary measures. We must only think of the well-being of the people.

- To conclude, the Dominican Republic would like to reiterate its support for any effort to prevent a major outbreak of COVID-19 in an already vulnerable Syria. Syria will not be able to cope with such an outbreak. This is not a situation to sit and wait. This is a situation for urgent, immediate and principled action and, above all, for solidarity.

D. Estonia

As noted already by the briefers and other Council members – the spread of COVID-19 adds another layer of complexity to the Syrian crisis.

It is clear that the number of infected persons is growing, even if not reflected in the official data. As underlined by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the fragility of the Syrian health-care system, combined with the spread of the virus, will further undermine Syrian internally displaced persons.

On this note, we stress that the work under Security Council resolution [2504 \(2020\)](#) on cross-border aid remains vital in assisting the vast number of people in need. We note that the cross-line aid deliveries are improving, however the aid is still not reaching all the people, especially those who were formerly receiving support through the Al-Yaroubiah crossing in the north-east of Syria.

The virus also threatens detainees in overcrowded prisons. We support Special Envoy Pedersen's call for a large-scale release of arbitrarily detained people and granting access to humanitarian organizations to those imprisoned. The announcement of a general amnesty is certainly a step in the right direction, but there are still a lot of unresolved issues surrounding its implementation. There have been several of these announcements in the past, with only limited results.

Finally, maintaining the ceasefire in Idlib remains crucial. It is important, both for the future of the political process and preserving humanitarian access. The European Union has clearly voiced its call for a nationwide ceasefire. We repeat this here today.

E. France

It is crucial that the Security Council continues to exchange regularly on the situation in Syria.

The top priority is the implementation of an immediate and sustainable nationwide ceasefire to facilitate the efforts to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

We support the call of the Secretary-General and of his Special Envoy in this regard. It is urgent that it be implemented. We call on all parties to work actively in this direction. The United Nations has to remain at the forefront of these efforts, in accordance with Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#).

The risk of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria is extremely worrying, notably in the north-west and in the north-east. A nationwide ceasefire is the only way to facilitate prevention and response actions to COVID-19. This is all

the more necessary as the implementation of the Russian-Turkish agreement of 5 March on Idlib remains fragile and uncertain.

We also fully support the call of the Special Envoy for the large-scale release of detainees and abductees, especially political prisoners, as well as immediate access for relevant humanitarian organizations to detention facilities.

We call on all parties, in particular the Syrian regime, to ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian access to all the people in need.

The United Nations agencies and their partners are scaling up their efforts to respond to the humanitarian needs of the population and to the COVID-19 crisis. These efforts need to be supported and enhanced.

In this context, the cross-border mechanism has never been so relevant in the north-west. The United Nations Children's Fund and World Food Programme were very clear after their visit in Syria: there is no alternative to the cross-border mechanism. The scale-up of humanitarian deliveries through the two crossing points must continue. France remains determined to preserve that life-saving mechanism. We have committed 25 million euros for 2020 to the humanitarian response in the north-west, including 3 million euros for the COVID-19 response.

In the north-east, we deplore that the recent announcement of the regime regarding the cross-line delivery of medical items has not materialized. The attempts of the regime to dictate the conditions for the delivery of aid are unacceptable and in blatant violation of humanitarian principles. It is essential that the World Health Organization convoy in Damascus can deliver aid to all the people in need in the north-east.

Urgent steps need to be taken to ensure adequate medical care and protective measures in all places of detention.

It is urgent to restart the political process and to broaden its scope to all the elements of resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#).

We support the attempts of the Special Envoy to find an agreement between the parties to resume the meetings of the Constitutional Committee and we welcome today's announcement. However, it is clear that the Syrian regime is unwilling to engage in a credible political process or to engage at all, as the last five months have sufficiently demonstrated.

In this context, we call on Geir Pedersen to make it clear to the Security Council when he deems he is no longer able to continue his efforts on the Constitutional Committee. We also urge him to work on all aspects of resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), as the political process cannot be reduced to constitutional discussions. The ceasefire is one of these aspects, as are the elections and the conditions for holding a transparent and free ballot. The temporary lull obtained in the north-west must be used for this purpose.

In conclusion, I reiterate my call on Russia to convince the regime to abide by a national ceasefire in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. Our collective cooperation is needed than more ever and we need to tackle the crisis together, despite our disagreements on the Syrian war.

F. Germany

We have just heard about the serious problems for humanitarian access in parts of Syria. We also heard about the growing need, which might even increase exponentially, depending on how the Corona-outbreak will affect Syria.

We also continue to be concerned about the well-being and safety of humanitarian personnel.

Restrictions to principled humanitarian assistance and to medical assistance have become all the more unacceptable with COVID-19 looming. We need more access to the North of Syria, and we need border crossings to ensure the continued flow of help. We definitely cannot accept the end of cross-border modalities in July. On the contrary, they need to be extended to allow aid to reach all those in need. Against the background of COVID-19, we urge Member States to reconsider previous positions in the name of humanity.

We need to make the best use of the time we still have to take preventive measures.

Let me remind everyone that sanctions are not directed at the population. They are directed at the leadership in Damascus, a leadership who are culpable of the worst human rights violations one could imagine. The humanitarian situation in Syria is the result of the policies of Damascus and of those policies alone.

Germany and the European Union are among the largest humanitarian donors in Syria. The German Government has provided humanitarian aid worth more than 150 million euros for the current crisis in Idlib since the beginning of the year. And Mark, as you already know, your appeal last week was well heard in Berlin. We have to protect the most vulnerable in Idlib and elsewhere in Syria. Even more solidarity is mandatory these days.

What is more, Germany fully supports the appeal by the Secretary-General António Guterres and Special Envoy Pedersen for a complete, immediate nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria. As Foreign Minister Maas said last week: “We have a shared responsibility to avert the fatal consequences that COVID-19 would mean for people weakened by war, displacement and hunger.” We need an extended humanitarian ceasefire throughout the country to be able to tackle the COVID-19 challenges.

The European Union also stressed its strong support for the Special Envoy’s appeal. A lasting, nationwide ceasefire has become even more urgent in light of the looming crisis caused by COVID-19.

If nothing else has taught us before, this common threat, our shared vulnerability should finally teach us the value of human life.

We stress the importance of the United Nations’ central role in reaching a genuine and sustainable nationwide ceasefire. There can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Sustainable peace, stability and security in Syria can only be achieved through a political settlement under the auspices of the United Nations, in line with Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#) and the Geneva communiqué of 2012.

We call for a swift return to the political process mandated by resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#) and reiterate our full support for the efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen in this regard. The central role of the United Nations in reaching a genuine and sustainable nationwide ceasefire is also clearly stated in this resolution.

The Syrian regime must stop obstructing and finally seriously commit to the Constitutional Committee. We call upon Russia to use its influence over Damascus in this regard.

We support the appeal by Special Envoy Pedersen for the large-scale release of detainees and abductees on humanitarian grounds and have taken note of the regime’s announcement to release at least a certain group of prisoners (i.e. people older than 70). If that were to be the case, it would be a first and overdue step in the right

direction. However, those announcements must now be followed up with concrete deeds, for once. We've too often seen empty promises in the past that were never lived up to. And let us be very clear: arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances for which the Syrian regime is responsible are still ongoing. It's cynical to announce a prisoner release while arrests continue on a daily basis. These arrests must stop.

We also call on the Syrian regime to allow immediate and unconditional access for relevant humanitarian organizations to all detention facilities under its control and to ensure adequate medical care and protective measures for all persons in detention. The Syrian regime must also finally inform the families of the tens of thousands of missing persons about the fate of their loved ones.

As long as the Syrian regime does not change its brutal behaviour and end its grave violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, there will be no lifting of sanctions. Germany and the European Union will only assist in any reconstruction of Syria when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition is firmly under way.

We will also continue to support all efforts, in particular those of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism and the Commission of Inquiry, to ensure that none of the crimes and atrocities committed during the Syrian conflict go unpunished, that all perpetrators are held accountable and that victims receive real justice.

G. Indonesia

As all of us stay safely in our own places, I cannot help but think about the millions of people in Idlib, internally displaced persons camps and other densely populated areas in Syria that are facing the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks.

As reported earlier, we currently have 10 cases in Syria. This is the early stage of the pandemic. We are all aware of the potentially devastating impact if the virus continues to spread throughout the concerned areas, particularly where hostilities are taking place.

We appreciate the ongoing prevention and response planning to minimize the transmission risk.

In this regard, my delegation wishes to highlight several points:

First, the health responses must be in parallel with a nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria.

Indonesia fully supports the call for a global ceasefire by the Secretary-General, as well as the Special Envoy's appeal for a complete and immediate nationwide ceasefire to suppress COVID-19 in Syria.

The fighting must end. And it is critical to end it now. All parties in the conflict need to firmly respect this.

We are pleased that, since the ceasefire of 5 March, there have been no reports of airstrikes in the north-west. However, in the midst of this pandemic, it is not only about halting the airstrikes or stopping the shelling, but it is also about creating a safe environment for all civilians in Syria, particularly the most vulnerable communities, in every aspect of their daily lives.

Secondly, Indonesia urges the United Nations and the Government of Syria, with strong support of other key parties, to strengthen their cooperation in ensuring the most effective prevention and response plan for COVID-19, as well as to guarantee

the continuation of humanitarian assistance in the country. The immediate and timely delivery of humanitarian assistance remains critical.

We are pleased to note that cross-border responses continue and have not been impacted by COVID-19 countermeasures. This is important to maintain.

Thirdly, while the focus is now on COVID-19, it is also important to continue to move forward together, working on a political way out of the Syrian crisis.

We appreciate the Special Envoy's continued engagement with all relevant parties in this regard and are delighted that agreement on the agenda within the Constitutional Committee has been reached.

It is extremely important to ensure that we scale up efforts to address the displacement crisis; there are still around 900,000 people displaced in the north-west and 60 per cent of them are children.

Again, they are also the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

With the upcoming holy month of Ramadan, we call on all parties to set aside their differences and work together to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people, including to confront the danger of the virus.

The guns must be silenced for the medical workers to do their tasks.

H. Niger

Niger welcomes and fully supports the appeal by the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Pedersen, for a complete and immediate ceasefire everywhere in Syria. We hope that all belligerents involved will respect this call. In these unprecedented times, we have to focus on the common adversary, which is COVID-19.

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, only 50 per cent of public hospitals and 47 per cent of public primary health-care centres are fully functional. If the outbreak accelerates, it will be very challenging for health workers to accommodate large amounts of patients.

Similarly, a large number of vulnerable people, including internally displaced persons and refugees, mostly women and kids, are at high risk of contracting the virus. This would create a larger crisis, given that social distancing is near impossible in overcrowded camps.

The COVID-19 does not respect travel bans or closed borders, therefore, maximum access to humanitarian workers and materials is necessary to face this pandemic.

My delegation calls on the Syrian government and the organizations to work together on additional partnership initiatives to protect Syrians in all parts of the country.

On the political topic, Niger would like to make two points:

- Our belief remains that the Syrian crisis must be resolved politically and not militarily, via a process led by the Syrians themselves and various components of their society. We welcome the recent positive evolution of the Constitutional Committee, as the Special Envoy informed us;
- We also still believe that the political and humanitarian situations in Syria cannot be dealt with independently of each other.

Therefore, my delegation hopes that the Special Envoy's ceasefire appeal is a step toward the implementation of the other components of Security Council resolution 2254 (2015).

To conclude, I encourage Council members to work together to help the Syrian population during this health crisis and avoid politicizing the subject. Syrians desperately need our help and solidarity now, because tomorrow it will be late.

I. Russian Federation

As we have heard from Mr. Pedersen, his contacts with the Syrian parties continue. We know that this process is not an easy one but it needs to be continued to help Syrians find common ground in the interests of the political process. Of course, COVID-19 affects the timing of the next round of the dialogue, once it is agreed in principle; and we heard today that it has been agreed in principle. We support the Special Envoy's efforts. On our part, we will provide him with the necessary assistance, including through our contacts with the Syrian parties.

In Idlib, the ceasefire introduced on 6 March is generally being observed. The number of violations does not exceed two to three per day. We continue to work with our Turkish partners to create a security corridor along the M-4 highway and resume transport links. Radical groups remaining in the area of the M-4 highway impede the work of the Russian and Turkish military. They organize provocations and create blockades. On 14 March, militants seized offices of the Syrian Red Crescent Society in Idlib and Ariha, looting property and detaining employees.

In the north-east, the situation is extremely difficult. At the end of 2019, only two state hospitals and four first-aid centres were fully operational on the east bank of Euphrates. Against the threat of the spread of coronavirus, this news is alarming. As we were informed today, among factors that impede humanitarian access are restrictions on the movement and lack of security guarantees. There are reports that the aviation of the so-called international coalition destroyed bridges across the Euphrates river, thus cutting ties between Syrian territories. Information about the continued malfunction of the Alluq water station was also alarming; we took every measure to ensure its restoration. Today we hear that water supply was restored.

There are reports that, inside the Rukban camp, the first cases of coronavirus infection may have been registered. There is no information about Al-Hawl yet, but given the location of the camp, which you can enter and exit, as well as the catastrophic sanitary conditions, there is little hope that the coronavirus will spare it. Today we heard from the U.S. about the Rukban camp. I would like to recall that it is not Damascus, but militants who are controlling the camp and preventing humanitarian aid from reaching people there. We also recall that the responsibility for the civilian population there lies with the illegally occupying forces. We would like to know what measures are being taken in the occupied Syrian territories. Not to mention that the issue of resettling the people of Rukban could have been resolved a long time ago. We were calling for it for many months, as well as for the need for an early solution to the Al-Hawl problem.

It is also strange for us to hear about the "stuck" delivery of "vital" medicines for the north-east. This topic was talked about a lot not so long ago; today we also heard references to it. Let me remind you that the Syrian Government, on 25 and 26 February, allowed the cross-line transportation of humanitarian goods to all parts of Syria from inside. One-time air delivery of medicines from Iraqi Erbil to Qamishli was also permitted. But now Erbil airport is closed, the one in Qamishli apparently too. Why the cargo was not delivered during this month is a big question. But this is definitely not the fault of the Syrian authorities. At the same time, reproductive health

kits were delivered to Hasakeh province in coordination with Damascus. We would like to ask Under-Secretary-General Lowcock to comment on this problem.

In fact, what we mentioned proves that if there is an adequate dialogue with Damascus, then issues related to the humanitarian assistance can be resolved while safeguarding the basic principles of humanitarian assistance. The Syrian authorities are taking all necessary measures to prevent the spread of the virus: a curfew has been introduced, essential goods are being distributed, quarantine response plans have been developed and laboratories opened, etc. An amnesty was announced and military service recruitment was temporarily suspended. Russia and China have already begun to provide assistance, including through sending medical supplies.

We consider it untimely and inappropriate to criticize Damascus and impose new conditions regarding humanitarian access. United Nations humanitarian agencies should strictly abide by measures introduced by the Syrian authorities to prevent the spread of the disease. This is for the sake of security of both the Syrians and United Nations personnel. I guess none of the representatives of countries that have introduced the same restrictions on their territory would like them to be violated on any pretext. Humanitarian aid should not only be delivered, but it should be delivered safely. Only the Syrian Government is capable of ensuring the safety of humanitarian aid. We know that the Syrian authorities are prepared to discuss options for humanitarian deliveries with the United Nations. The United Nations should engage with them in good faith.

In the current circumstances, we reiterate our call and the call of the Secretary-General to lift sanctions imposed on Damascus. Sanctions not only cripple the Syrian economy, which is why the common population suffers in the first place, but also block the supply of medicines and equipment to the country. Today, to speak about conditions for lifting sanctions is simply immoral. We remind you once again that Syrians live throughout Syria and not only in Idlib. We urge our colleagues not to use the current situation for political purposes, but to actually help all Syrians.

J. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines welcomes the 5 March additional protocol on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area, and we commend the diplomatic efforts which enabled it. It is our sincere hope that this agreement will be maintained and will lead to a nationwide cessation of hostilities.

Despite this armistice, the humanitarian situation in Syria remains of critical concern and the already dire conditions are compounded by the grave threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conflict has crippled much of the country's infrastructure, including its health services. Medical facilities are compromised due to inadequate staff, supplies and equipment. Syria simply cannot afford a COVID-19 catastrophe. Persons residing in densely populated and overcrowded areas such as internally displaced persons camps are especially vulnerable. Prevention strategies, such as physical distancing and frequent hand washing, are impossible to maintain in these environments. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines supports the efforts of the World Health Organization to assist the Syrian government's health response to combat this common enemy. COVID-19 and the wider humanitarian situation are far greater than any political quarrel. We therefore reiterate our appeal to countries that have imposed unilateral sanctions on Syria to engage in dialogue, to strengthen the COVID-19 response and to aid the country in meeting its urgent humanitarian needs.

We support the cross-border mechanism, which continues to be a lifeline for many Syrians. Similarly, we will support all further arrangements which seek to maintain timely, safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access, in coordination

with the Syrian government and in line with the guiding principles of humanitarian assistance.

Reconstruction in Syria is a critical component for improving the country's humanitarian situation. It is also one of the necessary requirements to ensure the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons. We encourage members of the international community to contribute to the reconstruction efforts.

The presence of Security Council-designated terrorist entities in the north-west continues to pose a significant threat to Syria's sovereignty, its people and the essential work of humanitarian organizations. We recognize the need for counter-terrorism operations in this regard and reiterate that such operations must respect international law.

Ultimately, full resolution of this crisis requires an inclusive political process, devoid of interference, and characterized by respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Indeed, there is no military solution. We continue to support the Special Envoy in his efforts to facilitate the wider political process and we hope that the Constitutional Committee will be reconvened soon. We are pleased to hear that the Co-Chairs have agreed on an agenda.

The Syrian people have been made to suffer as a result of forces which they did not choose and a geopolitical complexity over which they have no influence. This Council must work constructively to help Syria to return to stability and peace.

K. South Africa

South Africa fully supports the Secretary-General in his call for an immediate global ceasefire as well as Special Envoy Pedersen's call for a nationwide ceasefire in Syria in these uncertain times with the exponential spread of COVID-19 around the world.

The current environment in Syria, particularly in the north-west, poses significant challenges to curbing the spread of COVID-19. South Africa welcomes the steps that have been taken by the Syrian Government, including the implementation of curfews and the closure of public spaces, schools and shops and the restriction of access into Syria. Similar steps have also been implemented in areas not under the control of the Syrian Government.

Of great concern to my delegation is the possibility of the COVID-19 virus spreading among vulnerable populations, particularly those in internally displaced persons camps, who live in overcrowded locations, with limited access to health care or water and sanitary infrastructure. The closure of borders in the north of Syria is also of concern, as the continued shipment of vital humanitarian assistance through those crossing points may be limited and insufficient to meet the expected needs caused by the pandemic.

In this regard, South Africa supports the Special Envoy's call for the large-scale release of detainees on humanitarian grounds. We also call on all parties to ensure that the relevant medical supplies and equipment, including testing kits, ventilators and personal protection equipment and necessary humanitarian assistance is made available throughout Syria, wherever it is needed.

South Africa greatly appreciates the efforts of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, in particular, to minimize the impact of the virus on the Syrian population. The commitment of the personnel who continue to work in these challenging and changing circumstances is commended.

However, even as we respond to the challenges brought by COVID-19, we cannot forget the already dire humanitarian situation in parts of Syria and must ensure that the assistance required in these areas is provided in a full, safe, impartial and unimpeded manner.

South Africa welcomes the maintenance of the 6 March ceasefire agreement between Turkey and Russia and the resulting decrease in hostilities, despite sporadic reports of shelling on the front lines. We urge all parties to adhere to the provisions of this and prior ceasefire agreements, including their obligations under international humanitarian and international human rights law for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

In this regard, we welcome the resumption of the flow of water from the Allouk water station, which services nearly half a million people and the Al Hol camp. The Syrian people in this area cannot afford to have such a vital service jeopardized at this time.

As the people of Syria continue to face this dire humanitarian crisis in the face of the continuing conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, the easing of economic measures placed on Syria should be considered.

Turning to the political situation, South Africa welcomes the agreement by the Constitutional Committee on the agenda for the next meeting. We hope that the necessary arrangements can be made to ensure that the Constitutional Committee can meet safely during these extraordinary times.

My delegation also appreciates the efforts of the Special Envoy to continue his engagements with the various stakeholders to move the process forward towards achieving a lasting political outcome reflective of the will of the Syrian people, with guaranteed protection for all groups in Syrian society.

In conclusion, South Africa reiterates that the situation in Syria can only be resolved through negotiations and dialogue and calls on all parties to exert every effort towards the full implementation of Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#) to further avoid the displacement of Syrians and loss of innocent lives. For it to be sustainable, the political process must be Syrian-owned and Syrian-led. External interference in this process is detrimental to its success.

L. Tunisia

After nine years of conflict, the onset of the pandemic makes the outlook for Syrians ever grimmer, as this virus has the potential of inflicting further loss of lives, especially in zones of high vulnerability.

Tunisia, which has called for international and regional cooperation and solidarity, and coherent and resourced governance of the COVID-19 crisis, appreciates the efforts under way by the United Nations in Syria in this context, along with the ongoing provision of life-saving assistance cross-border and cross-line to those in need.

COVID-19 prevention and response measures are being faced with multiple dilemmas and challenges that are putting the right to health and the right to life in jeopardy, particularly in north-west and north-east Syria. In this regard:

- Voluntary self-isolation is being challenged by forced displacement;
- Social distancing is technically impeded by overwhelmed shelters;
- Hygiene is imperilled following the disruption of water supplies or destruction of water and sanitation facilities;

- Medical infrastructure is largely decimated and unable to deal adequately with a surge of the virus.

Tunisia believes that, in the current circumstances, a set of measures that are respected by the relevant parties on the ground and implemented in good faith is critically needed to best cope with a potentially catastrophic outbreak of the disease in Syria.

First and foremost, an immediate, sustained, nationwide ceasefire respected by all: ending hostilities should restore calm, thereby enabling better focus on mitigation of the spread of the disease.

Tunisia echoes, in this regard, calls by the Secretary-General and Special Envoy Pedersen to silence the guns in Syria and beyond, and expresses hope that the 6 March ceasefire in Idlib will better hold over time.

Second, full respect by all parties on the ground for their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law must be upheld, most notably in north-west and north-east Syria.

Safe, swift and unhindered cross-line humanitarian access, in particular for medical items, must be ensured by the relevant parties.

Additionally, water must be kept flowing in the north-east. This is a lifeline for more than half million persons in the region, with their increased needs for sanitation and hygiene.

Third, cross-border assistance in the north-west remains a lifeline for those in need in the area. Monitoring should be enhanced to prevent any risks.

The sense of urgency brought about by the coronavirus pandemic warrants the urgent reinvigorating of the Syrian-led, Syrian owned political process, in accordance with Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#) and under the auspices of the United Nations.

The coronavirus crisis should act as a stimulus for the relevant parties to leave their fight behind, reunite their efforts and re-engage constructively and without preconditions in the Geneva talks of the Constitutional Committee. Tunisia welcomes additional confidence-building measures, including a large-scale release of detainees on humanitarian grounds, and calls on all parties to focus on saving the Syrian population.

A lot of empathy with the Syrian people has been expressed by this Council over the past nine years. Syrians will be testing how this empathy is going to affect their lives in these exceptionally difficult circumstances.

The Council should therefore rise to the moment and set the tone for joint and genuine international efforts. Its unity in this regard is paramount.

M. Viet Nam

Firstly, we would like to welcome the encouraging developments in terms of the security situation in north-west Syria, with the implementation of the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey. We fully believe that this is a critical time to enhance dialogue and negotiations to resolve the long-standing political impasse in Syria to end years of conflict and bring sustainable peace to the Syrian population.

We would like to express our continued support for the role of the Special Envoy in facilitating a durable political solution in accordance with international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#).

We strongly support the call by the Secretary-General and Mr. Pedersen for a ceasefire to give a chance for peace and to fight against the common enemy – that is, COVID-19.

We remain concerned about the devastating impact of conflicts on the people in north-west Syria, as well as the continued shortage of basic needs across all sectors, including in north-east Syria.

At a time of the unstoppable spread of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world, we share the primary concern of Council members about the potential of imminent impacts on the Syrian people. In that country, there are already enormous difficulties with health-care facilities, equipment, medicines, water and food supply, sanitation, etc. It is most serious in terms of capacity to respond to the spread of the pandemic in densely populated areas. The multitude of those threats cannot be dealt with given the current situation.

We, therefore, very much welcome the swift and responsive actions taken by the World Health Organization, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other humanitarian partners in assisting the Government of Syria. We urge all relevant parties to ensure prompt and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance in all parts of Syria.

N. United States of America

I just want to say a special thanks to my friend Mark for giving me the latest update and what is on the ground in Syria. As you well know, I am always eager to know everything I can from you and I really appreciate the time that you always take to fill us in. As well as Geir, thank you so much. And also, for the Secretary-General's call for a comprehensive, nationwide ceasefire, especially, more important, in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have all seen how disruptive and deadly this virus can be, which is why there is no place where the calls for mercy and restraint are more urgent than in Syria. We reaffirm our full support for you, Geir, as you launch this effort to implement the ceasefire requested by the Council in its resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#). In order to make good on this timely call, all combatants must freeze ground operations that place civilian populations under threat. The Syrian people need the kind of ceasefire called for in resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), not another tactical pause that allows Syrian forces and their Russian and Iranian allies to rest before resuming their campaign of terror in the north-west. Such a pause would only encourage their continued pursuit of a military solution to the conflict.

In meetings with United Nations officials and Syrian refugees during my trip to Turkey earlier this month, I learned, and personally saw, that the United Nations must be at the centre of any effort to monitor and verify ceasefire initiatives. On this point, I want to be clear that Special Envoy Pedersen has the authority, granted under resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), to monitor existing lines of contact to ensure that ceasefire agreements are honoured. Reports have demonstrated that hospitals, clinics and even health-care providers have been harmed by the Assad regime and Russian airstrikes. Given the tenuous status of Syria's health-care infrastructure and the onset of this global pandemic, the United Nations inter-agency monitoring missions to north-west Syria and an enduring ceasefire are increasingly important. We urge the United Nations to continue its inter-agency missions to the north-west to help to protect the vulnerable Syrians sheltering there.

Just yesterday, Syria reported its first coronavirus death, reinforcing the danger faced by the Syrian people, especially those living in the densely packed camps in

Idlib. Amid the growing threat of COVID-19 throughout Syria, the case for expanding United Nations cross-border aid deliveries and access only grows stronger. For Syrians in the north-east, we must push to see United Nations cross-border access restored to this area, where, with just two votes, Russia and China blocked the ability of the United Nations to deliver 41 per cent of medical supplies. The Council must begin deliberations on how to implement the recommendations of the Secretary-General's report of 25 February, including restoring life-saving, United Nations cross-border assistance to over 1 million people in the north-east. Because of how rapidly COVID-19 is spreading, these vulnerable Syrians simply cannot wait on arbitrary approvals by Damascus for cross-line delivery of medical supplies. We must authorize more United Nations cross-border operations, not fewer. And we must maintain function for all NGO and United Nations cross-border operations currently going into Syria by the most direct routes.

The United States remains alarmed by the Assad regime's deliberate siege of the residents of the Rukban internally displaced persons camp. The regime has again blocked commercial traffic into the camp and now even refuses to allow the United Nations to provide cross-line aid from Damascus. Of course, Rukban is but one clear example of the Assad regime abjectly failing to honour its commitment to the Syrian people. A decade of such failures is precisely why the Trump Administration has no faith in the regime or Russia's promises to improve cross-line humanitarian access. Council members should take these promises with a large grain of salt. Once Syrian people in need are receiving regular, sustained, and high-quality United Nations humanitarian aid, the United States will revisit our assessment of regime and Russian promises. Until then, there can be no further reduction of United Nations cross-border humanitarian access into Syria. Such a step would immediately place millions of lives in jeopardy.

Finally, as we respond to COVID-19, I want to reiterate Secretary Pompeo's call regarding thousands of civilians, including U.S. citizens, being held arbitrarily in overcrowded regime detention centers. It is past time for the Assad regime to take concrete steps to protect these individuals and to alter the inhumane conditions in which they are being held. The Trump Administration demands the immediate release of all civilians and political prisoners who have been arbitrarily detained, including women, children and the elderly.

O. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The United Kingdom is grateful to Under-Secretary-General Lowcock and to Special Envoy Pedersen for their briefings. Both delivered stark warnings about the situation in Syria and the terrible toll that COVID-19 might take on a country inundated by nearly 10 years of conflict. The UK shares that deep concern about the potentially catastrophic impact that COVID-19 might have.

Of course, this risk is compounded by the destruction of health facilities by Russia and the regime over the years. As someone mentioned earlier, nearly half of the facilities that were standing in 2011 have gone – an awful situation from which to face this crisis. We look forward to the Secretary-General's Board of Inquiry report on some of those actions.

We heard from Mr. Lowcock about the desperate humanitarian situation in the north-west of Syria as the conflict enters its tenth year. Some 6.2 million internally displaced people are at particularly severe risk. Almost one million of those are in the north-west, living, as we heard from Mr. Lowcock, in appalling conditions and entirely reliant on cross-border aid. We also heard about how the most vulnerable are children and women, and it was particularly depressing to hear of the impact on the

population. This is why the UK recently announced a further \$100 million for the scaled up humanitarian response, which brings our overall commitment to around \$200 million.

We recognise those humanitarians who are continuing to work across Syria in the face now not just of violence and intimidation, but also the new threat of COVID-19. We salute their courage and commitment.

I wanted to take this moment to ask Mr. Lowcock: in addition to the ceasefire, for which he rightly called, what are the key steps that you need to help Syrians combat COVID-19 in Syria? It is clear that cross-line is not an effective substitute for cross-border aid; to tackle COVID-19, it is imperative that aid is delivered by the most effective means possible. This means cross-border in the north-west and the north-east, as recommended by the Secretary-General in his February report. The whole Council needs to reflect on the negative impact of the current arrangements, and in the light of the required response to COVID-19, we should both continue and expand humanitarian access when we review the arrangements.

If this virus is to be fought effectively in Syria, the ceasefire in Idlib must be permanent. To be enduring and ensure that civilians are protected and receive the humanitarian assistance they require, it must be monitored and verified by the United Nations. So, we welcome and support the call by Mr. Lowcock and Mr. Pedersen for a complete, immediate, nationwide ceasefire in Syria to enable all-out efforts to suppress the virus.

Russia, earlier in their statement, called on us to help all Syrians. What the Syrian people really need more than anything is this genuine and enduring nationwide ceasefire and an inclusive political process, as called for in Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#). Anything less from those who wield power and influence in Syria at the moment might well be condemning Syrians to a new health crisis and, in turn, create further global crisis.
