



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

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 Wednesday, 24 April 2019, 3 p.m.
 New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Heusgen. (Germany)

Members:

Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
China	Mr. Yao Shaojun
Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
Equatorial Guinea	Mrs. Mele Colifa
France	Mr. Delattre
Indonesia	Mr. Djani
Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
Poland	Mr. Lewicki
Russian Federation.	Mr. Safronkov
South Africa	Ms. Goolab
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Ms. Pierce
United States of America.	Mr. Cohen

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/321)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/321)

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

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Ms. Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator; and Ms. Nujeen Mustapha.

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

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2019/321, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018).

I now give the floor to Ms. Mueller.

Ms. Mueller: In eight years of conflict, Syrians have lived through a litany of horrors. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, many more maimed physically and psychologically, and Syrians in the north-east and north-west remain in constant fear of yet another humanitarian catastrophe unfolding. Today, more than eight in ten people live below the poverty line and nearly 12 million people in Syria continue to depend on humanitarian assistance.

I would like to highlight three key areas of concern.

First, on Idlib, where an escalation of hostilities since February is reportedly causing civilian deaths and injuries, as well as significant destruction of civilian infrastructure. Since February, well over 200 civilians have reportedly been killed as a direct result

of increased military clashes and attacks, with many more injured. Fighting has also caused more than 120,000 people to flee to areas closer to the Turkish border. Civilian structures — particularly schools and hospitals — continue to be hit. There were 11 attacks on schools in February and March alone, and we have heard reports that, on Monday, two schools were impacted by air strikes, resulting in three children being killed. In addition, many schools in the area have been shuttered indefinitely due to the hostilities.

We count on all parties, especially Turkey and the Russian Federation, as guarantors of the de-escalation agreement, to rein in the current escalation and press all parties to the full implementation of the 17 September 2018 memorandum of understanding. In addition, it is as critical as ever for all parties to respect international humanitarian law and take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize civilian harm. As the Secretary-General has said many times before, any large-scale military offensive in Idlib would come at an unacceptable cost in terms of loss of human lives and suffering.

Across north-western Syria, an estimated 2.7 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance, including more than 1 million children. This includes 1.7 million internally displaced persons, many of whom have been displaced multiple times and have been living in camps for years. Some 40 per cent of children are out of school. Two million people rely on water trucking for most of their clean water. Humanitarian partners continue to respond to evolving needs, with thousands of those most recently displaced receiving food and other assistance. Each month, some 1.7 million Syrians are reached with critical assistance through cross-border operations out of Turkey. Ensuring this sustained humanitarian access is critical.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the situation in Al-Hol camp. We have frequently reported to the Council about the plight of those tens of thousands of civilians at the Al-Hol camp, 92 per cent of whom are women and children. Most have been exposed to violence and trauma under the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. They are now living in extremely difficult conditions in which they face a range of protection challenges and an uncertain and disconcerting fate. This includes the risk of being denied repatriation, rehabilitation and re-integration or a fair trial, or even the risk of becoming stateless, despite having citizenship or a claim to citizenship. It also includes family separation

and not knowing the whereabouts of family members, given the notable absence of adult males and adolescent boys over the age of 15 in the camp.

All children, including those suspected of being associated with armed groups or terrorist groups, are entitled to special care and protection under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They must be treated first and foremost as victims. Solutions for foreign nationals need to be urgently found, and we call on all Member States to take all measures necessary to ensure that their nationals are repatriated for the purposes of prosecution, rehabilitation and/or reintegration, as appropriate, and in line with international law and standards.

The camp at Al-Hol currently hosts more than 73,000 civilians. Almost two-thirds of them — two-thirds — are children under the age of 12. Approximately 43 per cent of the camp population are Syrians, 42 per cent are Iraqis and 15 per cent are foreign nationals. There are 458 unaccompanied and separated children, including 121 who remain in interim care centres awaiting family tracing and reunification. The humanitarian community in Syria is ensuring that all those in need at the camp receive humanitarian assistance, without discrimination and in accordance with humanitarian principles. This includes assistance to the foreign nationals in the annex part of the camp. However, access to the annex remains constrained, particularly for health, nutrition and protection partners, who require a permanent presence inside the annex in order to provide continued care and services.

The United Nations also continues to advocate with the Syrian authorities for the deployment of surge staff from Damascus to support the teams operating in north-eastern Syria, who have now been responding uninterruptedly to successive crises for the past many months.

Further south, in Deir ez-Zor governorate, an estimated 150,000 people along seven villages between Hajin and Al-Susah, east of the Euphrates river, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The Syrian authorities recently approved the deployment of an inter-agency convoy to the area to bring assistance for up to 50,000 people as a first step. Aside from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy deployed earlier in the year, this would be the first inter-agency convoy to reach the area. Preparations are ongoing to conduct

the necessary assessments, obtain relevant security assurances and finalize logistical arrangements for the convoy to proceed in the coming period.

My third and final point will be on Rukban. As Council members may know, over 7,000 people have left the site in recent weeks, including nearly 2,000 just yesterday. Those who have already left organized their own transportation to the 55-kilometre border area, from where they have been transported to four collective shelters in Homs governorate through a combination of private and Government vehicles. Many are quickly leaving the shelters to stay with relatives in towns in eastern Homs governorate. Some people — mostly men — remain in the shelters for a longer period while they settle their status with the authorities.

Colleagues in Damascus have reiterated the United Nations willingness to be directly involved to ensure that core protection standards are met and movements are conducted in a voluntary, safe, well-informed and dignified manner. Today, our teams accessed the shelters for the first time. The United Nations is ready to engage further, but we must be fully engaged, from start to finish. We continue to advocate for full, unimpeded and sustained access to shelters, as well as areas of origin and destination, and to people en route, in order to be able to adequately support the humanitarian needs of those leaving Rukban.

While efforts to pursue durable solutions — guided by the needs, rights, security and dignity of the people in Rukban and based on their informed and voluntary choice — are under way, additional and sustained assistance for those who remain in Rukban is just as necessary. Food, medicines and other life-saving supplies delivered in February are running out. The United Nations has requested access to provide life-saving assistance, but on Monday was informed by the authorities that such a convoy would not be possible. People are exhausted. The number of children who have reportedly died at the settlement from preventable causes since January now stands at more than a dozen. The deployment of a third humanitarian convoy to Rukban remains urgent if we are to avoid the deaths of more innocent children.

As I said at the beginning of my statement, the Syrian people have suffered a litany of horrors. Among those people who have suffered the most — and are still suffering today — are those with disabilities. Those disabled before the start of the crisis often

face heightened challenges, and many more who have become disabled as civilians have been heavily impacted through years of conflict, including those injured due to explosive remnants of war.

In these settings, persons with disabilities are often excluded and highly vulnerable. Many lack access to health care and education, and experience difficulties in meeting their basic needs. They also face specific protection and psychosocial challenges, including heightened risk of violence and abuse. We must do our utmost to support and protect persons with disabilities and to ensure that their specific and diverse needs are addressed, including by ensuring the accessibility of activities and services, the training of staff and the collection of disaggregated data.

We — and I include the important role of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in this — must do more to include persons with disabilities in our work, making sure that they, and their representative organizations, take an active part at every step of planning and decision-making processes. Nujeen Mustapha, whom I had the pleasure of meeting yesterday, will speak in just a moment. She is an incredible advocate not just for those with disabilities in Syria, but for all those with disabilities in conflict settings, for women and for young people. She is an advocate for inclusive humanitarian action, and she is carrying with her an important message that we will all benefit from hearing.

The President: I thank Ms. Mueller for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Mustapha.

Ms. Mustapha: My name is Nujeen Mustapha. I am a 20-year-old Kurdish girl from Aleppo, Syria. I have cerebral palsy and use a wheelchair to move around. It is a privilege today to share with the Security Council my insights on the humanitarian situation for people with disabilities in Syria.

I will start by posing a question. What does it mean to be a person with a disability in Syria? For me, it meant not being able to go to school, hang out with friends or go to the cinema. It was almost like house arrest. Having a disability in Syria means that you are hidden away, confronted by discrimination, and that you are pitied. I was fortunate, however. My family was very supportive and I did not have any fears until the war broke out. I quickly realized that I was the main obstacle standing in the way of my safety for my family.

We lived in a tall building with no lift. If we needed to evacuate, I would need to be carried down five flights of stairs.

For weeks, I heard military helicopters buzzing over our neighbourhood, ready to drop bombs at any moment. My mother would carry me to the bathroom and stay with me there until the bombs passed. Every day, we would hear of relatives and friends who had been killed. Every day, buildings in our neighbourhood were bombed and people left trapped beneath the ruins. Every day, I feared that I could be the reason my family was one or two seconds too late. My brother even called us the “walking dead”. It took the bombing of a funeral in June 2015, where some of my relatives died, to convince our family that we needed to flee our home and leave our home and everything we knew behind.

In Syria, I did not have a wheelchair, so I had to be carried out of the country by my siblings, but many people with disabilities cannot depend on their families to help them reach safety, often because their family members have been killed or have already left. Being a woman and having a disability makes it doubly difficult. For example, a man can ask for help from a male friend, but in a society like Syria’s a woman cannot do that. She cannot just ask a male friend to carry her.

While living in a country at war is daunting for anyone, it is particularly challenging for someone with a disability. The support system on which people with disabilities rely breaks down in conflict situations, leaving them with a higher risk of exposure to violence and making it more difficult for them to get assistance, especially if they are women.

Many people with disabilities have developed different tricks for coping with daily life. For example, I had my independence at my home in Aleppo. I could easily reach my bed or the toilet, gracefully managing the two steps up, without anyone’s assistance. A blind person may know how to manage in her own environment, but can Council members imagine what it must be like to navigate rubble and debris strewn across her path to safety? Someone who is deaf may not realize that there are gunshots or warnings to evacuate and may end up in danger. If one has an intellectual or a psychological disability, leaving what is familiar behind can be very confusing and a source of great anxiety.

However one looks at it, one is at greater risk just because one has a disability. That is why it is so important and heartening that members of the Security

Council are taking the time to listen to the perspective of a young woman with a disability from Syria. But this is not just my story — it is the experience of thousands of Syrians with disabilities, who struggle to survive because of the limited services still functioning in the country, the lack of accessibility and the constant threat of violence, especially against women and girls. And if one becomes disabled as a result of the conflict — according to UNICEF, there are 1.5 million such persons still living in Syria — one faces stigma and exclusion within one's community and one suddenly finds oneself having to deal with having a disability.

I would like to leave Security Council members with three insights.

First, the crisis in Syria has a disproportionately high impact on people with disabilities. The use of landmines and cluster bombs has had devastating human consequences. Thousands of Syrians have lost their limbs to those dreadful weapons, which have rightly been banned by most Governments because of the immense harm they do to civilians. The conflict has had a significant psychological impact, too. Even in my case, I still jump when I hear a loud noise, a reminder of those hours hiding out in the bathroom.

In the current situation in Idlib, there are more than 175,000 people with disabilities, many of whom now have disabilities because of the conflict. Residents fear military action because it could result in large numbers of civilian casualties since Idlib is densely populated. The Council cannot allow Idlib to be another Aleppo, with hundreds of thousands forced to flee. Half of the people living in Idlib have already been displaced by war, like my family, except that this time they do not have anywhere to go.

All humanitarian programmes — many of which are funded by Governments represented around this table — should include specific programmes to reach people with disabilities to ensure that they can get things like health services, assistive devices and psychological support, which are essential for people with disabilities to feel like they are a part of their communities and recover some sense of normalcy.

Secondly, the well-being of people with disabilities, like the well-being of women and girls, seems to be an afterthought. The humanitarian response in Syria and neighbouring countries largely overlooks the needs of people with disabilities. Independent organizations like Human Rights Watch have documented that people

with disabilities cannot even access basic services such as sanitation, health care and education — something I myself experienced when I fled. On my way to Germany, I did not find many accessible bathrooms along the way — and that is especially hard for a woman.

There is very little data on how many people with disabilities live in Syria or have fled to neighbouring countries and what our needs are. And without that data, the programmes and policies just do not meet our needs. We are invisible. People with disabilities are forgotten in times of peace. What do Council members think we expect in times of war? But that does not make it right. The international community needs to count us, because we count too. United Nations agencies and humanitarian non-governmental organizations need to systematically collect data categorized by disability, age and gender and to monitor and report on people with disabilities so that Council members can understand the full impact the conflict has on us. Otherwise, we will continue to remain invisible.

The Security Council's job is to protect all civilians, including people with disabilities. "No one left behind" should not just be words that members say.

Thirdly, people with disabilities are a resource, not a burden. We know best what risks we face and what we need, so ask for our input, involve us in aid planning and reach out to us to report on the challenges we face — nothing about us, without us. That means ensuring the meaningful participation and representation of people with disabilities, including women and organizations of people with disabilities, in all parts of the Security Council's work. I might be the first person with a disability to address the Council, but I hope I will not be the last.

This should not be just another meeting where we make grand statements and then move on to the next item on the agenda. Council members can and should do more to ensure that people with disabilities are included in all aspects of their work. We cannot wait any longer. I understand that there are many competing priorities in this conflict and in the response to it, but the Council needs to address the needs of people with disabilities, particularly women. That is not a favour. That is not charity. That is our right.

I am very grateful for the chance to brief the Council today. My hope is that people with disabilities, especially women and girls, can one day live in a world that protects, respects and values us.

The President: I thank Ms. Mustapha for her briefing.

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

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait): I will deliver this statement on behalf of the three co-penholders: Belgium, Germany and Kuwait. Let me thank Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller for her valuable briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria. We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude and deep respect to all humanitarian and medical workers throughout Syria, in the region and at Headquarters for their tireless efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Ms. Nujeen Mustapha for sharing her story with us. Her optimism and bravery in facing the challenges she has encountered is inspiring, and she has reminded the Security Council of the struggles that young refugees face, especially those with disabilities. It is important that the Council does not lose sight of the perspective of the people living through the conflict. It was therefore important that she could be with us today to share her experiences. I would like to assure her that she will never be invisible to us and the State of Kuwait.

Nujeen's story is just one of millions of stories of Syrian civilians who have been affected by the conflict, which has entered its ninth year. It is one of the worst conflicts of our time. The humanitarian situation in Syria today remains dire, with nearly 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. The past few months have seen some worrying humanitarian trends, as we heard some moments ago from Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller.

We are extremely worried by the recent spike in aerial bombardments and shelling in north-western Syria, which has affected the civilian population, forcing the displacement of more than 100,000 civilians since February. That escalation contributes to a further deterioration of the already catastrophic humanitarian situation in the north-western de-escalation zone. Many civilians have also been killed and injured in north-eastern Syria. We strongly condemn the loss of civilian lives as a result of the recent escalation of violence, and we remind all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. We recall resolutions 2286 (2016) and 2427 (2018), which condemn attacks on hospitals

and schools, respectively. Abuses against civilians in times of conflict are a clear and indisputable breach of international humanitarian law and remain completely unacceptable.

The fight against terrorism must not impede principled humanitarian action. We reiterate our call for the sustained implementation of the Russia-Turkey memorandum of understanding in Idlib. We also reiterate our call for a nationwide cessation of hostilities, in accordance with resolution 2401 (2018).

The situation in the Al-Hol camp is of great concern. The camp's population has increased rapidly from around 10,000 people in December to more than 70,000 this month. Ninety-two per cent of the residents of the camp are women and children, many of whom have been exposed to violence and trauma under Da'esh and are now living in conditions where they face a range of protection concerns. The special needs of the most vulnerable, including the elderly and disabled, must be urgently addressed. We call on all parties to the conflict to allow sustained access to displaced people. The United Nations and its partners must be in a position to provide needs-based humanitarian assistance to all people in need without delay, discrimination or bureaucratic impediments.

In Rukban, almost 40,000 people remain in the settlement. There is a need for more durable solutions for the people of the settlement through collective efforts and arrangements in coordination with the United Nations. We stress that all movements of the residents of the camp must be voluntary, safe, dignified and well-informed. In parallel, we also strongly advocate for the continued sustained humanitarian access to Rukban until a lasting durable solution is reached. That is a matter of great importance, especially as the assistance delivered to the settlement by the humanitarian aid convoy in February is running out.

In Hajin, there are reports of shortages of basic commodities and a lack of basic services, particularly health services and access to safe and clean water. Furthermore, unexploded ordnances are rife in the area, posing a serious protection risk for civilians. Access to Hajin should be prioritized.

Syria has witnessed some of the most serious crimes under international law since the conflict began. Accountability must be ensured for those who have committed violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. We stand firm

in our commitment to fight impunity. In that context, we renew our support for the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism.

With regard to refugees, we would like to reiterate that any return of refugees must be safe, voluntary and dignified. Measures such as arbitrary detention and expropriation, to name just two, hinder any efforts that would allow Syrians to return. We also reject attempts to make demographic changes in Syria.

A month following the successful third Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria, we, as penholders, reiterate our commitment to delivering on our pledges announced at the Conference to support the Syria humanitarian response. We kindly ask all donors to make their funding available as soon as possible.

Lastly, the penholders would like to emphasize the importance of ensuring humanitarian access by all parties to the conflict throughout Syria, including areas where the control changed. Humanitarian access must be provided in an unconditional, safe, timely, unhindered and sustained manner. We remind all parties to the conflict of resolution 2449 (2018) on humanitarian access and cross-border assistance, adopted more than four months ago, which calls upon all parties to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2019. It is high time for all parties to the conflict to live up to that obligation and to do more to ensure sustained quality access to all in need throughout Syria.

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): During the Arria Formula meeting on the situation of persons with disabilities in armed conflict, held in December 2018, the United States made a commitment to raise the situation of persons with disabilities more systemically in the Security Council. We are very pleased to see the Council do that today. We want to thank Ms. Mustapha for sharing her story and her perspectives and for ensuring that Syrians with disabilities will never be invisible to the Council. For our part, the United States will continue to advocate for the needs of persons with disabilities when planning, coordinating and implementing humanitarian assistance in Syria and elsewhere.

Numerous United Nations reports detail the Al-Assad regime's systemic, barbaric use of arbitrary detentions against hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians. The United States will continue to work towards accountability and justice for those who

have been arbitrarily or unlawfully detained and for missing persons in Syria. That will be necessary as the political transition in Syria moves forward under the leadership of Special Envoy Pedersen in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

The United States strongly supports a third United Nations-led humanitarian convoy to the Rukban internally displaced persons camp. Unfortunately, as we have heard, the Al-Assad regime has denied the United Nations request. We also understand that commercial traffic into the encampment is blocked. It is unacceptable to starve the Rukban residents into submission. The United States condemns any attempt to prevent the United Nations from delivering humanitarian aid. As the residents of Rukban prepare for the holy month of Ramadan, we call on Moscow to ensure Damascus's agreement to provide humanitarian assistance to Rukban immediately and to stop blocking commercial traffic into the encampment.

Recent discussions among the humanitarian community and in the press have once again shined a light on the issue of cross-border assistance. Cross-border assistance remains a critical lifeline for more than 11 million people inside Syria. The Security Council must remain united in its support for the full implementation of the cross-border humanitarian mechanism authorized by resolution 2449 (2018) in December 2018. The United States is deeply concerned about recent attempts by Russia and China in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly to politicize and undermine the Security Council's unanimous authorization of cross-border humanitarian operations by proposing cuts to the mechanism's operational costs. Those attempts are at odds with the vital necessity of United Nations cross-border humanitarian aid to the Syrian people.

The United States calls on all Council members, as well as its regional partners, to ensure that the United Nations has the operational capacity to implement cross-border aid deliveries through all agreed border crossings, in accordance with resolution 2449 (2018). No one should politicize or try to dictate United Nations operations for cross-border aid delivery in Syria — not the Al-Assad regime, not the Russian Federation, no one. The Al-Assad regime continues to prioritize the provision of humanitarian assistance, including cross-border assistance, only to areas controlled by regime forces. Yet even areas under regime control, like Quneitra and Dara'a governorates in south-

west Syria, are struggling and reliant on approvals that are purposefully delayed by regime officials in Damascus. Those delays of regime approvals for routine humanitarian access requests underscore the importance of cross-border operations to continue unimpeded from all four border crossings, including the Al-Ramtha crossing from Jordan, which represents a direct route to reach the hundreds of thousands in need in south-west Syria.

The United States remains committed to the guiding principles for the voluntary and safe return of IDPs and refugees in dignity. They should return only at a time of their choosing. They should be able to choose where they go. They should have access to the proper civil documentation necessary for the exercise of their legal rights. They should be able to reclaim their property and, when that is not possible, be given appropriate compensation; and they should be free from fear that they will be victims of disappearances, unlawful detention or forced conscription.

Finally, the United States is alarmed by the surge this month in Russian and regime air strikes in Idlib governorate that have killed scores and displaced more than 110,000 people. The United States position on Idlib is clear. The September 2018 Russian-Turkish-brokered ceasefire must hold. Any military escalation, including any use of chemical weapons by the regime and its allies in Idlib, would be catastrophic for the millions of people there and for the stability of Syria's neighbours and the broader region.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank you, Sir, for convening today's meeting. We also thank Ms. Mueller for providing us with an up-to-date overview of the assistance being provided in the various areas of Syria, as well as the main concerns and difficulties on which the Council must focus and work together so that it can play the meaningful role with which it has been charged, without divisiveness.

We were particularly touched today by the incredible story of the young woman present among us — Ms. Nujeen Mustapha — which once again demonstrates the immense strength and resilience of persons living with disabilities. Her perspective has undoubtedly had a profound impact on us, and we are grateful for her courage, openness and sincerity with which she told us her story.

In all honesty, following the testimony that Nujeen shared with us, I do not believe that any of us could possibly hope to add anything new or insightful to the discussion. Thanks to her participation in today's meeting, I will take away several powerful messages, including the fact that the dramatic plight of a person on the long road to better living conditions can be understood only when we hear what it means in her own words, and that, in addressing that issue, we can never lose sight of her concerns and point of view. Her participation here has accentuated the need for the Council to continue to open its doors to people like her, who give a voice to those lacking one and who remind us that, beyond the statistics and numbers, there are millions of human stories. For my delegation, and me in particular, that requires our serious commitment to keeping the human aspect at the centre of the deliberations of the Council and to working to find a peaceful, credible, inclusive and definitive solution to this conflict. In that perspective, I should like very briefly to raise the following points.

Syrian civilians, especially women and girls, continue to feel the effects of the conflict. The virtual collapse of basic services, the rule of law and the loss of civil documentation threaten their security and access to health services. It is therefore necessary to establish coordination mechanisms to provide care for Syrian women, thereby contributing to the long-term comprehensive health of the entire population.

The Dominican Republic is deeply concerned about the increase in hostilities in various regions of the northern part of the country, which have forced hundreds of thousands of people to leave their homes and take refuge in the camps there. We know that this mass displacement, together with the recent floods in the north-east and north-west, entails significant operational and protection challenges. We therefore commend the measures taken to date to meet the needs of those people, but we know that considerable challenges remain. Accordingly, we call on the parties to respect the rules of international humanitarian law, particularly with regard to the protection of the civilian population, and to refrain from attacks on civilians and vital infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools. That includes counter-terrorism operations, which must also respect and protect civilian populations. The statistics pertaining to casualties resulting from those clashes are not encouraging.

We reiterate our appeal and join others in calling for the continued implementation of the Idlib ceasefire agreement in order to maintain sustained access to the millions of people who depend on cross-border humanitarian assistance, pursuant to the relevant Security Council resolutions. We deplore the recent indiscriminate attacks that have affected schools and health-care centres in the region, which in turn have forced the displacement of thousands of people. Only two days ago, we received reports of the deaths of three children from the same family who were sheltering at the same location while fleeing the bombardment of their school.

Lastly, we reiterate the need for safe, timely and unhindered access throughout Syria in order to reach the almost 12 million people in humanitarian need. In that regard, we urge the teams on the ground to continue to strengthen their partnerships with local entities, as well as with the Syrian authorities, so as to facilitate the provision of assistance under the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): First of all, I warmly thank Ms. Ursula Mueller for her very informative briefing and acknowledge her outstanding work and that of her teams in responding to the humanitarian emergency in Syria. I especially welcome the presence of Nujeen Mustapha among us, and thank her most sincerely for having travelled here to give testimony before the Council. Her courage is a source of inspiration and admiration to us all, and her briefing reminds us of the need to take fully into account both the situation of persons with disabilities and the absolute urgency to end eight years of conflict.

More than ever, we must remain fully ready to act on three key priority areas: maintaining the ceasefire in Idlib, about which Ursula Mueller spoke; guaranteeing humanitarian access; and achieving a lasting political solution in Syria.

With regard to the first priority of preserving the ceasefire in Idlib and respecting the front lines throughout the country, an offensive in Idlib would have disastrous humanitarian, migratory and security consequences throughout the region and beyond. We therefore call on Turkey and Russia to intensify their efforts to preserve the ceasefire agreement, in accordance with the commitments reiterated at the quadripartite summit in Istanbul. At the same time,

we should work jointly to come up with a coordinated response to the threat posed by the presence of terrorist groups in that region. In the north-west, as in the rest of the country, the protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel, must be an absolute priority for all stakeholders. It is unacceptable that hospitals and schools are still being targeted, and we cannot say often enough that attacks on hospitals and health workers amount to war crimes and that the perpetrators will be held accountable for their actions. A military intervention in the north-east, wherever it might come from, would have terrible humanitarian consequences. All actors must therefore refrain from taking such action and all the parties must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. That is not a negotiable requirement.

Secondly, humanitarian access must be guaranteed. Here I should point out the shocking fact that of the 338 requests for access made to the Syrian regime in February and March, only half were granted. That is simply unacceptable. We once again call on the actors with influence on the regime to ensure immediate, safe, comprehensive, unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access throughout Syrian territory, in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and international humanitarian law. In that context, the Whole of Syria humanitarian architecture put in place by the United Nations to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Syrians is more relevant than ever and must be maintained.

It is especially vital to ensure that a new aid convoy is allowed to deploy to Rukban camp immediately. We must also ensure that the return of displaced persons from Rukban is voluntary, safe and dignified, in accordance with international humanitarian law and in close coordination with the United Nations. It is also important to increase the humanitarian response in the north-east to cope with the influx of displaced persons. France will continue to do its part in that regard. We have made emergency funding available to support the humanitarian response in the region. We must also do everything possible to ensure that safe and unhindered humanitarian access to the Al-Hol camp is fully guaranteed.

Thirdly, a sustainable political process must be launched under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva. We will continue to support the implementation of a political solution, in line with all the elements of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué

(S/2012/522, annex), and to lend our steadfast support to the Special Envoy's efforts in that regard. Provided that a balanced agreement on its composition and operating rules can be reached, the constitutional committee could help to implement such a solution. It will be up to Geir Pedersen to tell us when the time comes if that is the case. Only the implementation of a credible political process will make it be possible for refugees to return to Syria, which must take place in safe and dignified conditions and under United Nations auspices. The low numbers of returnees show clearly that so far those conditions, especially on the political and security fronts, have not been met. It is essential that the United Nations be given free access to Syrian territory in order to ensure that returns take place in a transparent manner.

After all these years of the Council's failures in Syria, it would be a new and terrible political and moral mistake to turn the page today and direct our attention elsewhere, whether out of indifference or cowardice. That is first and foremost because it would be a serious lapse of judgment to think that the tragedy of Syria is behind us, and also because we believe that today, for perhaps the first time in eight years, there is a small but real window of opportunity to end the conflict. That is the role that we, the members of the Security Council, must play collectively on this existential issue for the United Nations.

Mr. Safronkov (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller for her briefing. We deeply appreciate the selfless and courageous work of the humanitarian workers in Syria and other hotbeds of conflict. We are also thank Ms. Nujeen Mustapha for telling us her own story, one that is both tragic and heroic and that encourages us to redouble our efforts in our quest for a settlement of the Syrian crisis.

We are seeing a significant stabilization of the situation in Syria, with real breakthroughs in the fight against terrorism and declining violence, especially in the areas controlled by the legitimate Government. Nevertheless, the situation in the country remains challenging and will require even greater assistance on the part of the international community in the work of consolidating the progress that has been made and creating the necessary conditions for normalizing the situation further.

It will be genuinely possible to make continued significant progress, but to achieve that, the politicization of the humanitarian issue and the use of double standards in assessing events in the Syrian Arab Republic must cease. The time has come to reconsider long-outdated approaches that have been overtaken by the evolving situation in Syria, and end the persistent attempts to blame Damascus for everything and hold back the processes of normalizing the situation in and around Syria, including its reintegration into the Arab family. Bringing a speedy end to the illegal occupation of Syrian territory, including in the north-east and in the area of Al-Tanf, would help the joint work of strengthening peace and stability in the country, along with a genuine united effort to combat the ongoing threat of terrorism, which, most alarmingly, is beginning to spill over the borders of the region.

We want to draw attention once again to the pernicious and damaging effects of unilateral sanctions, which are only exacerbating the humanitarian situation in Syria and other States, wreaking havoc on civilians, undermining the normal functioning of Syria's medical and social services and hindering the reliable supply of vitally necessary fuel for the people. We urge everyone to join the efforts to rebuild Syria's ruined infrastructure and restore normal life to the stabilized areas. With the assistance of Russia and other partners, the Government of Syria is taking active steps in that direction. Houses are being built and civilian infrastructure, hospitals and roads are being repaired. Since July of last year approximately 900 educational and 200 medical facilities have been rebuilt, a number of road bridges and more than 1,000 kilometres of roads repaired, approximately 1,000 kilometres of power lines laid and 140 water supply facilities, 180 bakeries, 631 electrical substations and more than 14,000 industrial facilities operationalized. Many thousands of hectares have been demined.

We welcome the growing economic relations between Syria and its Arab neighbours. The restoration of ties destroyed by conflict is a natural and objective process, while a policy of good-neighbourliness is a key to strengthening security and stability throughout the region.

Despite the real challenges, the process of Syrian refugees' return has maintained a steady positive trend. Approximately 1,000 people are returning to Syria every day. More than 190,000 Syrian nationals have returned to their homeland since July of last year.

We are also seeing positive developments in terms of internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning to the homes they had fled. The Syrian Government is working actively to improve the effectiveness of the repatriation process and provide the necessary guarantees. In 413 settlements that suffered the least from military activities, centres have been opened to receive and rehouse more than 1.5 million refugees. The Syrian committee coordinating the return of refugees is implementing various socioeconomic measures.

By contrast, we are seeing very different and negative trends in the areas that are not under Damascus's control. We share the concerns about the dire humanitarian situation in the temporary shelter at Al-Hol, which has continued to deteriorate rapidly despite the efforts of international humanitarian organizations. A camp designed for 40,000 people is now coping with twice that number. People are living in intolerable conditions, and many of them, most of whom are women and children, as today's briefings testified, have been through traumatic ordeals. Until very recently they were living under terrorist control and were forced to flee indiscriminate air and ground strikes during counter-terrorism operations in the areas of Hajin and Baghouz.

We believe it is vital to continue the coordinated work of resettling Rukban camp residents. That is the only way the problem can be solved, considering that almost all its residents have expressed a desire to leave the Al-Tanf area. Since February some 7,000 people have been transferred in accordance with their own wishes from there to areas under Government control. If that pace continues, as many as 60 or 70 per cent of the camp's residents could leave in the space of two weeks. The Syrian authorities are providing guarantees of decent living conditions for citizens who return from Rukban. All those who have left the camp have been provided with medical assistance and basic necessities and food. Problems with recovering documents and providing employment are also being resolved, and such steps or their positive aspects should not be ignored.

However, the situation in Rukban remains difficult. The militants of the illegal armed group Maghawir al-Thawra who control the camp subject its inhabitants to violence on a daily basis, block the return process and even attempt to impose their own agenda. We believe that involving the United States in the joint coordination meetings on Rukban organized at Russia's initiative for representatives of Russia, Syria and

various United Nations agencies would help to solve the Rukban problem very quickly and would represent a genuine practical step towards normalizing the living conditions of civilians, including those with disabilities.

The situation in Idlib remains unstable. The former Al-Nusra militants who have metamorphosed into the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham group continue to attack Government positions. They make indiscriminate strikes, including on civilian infrastructure, and innocent civilians are dying. The pseudo-humanitarian White Helmets continue preparing new provocations in order to accuse the legitimate authorities of using toxic agents. We see what is going on, and we do not know how long the status quo in Idlib can continue. It is absolutely unsustainable, and it is dangerous for Syria and the region. We continue to work with our Turkish partners to develop a lasting solution to the problem. Russia and Turkey's ongoing consultations include the detailed discussion of our joint steps with regard to the Syrian situation.

If we are to increase the sustainability of the positive developments in Syria, we must continue consolidated work on the political front in support of the efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen, particularly with respect to launching the constitutional committee as soon as possible, and the Astana troika is doing just that. Their twelfth meeting will be held in Nursultan on 25 and 26 April, and the leadership of Kazakhstan is providing organizational and other assistance for the event. We believe that meeting will make another significant contribution to the Syrian settlement, and we want to point out that it has been preceded by intensive work. The Russian representatives have held a series of consultations with all the key stakeholders and the Syrian Government and opposition first and foremost. Importantly, the eighth meeting of the working group on the release of detainees/abductees, the handover of bodies and the identification of missing persons will take place on the margins of the event. We should point out that in the past few days, thanks to the group's efforts, an exchange of prisoners took place between the Syrian Government and illegal armed groups in the area of the town of Al-Bab.

We once again urge all our colleagues to act in the interest of Syrians and not for the sake of geopolitical plans that have already destabilized a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa and destroyed their statehood. Together we can put an end to the destructive trends in Syria and the region as a

whole. We are ready to cooperate and open to serious, feasible initiatives that can be achieved in practice. The realities of the region demand that we all come together and join forces.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We would like to express our appreciation for the convening of this meeting and for the very comprehensive briefing by Ms. Mueller. We appreciate the valuable and often heroic work of her team on the ground. We also appreciate the moving testimony of Ms. Nujeen Mustapha, who reminded us of our obligation to bear in mind the suffering of civilians in Syria, particularly the most vulnerable.

Peru has been following the humanitarian situation in Syria with deep regret. The conflict continues to claim numerous lives and to cause the displacement of tens of thousands of people. We have to particularly deplore the escalation of violence in various areas in north-western Syria, including Idlib, resulting from terrorist organizations' control of the area and military responses that ignore the most basic principles of international humanitarian law and human rights. We deplore the reported attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools and medical centres, as well as the arbitrary arrests and abductions. In that context, we believe that the efforts of Turkey and the Russian Federation to deploy joint patrols aimed at enforcing the scope of the agreement signed last September and thereby prevent Idlib from becoming the scene of an even greater humanitarian tragedy are critical.

We want to emphasize the importance of facilitating the provision of sustained assistance to the civilian population displaced in Rukban, while ensuring that those who make the decision to leave the camp do so under internationally accepted parameters and with the support and assistance of the United Nations. We also emphasize the urgency of continuing to meet the growing needs of the internally displaced in Al-Hol, who fled the clashes with the remnants of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. We are grateful for and support the work being done by the United Nations and other agencies to assist them in such a critical situation, as well as their efforts to help those affected by the devastating floods of recent weeks.

Moreover, we believe that it is essential that at the meeting to be held this week in Nursultan new and greater developments are brought forward on the issues of identifying missing persons, the return

of mortal remains and the release of detainees and missing persons, and that this defuses tensions. We also stress the importance of continuing to mobilize the international community in support of humanitarian mine clearance and the removal of improvised explosive devices in Syria, which continue to wreak havoc on the population. We therefore welcome the recent launch of the Humanitarian Mine Action Support to Syria project and Japan's generous financial contributions that have made it possible.

I conclude by emphasizing the urgency of a permanent cessation of hostilities in order to begin to overcome the suffering of the Syrian population caused by this long conflict. Resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) should guide these efforts.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): Let me first of all thank Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller for her briefing and Ms. Nujeen Mustapha for being here with us and sharing her stories. We applaud Ms. Mustapha's optimism and strong efforts in advocating in favour of refugees and people with disabilities. I share the conviction of many of my colleagues who have spoken before me that she has displayed great courage and should be assured that her message does not fall on deaf ears.

Indonesia is deeply concerned about the ongoing humanitarian situation and hostilities in various parts of Syria, which have severely affected civilians, including women and children. As laid out in the report of the Secretary-General (S/2019/321), there are nearly 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, around 6.2 million within the country are displaced, some 2 million children are out of school, and there are also millions of Syrian refugees. We know these numbers by heart, and we have high hopes that they will decrease in time.

But hope alone cannot improve the current situation. Along with the ongoing humanitarian responses by the United Nations humanitarian agencies and partners, we also need the full commitment of all parties to the conflict to respecting international law and international humanitarian law. In this context, Indonesia is of the view that we must focus on two priorities.

First, civilians and civilian infrastructures must be protected. Indonesia urges all parties to the conflict to do everything in their power to protect civilians. It is indeed heartbreaking to learn that, as mentioned in

the Secretary-General's report, civilians continue to be killed and injured within the demilitarized zone in Idlib. It is also disturbing to learn that people — mainly women and children — continue to be killed as a result of the increased use of improvised explosive device, especially when they are used to target civilians. With regard to the protection of civilian infrastructure, Indonesia stresses that it is urgent to stop the heinous attacks on schools and medical facilities, and that all necessary measures must be taken to ensure this basic infrastructure is not being targeted.

The second priority is that all parties must allow safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access to all in need in all parts of Syria. This also means that all parties to the Syrian conflict shall enable the immediate and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance by the United Nations and its partners directly to people throughout Syria on the basis of the United Nations assessments of need, without any political prejudices and purposes.

In Al-Hol camp, there are already 73,000 people, 92 per cent of whom are women and children, living under extremely severe conditions, without access to health care and other limited basic needs. We can only imagine the situation. The camp is exceeding its capacity of around 41,000 people, with thousands of people arriving at the camp with illness and trauma caused by violence. There is great fear for their safety. That is a grim picture.

With regard to Rukban, we are pleased with the ongoing efforts to find durable solutions for people there. However, it is also necessary to ensure access for sustained humanitarian assistance for people who choose to remain. Indonesia shares the Secretary-General's important call for a carefully planned and principled approach to the situation in Rukban that does not create additional harm to the already traumatized and displaced people. In addition, I would be remiss if I did not mention the situation in Hajin as well as the severe flooding in north-west and north-east Syria that damaged 14 camps for internally displaced persons, 40 villages in Hassakeh, including the Areesha camp.

All of foregoing are challenging situations, and the humanitarian needs in Syria must be addressed as a matter of priority. And we in the Security Council need to consistently urge all parties to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria.

In conclusion, it is the collective obligation of the Council that the story of Nujeen or any similar story does not remain buried in the archives of the United Nations so as to ensure that the history of humanitarian calamities is not repeated.

Ms. Goolab (South Africa): Let me begin by thanking Ms. Ursula Mueller for her informative briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria and Ms. Nujeen Mustapha for telling us the story of her personal journey and for providing us with an insight into the reality those with disabilities are facing in the country. I would also like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the United Nations and its various implementing agencies that provide essential, life-saving humanitarian assistance to the thousands of people who require it.

Nine years into the conflict in Syria, the humanitarian situation in the country remains dire. The escalation of violence in some parts of Syria is of serious concern, particularly where such violence has resulted in the injury or death of innocent civilians. We are particularly concerned at the large numbers of civilians that were reportedly killed during the recent reporting period in Idlib and eastern Deir ez-Zor. In addition to the increased violence, severe weather conditions, such as flooding and extreme cold, have added to the burden of suffering of the Syrian people. In this regard, we call on all parties to uphold their commitments and obligations under international law.

My delegation has noted reports of people leaving Rukban to return to their homes or to their destinations of choice. This is a welcome development. However, it must be emphasized that all parties must ensure that the necessary conditions for their return are met and that these returns must be voluntary, safe, dignified and well informed. Humanitarian aid to Rukban is still necessary while people remain at the camp. While a long-term solution needs to be found, humanitarian aid, including medical assistance, is still necessary. We therefore call for the necessary access for the provision of the essential humanitarian assistance to Rukban, particularly with Ramadan fast approaching.

Additionally, South Africa reiterates its previous call for the full implementation of resolution 2449 (2018), which renews the authorization for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria, allowing for the delivery of aid to the places that most need it.

Millions of children remain at risk of undernourishment, dehydration, infectious diseases and injury. In this regard, South Africa is deeply concerned at the attacks that have struck, in particular, health-care facilities and schools. In order to ensure a peaceful future for the people of Syria, the international community must support every effort towards a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned settlement.

Mr. Yao Shaojun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China thanks Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for her briefing and Ms. Nujeen Mustapha for her statement.

China is greatly attentive to the humanitarian situation in Syria, sympathizes with the Syrian people for what they have been going through and commends the efforts of the United Nations and other actors aimed at improving the humanitarian situation in the country. As we speak, there continue to be a large number of people in Syria who need humanitarian assistance, and the problems in respect of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and Syrian refugees remain dire. Flooding has hit large swathes of north-western and north-eastern parts of the country, damaging or destroying IDP camps there.

The international community has been following with concern the humanitarian situation in the Al-Hol camp, Rukban camp and the Idlib governorate. In order to comprehensively address the humanitarian challenges, a tailored solution is needed. In that regard, I would like to share how China sees the situation.

First, we should actively support the Syrian Government and people in its economic and social reconstruction and support the return of Syrian refugees. Ravaged by many years of conflict, Syria has yet to recover from widespread devastation. The Syrian Government's reconstruction efforts require strong support by the international community to inspire confidence and hope in the hearts of the Syrian people about a better life ahead.

Recently, thanks to the efforts of various concerned parties, some Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan have returned to Syria and some of the internally displaced persons in the Rukban camp have also left the camp of their own accord. China welcomes those developments and supports efforts to find a long-term solution to the Rukban issue.

Secondly, we should further increase financial and in-kind assistance to the Syrian people and adjust and

improve humanitarian relief operations in response to changes in the humanitarian needs on the ground. The population of the Al-Hol camp has surged in recent months and more than 90 per cent of its residents are women and children.

The humanitarian response should be strengthened in the light of the camp's demographics and efforts should be focused on long-term solutions. The United Nations humanitarian operations and the international community in Syria should fully respect Syria's sovereignty, strictly adhere to the Council's resolutions and step up their communication and coordination with the Syrian Government.

Thirdly, the fight against terrorist forces should continue to defend hard-won security gains. The terrorist groups in Idlib, left unchecked and growing in strength, are jeopardizing security and stability in Syria and the region. According to the latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2019/321), in the areas controlled by terrorist groups there is no assurance for civilians' right to personal safety or other rights. The status quo is not sustainable.

China supports the commitment of various concerned parties to find a proper solution to the Idlib issue and eliminate the risk of a humanitarian crisis. The international community should apply uniform criteria to combating all terrorist groups that have been designated by the Council, while giving comprehensive consideration to humanitarian needs and avoiding harm to the civilian population.

Fourthly, the efforts to advance a political settlement should continue to create the fundamental conditions for easing the humanitarian situation on the ground in Syria. The international community should stand resolutely behind the United Nations as it plays its role as mediator, pushes the Syrian parties to seek a solution and addresses the concerns of all parties through negotiation, while respecting the principle of a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process and adhering to resolution 2254 (2015). The Syrian parties should put the future of the country and the well-being of their people first, continue to overcome their differences through dialogue and consultations, contribute to the country's stabilization and minimize conflict.

China looks forward to further progress being made in the new round of the Astana dialogue and following the formation of the constitutional committee in order to continue moving the Syrian political process forward.

Mr. Lewicki (Poland): First of all, let me join other colleagues in thanking Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Ursula Mueller for her — as always — excellent briefing. Our deep appreciation goes to her and her staff for their great work and commitment to providing humanitarian assistance to the people in need. We welcome also Ms. Nujeen Mustapha. Let me echo other delegations in ensuring her and all people with disabilities that they are not invisible any more — certainly not in this Chamber.

As Assistant Secretary-General Mueller highlighted, the whole population of Syria has suffered a litany of horrors. Let me focus on the situation of persons with disabilities, precisely because the ongoing conflict has a disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities. Let me cite some estimates, which are based on the October 2018 report of the Humanity and Inclusion organization. There are 3 million people in Syria who are living with permanent disabilities, a number that increases with every month that the conflict continues. Almost one-fourth of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan have some level of impairment and more than 60 per cent of households have at least one member with a disability. Those staggering numbers speak for themselves and demonstrate that we cannot discuss the humanitarian situation in Syria without addressing the very specific needs of persons with disabilities. In that context, allow me to touch upon the following issues.

The first point concerns data collection. Despite the increasing attention being paid to persons with disabilities in humanitarian contexts, very scarce information has been collected. As already mentioned by Ambassador Cohen, the lack of sufficient data on persons with disabilities in the humanitarian context was one of the key findings of the Arria formula meeting on the situation of persons with disabilities in armed conflicts, which was organized last December by Poland, together with Germany, Kuwait, Peru and Côte d'Ivoire.

That lack of sufficient data collection has a clear impact on our assessment of the delivery of humanitarian assistance. In that regard, I have the following question for Assistant Secretary-General Mueller, who briefly referred to data collection in her statement. Could she elaborate further on what challenges she faces in terms of data collection, how she is collecting it and what kind of impact it has on the delivery of humanitarian assistance?

Another issue to which we would like to draw the Security Council's attention is that of health services provided to persons with disabilities. We are deeply concerned about the dramatic deterioration of public hospital and health facilities. Unfortunately, the attacks on public hospitals and health facilities continue, which means that there is no proper care being provided to patients with injuries and as a result those injuries may become lifelong disabilities. That is why it is our strong belief that the Security Council should vigorously advocate for the health and protection of civilians, especially women, children and persons with disabilities.

Last but not least, we reiterate our call to all sides to strictly comply with international law and human rights law, which means the protection of civilians and granting unhindered access to humanitarian assistance for the entire population is not a matter of choice — it is a legal obligation under international law. It is our firm belief that those responsible for violating and abusing international humanitarian and human rights law should be held accountable. It is also a matter of conflict prevention. In that context, we strongly support the ongoing work of the Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism.

Allow me to also touch briefly on the situation in Idlib and Rukban, which was also raised by many delegations. Let me stress that the significance of the agreement between Russia and Turkey on the Idlib de-escalation zone as a crucial move towards avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe. All parties to the conflict should assure the full implementation of that agreement.

With regard to Rukban, we know that at the beginning of February the second humanitarian convoy to Rukban provided life-saving support to 40,000 people living in the camp. Nonetheless, it was only a temporary measure, sufficient for merely a month. As we approach the end of April, it is clear that we desperately need a safe, voluntary and dignified long-term solution for thousands of people, many of whom have been staying in the Rukban area for more than two years.

In conclusion, let me underline that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. A political agreement in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) remains the only way towards peace.

Lastly, allow me to reiterate the common position of the European Union on the reconstruction of Syria. We think that it should commence once an inclusive political transition is firmly under way, as we need to support the safe return of millions of Syrians who fled their homes.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation congratulates Ms. Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and Ms. Nujeen Mustapha, a Syrian refugee, for their enlightening and inspiring presentations.

Côte d'Ivoire is particularly concerned about the precarious situation in the Al-Hol camp. The number of internally displaced persons has sharply increased. It went from more than 15,000 people in January to around 73,000 in April, 92 per cent of whom are women and children.

The recent floods in the country are also a source of great concern to my delegation. According to OCHA's assessment, the torrential rains caused the destruction of 14 camps, hosting 40,000 internally displaced people, and 40 villages in Al-Hasakah governorate, with a total of 120,000 people.

In that context, my country welcomes the measures under way in the Rukban camp, which seek to find durable solutions to the situation of internally displaced persons. Between 24 March and 16 April, 4,317 people were able to leave the camp, including 2,842 who returned to their original homes or any other destination of their choice after a brief stay in a collective shelter. That encouraging return must be voluntary and safe and respect the dignity of the displaced.

In the same vein, Côte d'Ivoire notes with satisfaction the efforts made by humanitarian agencies to provide food aid to 3.32 million people and medical care to 2.4 million people. In that respect, it welcomes the provision of assistance through cross-border humanitarian deliveries. The 906 trucks in 27 consignments from Turkey and Iraq provided relief to an average of 150,000 people a month.

The unstable security situation in Idlib province could compromise the delivery of humanitarian aid to populations in need. Despite the ceasefire negotiated by the Russian Federation and Turkey on 17 September 2018, the province is seeing ongoing fighting. Côte

d'Ivoire therefore calls on all stakeholders to uphold the Russian-Turkish agreement on the demilitarized zone and recalls their obligation to respect international human rights law and international humanitarian law. We also call on the international community to continue its support for efforts to ensure the protection of people in distress and to meet their basic needs.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire urges the parties to the conflict to give priority to dialogue in the pursuit of solutions to the Syrian crisis, in accordance with the relevant provisions of resolution 2254 (2015) and the complementary Astana and Sochi processes.

In that regard, my country welcomes the next round of talks scheduled for 25 and 26 April in Nur-Sulatan, the capital of Kazakhstan, and hopes that it will help to relaunch the peace process in order to put an end to the Syrian crisis, which has lasted too long.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I join others in thanking Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for her briefing and to pay tribute to her teams on the ground. I would also like to add our voice to those thanking Nujeen Mustapha for such an amazing and compelling briefing, for telling her story and for sharing it with everyone here. I think that we all found it very moving and that we owe it to her to try and make a reality of some of the issues we have been talking about, such as how to make life for the Syrian people better and bring the crisis to an end. I will come to that in a minute, if I may.

On the political process, I would just say that the United Kingdom shares in full the statements made by the representatives of the United States, France and Poland so I will not rehearse those arguments. Instead, I would like to ask some questions, first, of Ms. Mueller. We are very interested in access trends. We would like to know what the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs considers the key access improvements in the past three months and where the challenges still lie.

Secondly, if I may, I would also ask a question of Nujeen Mustapha. She has come all this way to tell us her story. We heard that there are 175,000 persons with disabilities in Idlib alone. The story about having to hide in the bathroom brought the situation to life for everyone in the Council and clearly illustrated the human cost that people in Syria are facing. What is it that we in the Security Council could most do to help her and all those in the situation in Syria that she faced

in Aleppo? What should it mean for us tomorrow, the day after and in six months' time? If there is one thing that the Council can do, it would be very useful to get a sense of what she would like it to be.

I would also like to address some questions to other speakers. I have four questions. The first one is easy. It is to ask our Russian friends not to keep telling lies about the White Helmets, which is a volunteer humanitarian organization. We have had this debate in the Council several times, and it has been proved beyond doubt that they are not terrorists but humanitarians. That is the first question.

Leading on from that, we appeal to our Russian and Chinese friends, who were talking about progress on the ground in Syria, to support the United Nations monitoring cross-border mission. We ask them to support it in the Fifth Committee and to allow it to have the funding it needs so that the cross-border assistance can proceed, as the Council has intended and has set out.

The rest of my questions, if I may, are addressed to the Syrian representative, who, I noticed, does not look at women when we speak. I think that is quite interesting. I would like to ask him a question given what we heard from Nujeen about persons with disabilities and in recognition of the fact that, throughout the United Nations, issues relating to persons with disabilities have always been non-political. They have always been areas where every Member State can cooperate. It is not a political issue. What are the Syrian authorities doing to address the situation of persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls and those in the worst hit places, like Aleppo and Idlib? I would really like to know the answer to that question and we hope for some positive news.

The third question is about the lack of access for humanitarians to Rukban camp. Thirteen children have died of preventable causes recently. Why is it "not possible" to allow unconditional United Nations access to that camp?

My fourth question is to ask for an unequivocal assurance from the Syrian authorities, through the person of the Syrian representative today, that the ceasefire in Idlib will be respected without qualification.

Mrs. Mele Colifa (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): First of all, allow me to join those who spoke before me in expressing my delegation's thanks to Ms. Ursula Mueller for her briefing and to Ms. Nujeen

Mustapha for her important and moving testimony. We believe that her remarks have not left a single Council member unmoved. We therefore express our support and solidarity.

We are aware that, in Syria, thousands of people are experiencing the same situation and that their testimony constitutes, above all, a call to action and to take decisive measures to end this long war and compensate the victims in order to restore peace in Syria and foster the normalization of the political situation.

The Government of Equatorial Guinea remains concerned about the escalation of violence in Syria, especially in the north-western part of the country where several terrorist groups and illegal armed groups have entrenched themselves. While it is a fact that the Syrian Government controls most of its territory and that the situation in the province of Idlib needs to be resolved as soon as possible, the need for the parties to the conflict to refrain from large-scale military operations nevertheless remains.

Concerning that governorate, which is key to the outcome of the conflict, it is necessary that the parties realize that any major military attack in the north-western part of the country would not only endanger the lives of thousands of people but also hinder the work of humanitarian agencies. It is worth reminding the parties that, in their counter-terrorist operations, they must always fulfil their obligation to respect the rights of and protect civilians, while ensuring timely, sustained and unhindered access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance in the north-western, north-eastern and all other parts of Syria.

Any further hostilities in Idlib would undoubtedly have a devastating impact on civilians. Every effort must be made to prevent the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and all parties to the conflict must comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law so that civilians are spared from the worst impact of the fighting. It is imperative that the Security Council be more united and work collectively to avoid further military escalation in north-west Syria.

In that regard, the demilitarized zone must be respected so as to prevent the further mass displacement of the population and shield schools, hospitals and other vital civilian infrastructure. Accordingly, we must ensure the recovery of children affected by the conflict, including by restoring schools, improved access to education for all, the provision of adequate

child protection services and the removal of explosive remnants of war and landmines.

The priority of the Security Council must be to protect the lives of the millions of innocent civilians. Our priority and moral duty is to ensure that the people — most of whom are women, children and persons with disabilities — survive. That is, however, an extreme challenge, given the situation in the Rukban and Al-Hol camps, which are sheltering thousands of people subsisting in appalling conditions.

That is the most horrific aspect of the war, as the needs of the population remain extremely critical in all areas. Given such a deplorable situation, it is necessary that a consensus be reached on the importance of meeting the urgent and immediate needs of those displaced and traumatized people. In that regard, we welcome the ongoing arrangements to ensure the deployment of a third humanitarian convoy to the Rukban settlement, although we believe that it would be better to come up with sustainable solutions or, where appropriate, to move people to other collective shelters.

There no longer remains any doubt as to the urgent need to take action in Syria. The third Brussels Conference, which succeeded in raising approximately \$7 billion in aid to fund the United Nations humanitarian response plan for Syria and the region, attested to the international community's solidarity with the Syrian people and neighbouring countries. Donors and Member States must now urgently fulfil their commitments, as the Secretary-General has stressed.

In conclusion, in looking forward to the next meeting in Astana, we reiterate our firm commitment to finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis within the framework of resolution 2254 (2015).

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic and invite him to respond to questions.

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to say at the outset that the Syrian people continue to be the victims of developments in the Security Council and the hypocrisy of certain countries that do not want to end the crisis in Syria but prefer to manipulate terrorism, invest in armed terrorist groups and impose an economic embargo on the Syrian people. Needless to say, countries that attempt to exploit the suffering of the Syrian people in order to achieve their

own goals are far from engaged in ending the suffering of the Syrian people.

The Syrian Government asks the Governments of those countries that support terrorism in Syria to stop exploiting the Syrian crisis to achieve their own political goals and not those of the Syrians. They must also lift the economic embargo imposed on the Syrian people and stop bombing their cities, killing civilians and destroying the infrastructure. All of this is real evidence of the direct responsibility of those regimes for the suffering and forced displacement of Syrians. They impede the safe and dignified return of the refugees to their own country.

The Government of my country, the Syrian Arab Republic, has spared no effort in recent years to provide every form of humanitarian assistance and support to all Syrians affected by the crisis, regardless of their locations throughout Syria. The Syrian Government has therefore collaborated and cooperated with the United Nations and other international organizations working in Syria to that end, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 46/182. Far from the propaganda and the allegations that some are trying to promote, I would like to stress that the path to improving the humanitarian situation is known by all and requires the following.

First, we must not ignore the main causes of the suffering of the Syrian people, namely, the practices of armed terrorist groups and well-known Governments that support them; the ongoing crimes committed by the so-called international coalition, which have caused the deaths of thousands of civilians and serious damage to the infrastructure, including schools and hospitals; the coercive unilateral illegal measures imposed on the Syrian people, which must cease immediately and unconditionally, especially in light of the fact that their catastrophic, criminal effects on civilians and humanitarian action are known to all.

Secondly, it is necessary to put an end to the deliberate and methodical politicization of the humanitarian issue and to stop attempts to exploit it by certain States in order to look good. That was demonstrated recently at the Brussels Conference, where the objective was to pressure Syria and complicate and prolong the crisis while associating humanitarian and development action once again with political conditions that do not jibe with humanitarian principles.

Thirdly, the efforts of the Syrian State and its allies to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees to their country in safety and dignity must be supported. The pledges of donors must be in line with this goal rather than using billions of dollars to keep the refugees in host countries.

Fourthly, there is a need to join Syrian efforts in order to save our people in Idlib, who are living under the threat of the Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist groups and entities affiliated with it, which are using the people as a human shield. There should be an end to the recurrent aggressions of those terrorist groups against innocent civilians in the neighbouring towns and cities.

Fifthly, there must be an end to the suffering of tens of thousands of civilians who live in areas controlled by illegitimate foreign forces and militias affiliated with them. In this regard, we note that it has been 1,820 days since the civilians in Rukban camp, which is located in Al-Tanf area, have been living in forced captivity by the United States and terrorist militias associated with it. The continued suffering of those Syrian civilians demonstrates the indifference of the United States Administration to their suffering and disastrous situation. We stress once again that there is a need to put an end to the suffering of these civilians and to close this issue definitively. The detained people in the camp must be allowed to leave it and return to their home regions, which have been liberated by the Syrian Arab Army from terrorism. We note that the Syrian Government has taken all necessary measures to evacuate the detainees from the Rukban camp and end their suffering. What is needed today is for the American occupation forces to allow the camp to be dismantled and to ensure safe transportation in the occupied Al-Tanf area.

In conclusion, the only way to alleviate the suffering and help the humanitarian situation is for the known Governments to stop sponsoring terrorism and immediately end the illegal coercive measures used to implement nefarious agendas.

Lastly, the suffering of each and every Syrian person, including those with disabilities, causes pain to us. The Syrian State institutions are making every effort to assist and support those people and others who are vulnerable. The number of such people has significantly increased due to the activities of terrorist groups and crimes committed by the international

coalition. Those difficulties have been exacerbated by unilateral coercive measures that impede our efforts to safely provide our people with all services and health care. Every city in Syria has many specialized educational institutions for persons with disabilities and provide their services free of charge. The Syrian Government has paid great attention to assisting persons with disabilities.

The President: I would like to respond in my national capacity.

The Ambassador of Syria accused members of the Security Council of hypocrisy and a lack of concern for the people. I would like to just say that, for Germany's part, we have taken in hundreds of thousands of Syrians in Germany — one of them is sitting right here. We talk to the people and know of their fate. We hear them talk about the torture that they experienced in prisons in Syria. We know about people being starved, bombed and gassed by their own Government, as well as being sexually violated in their homes. I just wanted to mention that.

I would also like to say that Germany is working on accountability. We support the 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, and we are now prosecuting the first representatives of the Syrian regime in Germany for the atrocities they have committed.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I now give the floor to Ms. Mueller to respond to questions.

Ms. Mueller: I would like to respond to the question raised by the representative of Poland on disaggregated data. To ensure disaggregated data, it is very critical to have effective humanitarian programming and to be aware of the specific and diverse needs of people with disabilities, because humanitarian assistance is effective only if it is inclusive.

Humanitarian partners are now collecting disaggregated data. Sex, age and disabilities are aggregated into our planning estimates, and we continue to refine our data so as to allow us to target humanitarian programming for those most in need. We extended the period for assessing the needs in Syria for

the 2019 humanitarian needs overview, as those present know. That was released in March for this year and provides a comprehensive overview of needs, including for persons with disabilities.

What is important now is to see the support of the donors to help us address those needs. While \$7 billion were pledged at the Brussels Conference to support those in need in Syria and the region, this year's appeal is funded by only 8 per cent. We must therefore do more, and we can do more. Humanitarian agencies and the United Nations stand ready to continue providing humanitarian assistance and protection to the people in need in Syria.

As for the question raised by the Ambassador of the United Kingdom on water access improvements and challenges, the Secretary-General's report (S/2019/321) addresses the expanded access that the United Nations has in areas under Government control. There were over 1,200 missions deployed throughout the country in February and March. We have two main challenges, which I would like to highlight.

First, we have called for access to Rukban to deploy the third aid convoy and we received information on Monday that it is not possible, as I mentioned, which makes that the first biggest challenge. Secondly, we need access to send staff to the north-east to support operations in the Al-Hol camp.

The President: I thank Ms. Mueller for her statement.

I now give the floor to Ms. Mustapha.

Ms. Mustapha: I am happy to hear so many Council members today say that people with disabilities will no longer be invisible. I and so many others will be watching to make sure that those words are turned into action. Idlib is a perfect example of where that action should take place in order to protect all civilians. In terms of concrete action, the Council can make sure that people with disabilities are included in all of its work, resolutions, programmes and funding. I would like to ask the Council to please make sure that our specific needs are met, especially those of women and girls with disabilities. Today, for the first time, the Council has given a woman with a disability a voice. My hope is that from this day forward, this will be a regular occurrence in the Council, so that it can hear from us first-hand and never forget what we have talked about today. Let there be nothing about us without us.

The President: I now give the floor to members of the Council who wish to make further statements.

Mr. Allen (United Kingdom): I thank Ms. Mueller and Ms. Mustapha for their answers to Ambassador Pierce's questions. We have taken note of what they said, and we will follow up on those points.

I believe the representative of Syria responded to one of the three questions that we put to him. With your permission, Mr. President, I would like to put the other two questions to him once again, and I will repeat them. I think almost every delegation here today raised the issue of the situation in Rukban, and we just heard from the Assistant Secretary-General that the United Nations has learned from the Syrian authorities that it is not possible for the United Nations to deliver its next convoy. Could the Syrian representative explain to us and to the Council why it is not possible? That is the first question.

The second question is whether the Syrian representative can give the Council a clear assurance that the Syrian authorities will respect the ceasefire that is in place in Idlib.

Mr. Yao Shaojun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I was hoping that Ambassador Pierce would still be here so that she would have the opportunity to listen to my response. Instead, after acting like a judge and firing a few questions at us, she simply left.

Ms. Pierce raised a question that Mr. Cohen also touched on. As far as China is concerned, politically speaking, we fully support the cross-border delivery of humanitarian assistance. As for questions that are discussed in the Fifth Committee, since budgetary and financial issues are involved, they should be left to our colleagues in the Fifth Committee rather than to us on the Security Council. I nevertheless checked with my colleague on the Fifth Committee. I was told that consensus had already been reached on the issue in the Fifth Committee. Accordingly, there was no issue as to whether China supported the cross-border delivery of humanitarian assistance or had attempted to obstruct it. There was no such issue. The issue has been resolved, so there is no problem. There was no need to bring it up in the Security Council.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to respond to the questions raised.

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): When I used the word “hypocrisy”, I was referring to a number of countries. They know who they are, and they bear the main responsibility for the humanitarian suffering in my country. The references that you, Mr. President, made to practices such as torture, the use of chemical weapons and so forth demonstrate once again the deliberate politicization of this issue and how some countries use the United Nations to demonize and insult my Government. In answer to the question posed by my British colleague, today we will circulate two identical letters. I would like to quote part of the text of the letters with regard to the situation in Rukban and other camps.

“With respect to the situation in Rukban camp, the Syrian Government affirms the information already released in response to earlier reports and wishes to stress that thanks to the approvals and facilitation of the Syrian Government, the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent were able to send two humanitarian convoys to Rukban camp. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic is prepared to provide the necessary support to send a third humanitarian convoy, as long as that convoy does not fall into the hands of terrorists, as has happened in the past. We are prepared to do that on condition that the convoy does not fall into the hands of terrorists.”

The Syrian Government asserts that the only cause of the deplorable conditions for civilians in the camp is that the United States is occupying the land where the Rukban camp is located. That country refuses to dismantle the camp and is holding Syrian civilians in it hostage. It is preventing them from returning home for political reasons that are known to all. It is important to bear in mind that the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic had an agreement with the United Nations to end the suffering of the civilians in Rukban camp and dismantle it so that they could return to the homes, towns and villages from which they had been displaced by terrorism. A number of meetings have been held to discuss this issue, the most recent on 22 April.

With regard to Al-Hol camp, the Syrian Government, in cooperation with United Nations, is preparing to send a humanitarian convoy after the necessary approvals have been obtained. Moreover, it has facilitated access for the International Red Cross to bring aid to that camp and neighbouring areas. With respect to the Al-Areasha camp, which was flooded, the Syrian Government had been asking for the displaced persons to be evacuated

to their villages and towns for a long time. The United Nations did not respond to our request. If it had, that humanitarian disaster could have been avoided.

Turning to Idlib, the civilians in towns and villages around Idlib are suffering daily from bombings and violations by the terrorist groups located there. Can the Council guarantee that those terrorist groups will not attack the civilians in the area around Idlib?

The President: I now take the floor in my capacity as representative of Germany.

I would ask the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic if he would subscribe to the demand under international humanitarian law that the Syrian Government guarantee and support the safe, voluntary, dignified and well-informed return of refugees to their homes.

I resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

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

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Mr. President, could you repeat the question?

The President: Can the representative of Syria here today guarantee and state that his Government will support and follow the rule of international humanitarian law requiring it to promote the safe, voluntary, dignified and well-informed return of refugees to their homes?

I resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

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

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic was the first to call for the return of all refugees to their home country, Syria. The Syrian Government was the first to constantly call for the return of all refugees to their homes. Those who impede their return are not the Syrian Government. Everybody knows who it is that is impeding their return. We support the return of all refugees to the Syrian Arab Republic.

The President: I resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

The meeting rose at 5.20 p.m.