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Seventy-fourth year

8527th meeting

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Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Djani	(Indonesia)
<i>Members:</i>	Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
	China	Mr. Ma Zhaoxu
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
	Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Germany	Mr. Schulz
	Kuwait	Mr. Almunayekh
	Peru	Mr. Ugarelli
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	South Africa	Mr. Sithole
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Mr. Cohen

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 9.40 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey 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. Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Peacebuilding and Political Affairs, and Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

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

I give the floor to Ms. DiCarlo.

Ms. DiCarlo: We are at yet another juncture in the Syrian conflict where civilians are paying the price for a never-ending war. We have been here before: in Aleppo, in eastern Ghouta and in Raqqa. Today it is Idlib, where 3 million civilians are at risk.

Until recently the Russian-Turkish memorandum of understanding, signed on 17 September 2018, had significantly reduced violence in northwest Syria. However, we now see increasing hostilities on the ground. If the escalation continues and the offensive pushes forward, we risk catastrophic humanitarian fallout and threats to international peace and security. The United Nations therefore welcomes the announcement made on 15 May of a Turkish-Russian working group as a means towards re-establishing a cessation of hostilities in northwest Syria. That cooperation is desperately needed.

The United Nations has followed with great concern the dangerous intensification of violence in the de-escalation area of north-western Syria, involving Syrian Government forces, their allies, armed opposition forces and the Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Between February and March, we received reports of Syrian Government air strikes resuming on areas inside the Idlib de-escalation area,

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham stepping up its cross-line raids on Government forces and mutual exchanges of mortars and rockets. We have continued to receive reports of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham launching attacks towards Government areas, including a Russian airbase.

On 8 March, Turkey, in coordination with Russia, began patrols inside the demilitarized zone. We welcomed those coordinated patrols, which somewhat de-escalated violence. Yet, outside the patrol hours or patrols areas, attacks from both sides continued and increased significantly in late April.

On 6 May, Government forces began a ground offensive, which reportedly included Russian air support, opening two fronts — one in northern Hama and the other in north-east Latakia. As of 15 May, the Government had seized several towns in northern Hama inside the demilitarized zone.

Turkey reports that two of its soldiers were injured on 4 May by Government shelling on a Turkish observation post in northern Hama. As the fighting moved closer to the observation post, Syrian Government and Russian strikes were reported in close vicinity to the post.

Since late April, this escalation in violence has reportedly killed and injured more than 100 civilians and displaced 180,000 people. The aerial bombardment is alarming, including the use of barrel bombs on populated areas. Air strikes, barrel bombs and shelling have damaged or destroyed multiple health facilities and schools in greater Idlib, several of which had been deconflicted with the United Nations. There was also reported shelling from the de-escalation zone into areas under the Government's control, including a rocket strike on the Neirab camp for Palestine refugees.

We appeal to all parties to cease hostilities, uphold international humanitarian law and protect civilians. We condemn all attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, in particular medical facilities and schools, and urge the parties to respect the safety and neutrality of health and humanitarian workers. The Secretary-General has called for an urgent de-escalation of the situation and urged the parties to recommit fully to the Russian-Turkish ceasefire arrangements. He has urged the Astana guarantors, in particular Turkey and Russia, to ensure that this takes place. I strongly reiterate that appeal today.

The current escalation once again reminds us of the urgent need for a political solution to the conflict.

The international community agrees that the presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib must be addressed but, with 3 million civilians in close quarters, combating terrorism cannot be allowed to supersede obligations under international law.

Special Envoy Pedersen has elaborated priorities for the political process. The Council has expressed support for his efforts. Alongside the urgent imperative to end the current violence in north-western Syria, we need to revitalize the United Nations-facilitated political track. We must continue a sustained dialogue with the parties, building trust and confidence. We should work together in support of Russia and Turkey's recommitment to a ceasefire on Idlib. We can then work towards restoring a nation-wide ceasefire and focus on advancing the political road map in resolution 2254 (2015).

We need concrete action on the release of detainees and the clarification of the fate of missing persons. Reported estimates of the number of detained and missing since 2011 are well in excess of 100,000 people. The single greatest contribution that could be made now would be the large-scale release of children, the elderly, the infirm and women.

Much progress has been made towards convening a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee. The United Nations continues to consult parties on a package addressing the committee's composition and rules of procedure that would be acceptable to both the Government and the opposition Syrian Negotiation Commission. With a bit of compromise, it could move forward, and that step could help to unlock a broader political process. International cooperation and support of the Geneva process are critical if Special Envoy Pedersen is to realize his mandate.

The conflict in Syria is complex but there is a path forward. Let us unite today for the first step to support an immediate de-escalation of the violence in greater Idlib and work towards a political solution that meets the legitimate aspiration of the Syrian people.

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

I now give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: The past three weeks have seen a deadly escalation of the conflict in north-western Syria. The Secretary-General has been warning about this for months. In a September 2018 press release (SG/SM/19208), he stressed that it was, absolutely

essential to avoid a full-scale battle in Idlib. And he warned that that would "unleash a humanitarian nightmare unlike any we have seen [in Syria]". When I briefed Council members here on 18 September, I said a full-scale military onslaught could result in "the worst humanitarian tragedy of the twenty-first century" (S/PV.8355, p. 5). Despite our warnings, our worst fears are now coming true.

As Ms. DiCarlo just summarized, the United Nations estimates that 3 million people live in the area of the de-escalation zone in the north-west of the country. Even before the recent escalation, they were among the most vulnerable people in Syria, particularly the 1 million children and the 1.3 million people who fled to Idlib from other parts of the country. The area is now largely controlled by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham — a proscribed terrorist group. The innocent civilians, of course, hugely out-number the men with guns.

We have briefed the Council every month as the conflict has escalated. On 27 March, my Director of Operations alerted the Council to the alarming spike in civilian casualties and displacement owing to fighting, noting that 90 people had been killed and nearly 90,000 displaced (see S/PV.8493). On 24 April (see S/PV.8515), my Deputy briefed Council members here on a further increase in air strikes and shelling, with attacks both in the de-escalation zone and from the zone into Government controlled areas. She described how approximately 200 people had been killed since February, and the number of newly displaced had grown to 120,000 people.

Just days later, the pace of attacks increased even further, with some of the most intense hostilities in almost a year. My Director of Operations briefed the Council once again last Friday on the effect of the air strikes, the barrel bombs, the ground attacks and the shelling. And yesterday the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator updated the International Syrian Support Group humanitarian task force in Geneva on yet a further spate of barrel bombs from helicopters, air strikes, heavy shelling, ground attacks and counter-attacks. In the past three weeks, we have received reports that up to 160 people have been killed. At least 180,000 people have been displaced, and millions of people are crammed into an ever-smaller area — 180,000 in three weeks.

While many people have moved to camps, more than 80,000 people have found themselves with nowhere

to go. They are therefore simply parked in open fields or sheltering under trees. We now have reports of three internally displaced persons settlements being attacked. Three days ago, an attack near a market place in Jisr Al-Shughur reportedly killed at least eight civilians and injured three others. Some 17 schools have been damaged or destroyed, and many more are closed, with more than 400,000 students unable to sit for their exams.

Areas in Government-controlled western Aleppo and northern Hama have also been affected by hostilities, resulting in civilian casualties and injuries. On 14 May, rockets hit the densely populated Al-Neirab camp for Palestine refugees in Aleppo, killing at least nine civilians and wounding 11. Humanitarian agencies are trying to help people caught up in the fighting, but the response is already stretched. Pre-positioned stocks of food have been given to 100,000 people since the start of this month. Tents and other shelter items for 25,000 people are being distributed, but, as we have told the Council before, a full military incursion would overwhelm all ability to respond. We are rapidly approaching that scenario.

I am most of all concerned about the number of attacks damaging or destroying medical facilities. I need not remind the Council that medical facilities are specially protected under international humanitarian law. Since 28 April, the World Health Organization (WHO) and health actors have identified at least 18 facilities that have been damaged or destroyed by air strikes, shelling or other fighting. All of them are inside the so-called de-escalation zone. Following the attacks, almost all are currently unusable, including a hospital in Latmana, in Hama governorate, attacked on 28 April; a hospital in Madiq Castle, in Hama governorate, attacked on 28 April; a primary health-care centre in Hbeit, in Idlib governorate, attacked on 30 April; a primary health-care centre in Qastun, in Hama governorate, attacked on 1 May; a WHO-supported surgical unit in the Kafr Nabudah area, in Hama governorate, attacked on 1 May; and a primary health-care centre in Al Madiq, in Hama governorate, attacked on 2 May.

I know that the Council appreciates brevity, but I could continue listing such attacks for some time. The trend has continued day after day. In total, WHO and health actors have reported 20 attacks on those 18 facilities, amounting to almost one a day over the past three weeks. Some facilities have been hit twice. Other

hospitals are closing for fear of being attacked. A total of 49 health facilities have partially or totally suspended activities. Among them, they provided an average every month of at least 171,000 medical outpatient consultations and 2,760 major surgical operations. They helped more than 1,400 women deliver their babies every month. Now they are not doing those things.

The 20 attacks are confirmed attacks, using WHO's global methodology for cataloguing attacks on health facilities. That system relies on WHO's global reporting system and a specialized network of partners on the ground to triangulate and confirm what has happened. In the case of a reported attack, those partners on the ground provide a detailed incident report. That is then verified by WHO, and it is checked against additional sources. Only those that are fully vetted and confirmed by a variety of sources are included in the list of confirmed attacks. That system, by the way, is the one used for reporting on such attacks from Afghanistan to Yemen. It is widely respected.

In the light of the events of the past three weeks, my office and I have been asked a lot of questions by Member States, non-governmental organizations operating in the area, doctors in the hospitals and families affected by the fighting. Let me tell the Council some of the questions, and what I can say in answer to them.

They ask: Who is bombing all these hospitals? I answer that I cannot say, but that at least some of those attacks are clearly organized by people with access to sophisticated weapons, including a modern air force and so-called smart and precision weapons.

Are our hospitals being deliberately targeted? I say that I do not know. The people who do are the ones dropping the bombs. What I can tell them is that there are a lot of attacks on those health facilities.

Is it true that you provide details of where hospitals are in order to protect them? I answer that, yes, the obligation to protect civilian objects, including hospitals, emanates from international humanitarian law. We give details of some hospital locations to the parties to the conflict so that they can comply with those obligations.

Is the information being provided about the locations of hospitals in fact being used not to protect hospitals but to target them? I answer that I do not know. Once again, the people who can answer that question

are the ones dropping the bombs. Many deconflicted sites that are not hospitals have not been attacked.

Has this kind of thing happened before during the Syria conflict? Yes. Last year, the then Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, and I raised concerns about similar attacks in eastern Ghouta with Council members that we thought might have relevant information and could prevent a recurrence. Did you get satisfactory answers at that time? We have yet to receive full answers to the questions we raised last year.

If I were a non-governmental organization running a hospital, why would I want to give you details of my location if that information were simply being used to target the hospital? That is a good question. We are thinking about what conclusions to draw from recent events in respect of the de-confliction system insofar as it covers health facilities.

What is your advice to parents of children who live in the de-escalation zone; should they take their children to the hospital in case of an illness or injury? That is a very difficult question. I am deeply concerned about the impact on the health of children and their safety, when so many medical facilities are being attacked. What would you do if you were the parent of a child needing hospital care in the so-called de-escalation zone in Idlib right now? I am sorry to say that I just do not know. I feel desperately sorry for parents in that horrible position. Has the Security Council not adopted a resolution reinforcing the fact that countries should not bomb hospitals? Yes: resolution 2286 (2016) specifically covers that.

Finally, I am asked: what is the point of the Security Council adopting such resolutions if States are not going to comply with them? That, Mr. President, is also a very good question. It is, of course, not really addressed to me.

The President: I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

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

Mr. Pecsteen de Buyswerve (Belgium): I deliver this statement on behalf of the three co-penholders, namely, Belgium, Germany and Kuwait, which have called for this meeting, following last week's consultations, to follow up on the concerning military escalation in the north-western de-escalation zone in Syria. We would like to thank both Under-Secretaries-

General, Mr. Mark Lowcock and Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, for keeping us up to date on the different aspects of this crisis.

We would like to start by expressing our deep concern about the escalation of violence in north-west Syria over the past few weeks, including aerial bombardment, heavy shelling and the reported use of barrel bombs. That has led to the loss of life of many innocent civilians, including health workers, and has forced more than 180 000 people to leave their homes. We are particularly concerned about the attacks on civilian infrastructure, as we have just heard, including on 18 health facilities caring for 170,000 people, and at least 17 schools, which are now unable to provide their services, thereby impacting 480,000 students.

We acknowledge that there is a considerable presence of members of United Nations-designated terrorist organizations in Idlib. We clearly condemn the violent attacks they have carried out. But the fight against terrorism can in no way justify indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Counter-terrorism operations do not override the responsibility of parties to protect civilians, nor should they impede impartial humanitarian action. The use of barrel bombs, in any place but especially in populated areas, is completely unacceptable, as it demonstrates complete disregard for human life and represents a strategy of collective punishment.

We, the co-penholders, remind all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law, based on the Geneva Convention and its Protocols, including the humanitarian principles to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. Accountability must be ensured for those who have committed violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. We stand firm in our commitment to fight impunity.

We also recall resolutions 2286 (2016) and 2427 (2018), which condemn attacks on hospitals and schools, respectively. We are particularly alarmed and shocked by reports of attacks on civilian infrastructure, such as medical facilities whose location has been notified under the de-confliction mechanism. That seriously undermines the very purpose of such notification as a tool to increase the security and acceptance of humanitarian actors in the field.

The Russian-Turkish memorandum of understanding signed in September 2018 was significant in de-escalating the situation in north-west Syria. We reiterate our call

for the continuous and full implementation of the ceasefire arrangements of the memorandum. We recall that 3 million people, including 1 million children, live in that area. A wide-scale offensive would lead to a humanitarian catastrophe for Syria and the region. We, as the Council, must not let this happen. A lasting ceasefire in Idlib is paramount. We urge all parties to avoid further escalation and to use their influence to that end.

Humanitarian access must be provided in an unconditional, safe, timely, unhindered and sustained manner. We would like to salute the heroic work of humanitarian workers in these particularly difficult circumstances. The United Nations and its partners continue to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance based on humanitarian principles, including through cross-border assistance in accordance with resolution 2449 (2018), which is a lifeline to millions of people in the north-western part of Syria.

Finally, as we, the co-penholders, continue to follow the situation in the north-west of Syria closely, we reiterate our support for Special Envoy Pedersen in his efforts to reach a political solution in Syria on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué of 2012 (S/2012/522, annex).

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): I thank Under-Secretaries-General DiCarlo and Lowcock for their deeply concerning briefings today.

The United States believes that the September 2018 ceasefire agreement between the Russian Federation and Turkey in Idlib and neighbouring areas is absolutely essential to maintaining international peace and security. Millions of civilian lives are in jeopardy due to increased hostilities by Russia and the regime over the past two weeks in Idlib and Hama governorates.

These intensified military operations continue to destabilize the region. The escalation has killed or injured at least 100 people and driven more than 180,000 from their homes, as we have heard — some for the third or fourth time in eight years of war, fleeing the Al-Assad regime's barrel bombs and Russian and regime air strikes. Recent fighting has forced civilians to seek safety closer to the border of our NATO ally Turkey, and the new wave of displaced persons has overwhelmed the capacity of camps for internally displaced persons in the area. The offensive has put aid workers and humanitarian facilities in danger. Turkish military forces on the ground to monitor and implement

the ceasefire agreement are also in danger, with some having already been injured, as we have heard.

For a year, the United Nations and many in this Council have issued grave warnings about the scope of the tragedy that would result from a military offensive in Idlib. The Secretary-General was crystal clear in September 2018 when he said that a military assault on Idlib would unleash "a humanitarian nightmare unlike any seen in the blood-soaked Syrian conflict". Under-Secretary-General Lowcock has been equally clear in the past and again today about the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe that would result from a military assault on Idlib.

The Russian Federation, on behalf of the Astana group, has assured the Security Council, as well as my country bilaterally at the highest levels, that it is committed to maintaining its own ceasefire. However, Russia and the regime justify their attacks on civilians and hospitals as counter-terrorism. The strikes have destroyed 18 health facilities. Most alarming is the fact that several of these facilities were on deconfliction lists set up by the Russian Federation and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The Syrian people are in grave risk of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis if Russia and the Al-Assad regime do not immediately halt their escalation and immediately recommit to the ceasefire. The United States reiterates that any escalation in violence in north-western Syria would destabilize the region, and we call on the Russian Federation to take the following steps with immediate effect, in recognition of its ability to influence the behaviour of the Al-Assad regime.

First, it must ensure the de-escalation of all military activity in the Idlib demilitarized zone and recommitment to the full implementation of the 17 September 2018 Sochi agreement. This means a full cessation of all hostilities in the area — full stop.

Secondly, it must ensure that United Nations cross-border humanitarian aid deliveries authorized by resolution 2449 (2018) continue to reach populations in Idlib, including in the demilitarized zone, with regular, sustained and unimpeded access.

Thirdly, it must encourage Damascus to take all steps necessary to ensure the safe and unhindered access of relief personnel to the affected areas in Idlib.

Fourthly, it must finally ensure that the Syrian regime does not deploy chemical weapons in Idlib.

The United States strongly supports Turkey's efforts to de-escalate the situation and preserve the Sochi ceasefire agreement. The United States is not alone in its calls for Russia and the regime to live up to their commitments to maintaining the ceasefire. We echo the important statement by the Turkish Foreign Minister this week, calling on the regime to stop its military aggression in Idlib, as well as similar calls by our European partners. The United States' resolve to hold the Al-Assad regime accountable for any further use of chemical weapons is unwavering, and we remind the regime and its allies that any use of chemical weapons, including chlorine gas, will be met by a strong, swift response.

Russia's involvement in this offensive is deeply concerning because the violence threatens the opportunity that we believe has arisen in recent days thanks to the diplomatic push by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Geir Pedersen, to jump-start the political process through the creation of a constitutional committee. The 6 May announcement by the Al-Assad regime of a ground offensive is incompatible with the Special Envoy's goal of achieving a political solution to the conflict. The United States fully supports Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts to form the constitutional committee as soon as possible.

With agreement on the constitutional committee within reach, Russia and the regime's decision to launch air strikes, fire heavy artillery and drop barrel bombs sends a terrible signal of disregard towards the United Nations political process. Today, we want to send a clear signal to the Al-Assad regime and its supporters, Russia and Iran, that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. The only solution is a political transition, as outlined in resolution 2254 (2015), namely, a ceasefire; the establishment of credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance that respects the rights of the Syrian people; constitutional revision; and free and fair elections pursuant to the new constitution, supervised by the United Nations, with the participation of all Syrians, including members of the diaspora.

Russia has repeatedly claimed to agree that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria. A peaceful and lasting political resolution of this crisis must begin with the protection of civilian populations from violence. The United States is therefore concerned that the recent military escalation may be an attempt by the Al-Assad regime to stall the formation of the constitutional committee and the United Nations-led

political process and undercut pragmatic efforts to make progress on a trajectory to the political resolution of the conflict. This is precisely the wrong course to pursue.

Finally, I have outlined what is the only solution to the conflict endorsed by the international community and every single member of the Security Council. The United States remains firmly committed to Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts on the United Nations-led political process in Geneva and to resolution 2254 (2015). Millions of lives depend on it.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I thank our briefers.

We will hear from the representative of Turkey later, but I want to start by welcoming Turkey's efforts to agree to agree the Sochi ceasefire in September. As we welcomed that then, so we welcome now its efforts to restore that ceasefire and de-escalate. I think we heard very clearly from both Under-Secretaries-General why that is a matter of urgency. I also thank Kuwait for calling for this meeting, which is clearly needed.

The situation in Idlib is so dire that I will not repeat our well-known position on the political process, which has not changed, nor indeed on chemical weapons. I want to use this meeting to focus purely on Idlib, the nightmare that is in Idlib and the slaughter that is happening in Idlib. Mr. Lowcock asked a number of questions; as he said, there are more questions than answers. It will be good to get some answers for the people of Idlib from this meeting today.

As we have heard, the regime offensive in north-western Syria has left 180,000 people displaced since 28 April alone and many killed and wounded. Since that date, at least 18 health facilities, including nine primary health-care centres and nine hospitals, and 17 schools have been hit by air strikes. That is a clear violation of resolution 2286 (2016) and of international humanitarian law. As the Belgian Ambassador asked, what has happened to the principles of proportionality, distinction and necessity? What is necessary? What is proportionate about bombing 18 health facilities, with a devastating effect on the local population that the Under-Secretary-General outlined?

I was interested in Mr. Lowcock's confirmation that the United Nations provides details of the locations of hospitals to the parties to the conflict, and I note with grave concern the international humanitarian law obligations that he cited, which should not be taken lightly. He asked the question: Who is bombing these

hospitals? Whoever it is has a modern air force and precision weapons. Are the hospitals and other facilities being deliberately targeted despite the deconfliction mechanisms? It would be absolutely grotesque if non-governmental organizations and health workers providing coordinates to a mechanism which they believe is there to ensure their safety were finding themselves being the authors of their own destruction because of deliberate targeting by the regime.

But since we know that Russia and Syria are the only countries that fly airplanes in the area, I would like to know whether the answer to Mr. Lowcock's question is the Russian and Syrian air forces. I think we need answers today, and if the answer is the Russian and Syrian air forces, I would call on both Ambassadors here today to give us an assurance that the attack will stop and that there will be no more deliberate targeting of civilians in this manner in facilities that every single member of the international community has a duty to protect.

The Belgian Ambassador also referred to the fact that counter-terrorist operations are not a license for indiscriminate attacks on civilians. I want to underscore that point as well. It is in the Geneva Conventions. It is a central doctrine of international humanitarian law. Proportionality, distinction and necessity really matter, and they do not seem to be in evidence in Idlib.

Russia has claimed that its so-called retaliatory strikes, in support of the regime, were "surgical" in their precision. I hope that I never need medical treatment in Moscow, if surgical accuracy means what we have seen on the ground in Idlib. Either those statements or the strikes are therefore wildly inaccurate.

Russia must ensure that its own forces and those of its ally in Damascus strictly abide by international humanitarian law and the agreements and resolutions to which, as a member of the international community and as one of the permanent five members of the Security Council, it has agreed.

There is one other question that struck me from the Under-Secretary-General, which is why the resolutions are not being complied with. I think that is a very good question. I believe that every parent in Idlib has the right to know the answer to that question. It is not a \$64,000 question — to use the vernacular phrase. It is a question that is costing 160 lives in Idlib, and has cost 400,000 lives since the conflict in Syria began.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock and Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo for their very useful briefings. Given the tragic situation in Syria, particularly in the north-west, I would like to underscore three priorities: the critical need to preserve the ceasefire in Idlib, the non-negotiable imperative to respect international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians and the urgency of reaching a lasting political solution.

The preservation of the ceasefire in Idlib must be our top priority. France is extremely concerned about the recent ground offensive launched by the Syrian regime in the north-west, as well as the bombardments and artillery fire by the regime and its allies. Those actions are flagrant violations of the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey, which was reiterated in the joint communiqué of the Istanbul summit last October.

Reports that this offensive has ended still need to be confirmed on the ground. We will remain vigilant in that regard. Compliance with the ceasefire must be ensured over the long term. We must do everything we can to prevent another disaster in the north-west; the lives of 3 million civilians, including 1 million children, are at stake. To put it plainly, we must prevent Idlib from becoming the new Aleppo at all costs. An offensive would not only have drastic humanitarian consequences, but would also pose a serious migration and security threat to all of us, with a major risk of terrorist fighters spreading.

In that context, it is the primary responsibility of the guarantors to preserve the ceasefire, in accordance with the agreement on Idlib, on which the Astana guarantors reaffirmed their commitments at their meeting on 26 April. France especially calls on Russia to honour its commitment to uphold the ceasefire in Idlib and bring all the necessary pressure to bear on the regime in that regard. Moreover, I repeat that France will be extremely firm in the event of chemical weapons being used again, and we stand ready to act.

Against that backdrop, the protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law constitute an absolute priority. The humanitarian consequences of the escalating violence are of great concern. More than 180,000 people have been displaced, 150 are dead and 11 schools and 18 medical facilities were attacked, including hospitals that were de-conflicted. I reiterate here that France condemns in the strongest terms all attacks on hospitals and health workers, as

they constitute war crimes. I repeat, once again, that the protection of civilians, including humanitarian and health workers, as well as civilian infrastructure, is an imperative by which we all must abide and which is non-negotiable.

Let us make no mistake about it: the current offensive is not exclusively about the fight against terrorism. It is part of the brutal retaking of areas that are still outside the control of the regime and its allies. That offensive contributes only to the amplification and spread of the terrorist threat. We support Turkey in stepping up its efforts to reduce the influence of terrorist groups. In any event, fighting terrorism, which is a priority for all of us, cannot be used to justify violations of international humanitarian law.

As everyone can see, we are facing a new moment of truth in Syria, the future of which is at stake. How can we restore the necessary confidence for a credible political process when the population of Idlib is targeted by a violent military campaign? How can we both wish for the return of refugees and launch an offensive that will inevitably make hundreds of thousands of Syrians flee? The reality is that an offensive in Idlib will ruin the prospects for peace in Syria, which could otherwise come to fruition today.

Only a credible, irreversible and inclusive political transition will break the cycle of the Syrian tragedy and pave the way for reconstruction. We must collectively support the Special Envoy's efforts to implement all the elements of resolution 2254 (2015), including a credible constitutional package. The regime's obstruction, which has been going on for months, is unacceptable. It is equally important that Geir Pedersen continue his work on confidence-building measures in parallel, with a view to establishing a secure and neutral environment, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), and that he start preparing for the holding of elections. On all those points, Russia has a leading role to play vis-à-vis the regime.

After years of failing Syria in the Security Council, it would be yet another great moral and political mistake to turn the page today and look elsewhere, whether because we are tired or not courageous enough. To think that the Syrian tragedy is behind us would be a grave lapse in judgement, also because we are convinced that today, for the first time perhaps in eight years, a small but real window of opportunity is opening for us

to put an end to the conflict; we must not allow that small window to close. That means that, as members of the Security Council, we must assume our collective responsibility to switch off our automatic pilot modes, build upon our commonalities and at last achieve peace in Syria.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We appreciate the convening of this meeting and thank Under-Secretaries-General DiCarlo and Lowcock for their valuable briefings.

The Dominican Republic notes with great concern the increasing military escalation in southern Idlib and northern Hama in the Syrian Arab Republic, which has resulted in greater suffering, destruction and desolation for the Syrian people. That area in particular had been considered safe following the agreement reached between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey in September last year. Today, however, we see how violations of that agreement have led to the displacement of 180,000 people. Of those who choose to stay, nearly half a million are exposed to violence.

In a blatant and deplorable violation of international humanitarian law, there have been reports of attacks on 18 hospitals and ambulances, where several health workers died, as well as 10 schools and camps for internally displaced persons, leading to the disruption of basic services, such as education and health, especially for women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities and young people. If we add the fact that humanitarian actors who are still active are working at maximum capacity and in an unsafe environment, it would appear that the situation could not get any worse. Therefore, a large-scale confrontation would lead to a humanitarian crisis of catastrophic levels, given that it would put at risk the access of cross-border humanitarian assistance to 3 million people who live in the affected areas and who depend, for the most part, on such assistance to survive. We cannot allow that to happen.

We believe that the Council has an unavoidable responsibility to show unity and decisively meet the requests of the humanitarian community in Syria, which were very clearly expressed by Mr. Lowcock, on behalf of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and actors in the field. The possible serious humanitarian consequences described today, and of which all of us are aware, are definitely worrisome. However, they must be the driving force behind unity in the Council in order to, first, stop the current violence

and demand the establishment of a safe humanitarian corridor to ensure that humanitarian assistance can continue to reach those affected; secondly, remind the opposing parties in the most emphatic way possible of their commitment to protecting civilians, in line with the norms of international humanitarian law, and that counter-terrorism activities must also respect such norms; and, thirdly, call for an immediate end to the use of, and attacks on, civilian infrastructure, such as homes, hospitals and schools.

In conclusion, the Dominican Republic would like to reiterate what was said here on 30 April (see S/PV.8520). It is imperative to redouble efforts to prevent a military escalation in Idlib, which, first and foremost, affects the lives of millions of civilians, jeopardizes the progress made in the political process and, no less important, calls into question the capacity of the United Nations to prevent further suffering and be able to reach a credible and sustainable political solution to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.

I end by asking that the bombing of civilians stop, and stop now.

Mr. Ugarelli (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank you, Mr. President, for convening today's meeting, and the briefers for the valuable information they provided.

We follow with deep regret and concern yet another escalation of violence in Idlib and other areas in north-western Syria, as a result of intense air strikes that do not discriminate between combatants and civilians. Peru strongly condemns terrorism and believes that the terrorist groups in Idlib and other areas of Syria must be brought to justice. We also acknowledge the need to safeguard Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. However, we underscore that in no case does that justify the commission of additional attacks on civilians and medical facilities, medical personnel and essential health infrastructure.

We underscore that such acts are flagrant violations of international law and, because of their intentionality and impact on civilians, can and should be classified as war crimes. They are also a violation of the provisions of various Security Council resolutions, such as resolution 2286 (2016). We therefore hope that such reprehensible acts will be the subject of exhaustive investigations that will identify and duly punish those responsible.

We are also alarmed that the upsurge in violence appears to be exacerbating the extreme vulnerability

of millions of women and children in the area, which leads us to highlight the responsibility of the Council to protect them. We also emphasize the importance of meeting the needs of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons registered in recent months, mainly from northern Hama and southern Idlib, who are in precarious temporary shelters in areas close to the Turkish border.

Given the delicate circumstances that bring us all here today, we urge the Syrian Government and all actors in the conflict to prevent further deterioration of the situation and Idlib from again becoming a stage for horror and destabilization, in particular when the lives of millions of civilians are at stake. We underscore that essentially that means preserving the ceasefire brokered by Turkey and Russia last September and a renewed commitment by all parties, and in particular the Syrian Government, to the political settlement process promoted by the United Nations, on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

We believe that it is crucial that the Astana guarantors and other countries with influence over the Syrian Government and the opposition contribute to that goal by fostering a climate of moderation, calm, dialogue and commitment to peace and the future of the country and its people.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank you, Mr. President, for convening today's meeting. We also thank Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo and Mr. Mark Lowcock for their excellent briefings.

When this second meeting was convened to address the situation in Idlib, we could not help but wonder if we should prepare for the worst-case scenario in Idlib and if the United Nations should urgently review its state of readiness in the event that developments took a tragic course and we again found ourselves with a situation similar to that of Aleppo, which has been virtually completely destroyed by the war. Equatorial Guinea believes that there is indeed cause for concern, as a surge in ceasefire violations in the de-escalation zone is increasingly worrisome, with serious consequences for the humanitarian situation faced by civilians in Idlib, an increase in the number of fatalities and a wave of displacement, as Ms. DiCarlo and Mr. Lowcock have described.

We are facing a devastating scenario in which thousands of families and villages have been completely

annihilated and in which corpses, as has been underscored, are arriving from hospitals and schools on a daily basis, as well as a huge number of internally displaced persons, many of whom are wounded and face an acute lack of hospitals and means to care for them. Worse still, the few hospitals that can still care for the wounded are constantly under attack.

We call on all the parties to put an immediate end to the escalation of tensions in Idlib and to do everything possible to prevent the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, health centres, schools and other civilian infrastructure, and to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law to prevent civilians from bearing the brunt of the fighting. They also have an obligation to protect civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals, schools, warehouses and so on.

As we underscored recently, given this bleak outlook, we cannot remain mere onlookers. Passivity and the lack of genuine political will to bring an end to the hostilities in Idlib will, in one way or another, turn us into participants in the ongoing tragedy in Idlib. We must therefore be unwavering in our determination to resolve the situation in that supposedly demilitarized zone.

We encourage better Russian-Turkish cooperation aimed at stabilizing the situation in Idlib and stress the need to take effective measures to combat terrorist organizations in Syria. We recall that no one should sabotage the effective coordination of those bilateral actions, which could thwart the spirit of Astana and increase the risk of tensions, as well as tear apart the political process in Syria and the formation of the constitutional committee.

In conclusion, we would like to echo some internal Syrian voices who are calling on the United Nations to consider deploying an impartial and independent monitoring team in Idlib in order to ensure the cessation of all acts of violence against women, document any violations and a posteriori prosecute and punish those responsible. We believe that measure deserves the full attention of the Council, since it is aimed specifically at protecting the Syrian people from a possible massacre looming on the horizon in Idlib. We call on those countries that have influence on the events that are unfolding to exert the necessary pressure on the parties to avoid a huge loss of innocent lives, as we are now seeing in Idlib.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank both Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo and Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for their briefings. Unfortunately, both briefings were extremely alarming.

For the past two weeks, we have been following with great concern the intensification of hostilities in the de-escalation zone of north-western Syria. The current fighting involves Syrian Government forces and their allies, as well as armed opposition forces and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Let me be crystal clear: it is again civilians who are paying the highest price. We have already encountered similar escalations in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta. A repetition of those scenarios is simply unacceptable. Growing human suffering in north-western Syria only adds to the tragedy of the Syrian people, and that is the main reason why we have called for today's meeting.

As already mentioned in the Chamber today, we have been observing an increase in air strikes over the Idlib province and in northern Hama for the past weeks. I have to insist and underline that it is the civilian population in the region that has been under heavy shelling on a daily basis. I also want to be clear that the United Nations-designated terrorist groups have intensified their attacks. As there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict, this situation must stop.

Over the past two weeks, the violence has resulted in the death of more than 160 civilians. Air strikes on population centres, bombardments and the use of barrel bombs, as well as the targeting of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure, notably schools and health facilities, are violations of international humanitarian law. It is unacceptable, particularly taking into consideration the fact that in some cases attacks on civilian and medical infrastructure happened even though the GPS coordinates were communicated to the parties to ensure their safety.

Poland condemns those atrocities in the strongest possible terms and reiterates its call on all parties affecting the situation on the ground, especially the Astana guarantors, to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law and spare no effort to protect civilians.

In that regard, Astana guarantors have a special role to play and should therefore take all necessary actions to arrive at a full cessation of hostilities, especially

while taking into consideration the crucial importance of the memorandum of understanding between Russia and Turkey signed in September 2018, which has been already recalled at this meeting. It is our moral and legal duty to do our utmost to alleviate the suffering of civilians in Syria.

Let me conclude by underlining that any military operation — even those aimed at countering terrorism — should be fully in line with international humanitarian law and human rights law. Not only is it a legal, but also a moral, obligation to prevent harm to thousands of civilians trapped in the middle of fighting. Those who do not comply should be held accountable.

There can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict and a political agreement in line with resolution 2254 (2015), and the Geneva communiqué of 2012 (S/2012/522, annex) remains the only way towards peace. We look forward to the establishment of a constitutional committee — the first step towards a genuine political process under United Nations supervision. In that context, United Nations Special Envoy Pedersen has our full support.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation thanks Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo and Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for their informative briefings on developments related to the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Côte d'Ivoire remains concerned about the new military escalation in Idlib governorate, despite the signing in September 2018 of the agreement between Russia and Turkey on the demilitarized zone, which is intended to separate insurgent territories from Government areas and ensure a cessation of hostilities in that region. According to the United Nations, that offensive resulted in the displacement of approximately 180,000 people between 29 April and 9 May, including many deaths. If we are not careful, that new outbreak of violence risks undermining the many efforts of the international community to achieve a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis and worsening the already worrisome humanitarian situation.

In that context, Côte d'Ivoire, which condemns the pursuit and intensification of fighting, including its disastrous consequences, calls on the parties to immediately cease hostilities throughout all Syrian territory in order to give the peace process a chance to succeed. In that regard, we call on the parties to

the conflict to fully implement the Russian-Turkish agreement on the demilitarized zone. In particular, we urge all the parties to respect the obligation to protect civilians and respect international law and international humanitarian law, violations of which, we should point out, can be subject to prosecution in the competent international courts.

My delegation welcomes the meeting held in Sochi on Tuesday, 14 May, between the United States Secretary of State and his Russian counterpart, to discuss issues of common interest, including that of Syria. We hope that this meeting will open up other areas for consultation with a view to identifying, in the words of the Secretary of State, “pathways forward in Syria ... to move the political process forward”. My delegation hopes that the most urgent issues, such as the humanitarian situation and the establishment of the constitutional committee, can unite the views of all stakeholders in the Syrian crisis.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my country's call for a political solution to the Syrian crisis through an inclusive dialogue among all the stakeholders, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). In that regard, Côte d'Ivoire affirms its full support for Special Envoy Geir Pedersen's tireless efforts to restore peace and stability in Syria.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Ms. DiCarlo and Mr. Lowcock for their briefings.

To be honest, we have a feeling of déjà vu all over again. We frequently heard these kinds of appeals and lamentations during the pacification of eastern Aleppo and Ghouta. But I want to ask why the humanitarian troika was in no hurry to call for a Security Council meeting when the so-called coalition was razing Baghouz and Hajin to the ground. Civilians were dying then, and air strikes were destroying civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools. And what about Raqqa? Almost no one cared about the fate of that city, which was basically obliterated.

Let us recall what happened in Raqqa. It is always useful, especially because people do not like hearing about it and would prefer to forget it. We recommend reading a publication put out by the international human rights organization Amnesty International on the events of two years ago. Its careful, painstaking work established that as a result of the thousands of indiscriminate air and artillery strikes by the so-called

coalition and its allies, more than 1,500 civilians died and more than 11,000 buildings and infrastructure facilities were destroyed. I recall that at the time our Western partners described the Raqqa operation as possibly the most precise military aerial campaign in history, acknowledging responsibility for only 159 deaths.

In general, it is time to stop using double standards for what is happening in Syria. For instance, we are hearing a lot of lectures about Rukban, even though all of the problems there are related to the fact that militants belonging to Maghawir Al-Thawra, with the connivance of the United States, are preventing internally displaced persons (IDPs) from leaving the camp voluntarily and are restricting their rights. Despite that, as of 15 May 12,000 people had left Rukban. We hope that our United States colleagues will change their unconstructive approach, or better yet, end their illegal occupation of that part of Syria's sovereign territory as quickly as possible. In any event, the occupying State is responsible for the population of the occupied territories under the terms of the Geneva Conventions. That is not a politicization of the Rukban issue, because the Geneva Conventions are the very foundation of international humanitarian law. In anticipation of possible comments on this, I should say that there is no fight against terrorism that justifies occupation.

In contrast to Rukban, we have heard none of the breast-beating and anxiety about the dire humanitarian situation in the IDP camp at Al-Hol in north-eastern Syria, which is not under the Syrian authorities' control. The camp is overcrowded, its residents are mainly women and children whose rights are being violated, and there is a disastrous lack of humanitarian assistance. Instead of working to establish a steady flow of humanitarian convoys from the areas controlled by Damascus, attempts are being made to consolidate deliveries through a non-transparent cross-border mechanism.

We categorically reject the accusations of violations of international humanitarian law. Neither the Syrian army nor the Russian aerospace forces is conducting hostilities against civilians or civilian infrastructure. Our target is the terrorists, which some of my colleagues prefer not to mention. We once again call on the Secretariat and the specialized United Nations agencies, including the World Health Organization, not to hasten to publicly spread unverified information about civilian casualties or damage to civilian infrastructure. The

information should come from reliable, non-politicized sources and must be thoroughly checked, including by ascertaining whether infrastructure that has supposedly been hit has been through a deconfliction process. While we are being fed information from so-called reliable sources, when we ask about those sources they categorically refuse to name them. Or is this once again about those heroic White Helmets?

The Syrian Government and Russia's representatives have always tried to prevent violence and resolve situations peacefully, when appropriate, even when illegal armed groups are involved. Peace has been restored in most of the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic through this type of negotiation. However, there is one obstructive factor in Idlib — the continuing aggressive actions of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists, which have provoked a serious escalation of tensions in the area. The militants continue to attack Government-held positions and shell nearby settlements, where the victims are both civilian and military Syrians. When we were told today about people being killed by rockets, for some reason those speakers were too embarrassed to mention that civilians in Aleppo and Hama are being killed by rockets fired by the terrorists of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. By the way, the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic has received actionable information confirmed by independent sources that the Al-Nusra Front terrorists are preparing yet another act of chemical provocation in the town of Saraqib with a view to subsequently blaming Damascus for it.

On 27 April, around 130 terrorists attacked a defensive position of Government forces near Al-Suqaylabiyah, in north-western Hama governorate. The Syrian army retaliated, but sustained losses of 26 killed and more than 40 injured. As a result of attacks by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists, 22 Syrian soldiers and four civilians were killed and about 100 wounded in the first half of May alone. Provocative actions by jihadists are also a serious threat to the security of the Russian air base at Hmeimim and the lives of our troops. The militants are actively using multiple-launch rocket systems and attack drones. At the end of April and beginning of May, for example, terrorists repeatedly shelled the air base with rockets, and 18 attack drones were destroyed on their approach to Hmeimim.

From 6 to 11 May, in response to such aggressive attacks and provocations by terrorists from Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, including their use of multiple-launch

rocket systems and attack drones, Government forces, supported by the Russian military, were obliged to undertake countermeasures to drive the terrorists out of the areas they were using to shell Hmeimim air base and the Syrian army positions. The strikes were aimed only at terrorist targets confirmed by intelligence. As a result, we were able to clear the areas with the highest concentration of terrorists in the southern part of the Idlib de-escalation zone. However, even after the Syrian army had stopped the militants' active hostilities, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists continued their acts of aggression. On 13 May, for instance, two detachments of illegal armed groups totalling about 650 fighters, with artillery support, 10 tanks and four armoured vehicles, attacked Syrian army positions in the area of Kafr Zita and Al-Suqaylabiyah, killing two Syrians and injuring nine.

Russia affirms its continuing commitment to the agreements on stabilization in Idlib, including the Russian-Turkish memorandum of understanding of 17 September 2018. Negotiations through our defence ministries are currently continuing between Russia and Turkey with a view to firmly stabilizing north-western Syria and neutralizing the terrorist threat coming from it. We want to emphasize specifically for the benefit of those who from time to time raise the alarm about what is going on in Idlib and about the actions of the Syrian army and its supporters that the memorandum makes no suggestion whatever that the terrorists should be protected. On the contrary, it affirms the memorandum participants' determination to fight them. We refuse to consider terrorists untouchable and will continue to fight them despite the complaints of some of our partners. In general, we are getting the impression that the terrorists in Idlib are simply being covered for and reserved for some nefarious purpose. The argument is based on the issue of the protection of civilians, whom we are just as concerned about as the rest of the Council and who have become hostage to the terrorists in Idlib.

Rather than pushing a narrow, self-serving agenda in Syria with the goal of regime change, we should unite our efforts to stabilize the situation in Syria and together eradicate terrorism, work on post-conflict restoration and assist in the return of refugees. Here I would like to push back on my American colleagues' accusation that Russia has destabilized the region. We have different views as to who destabilized the region and continues to do so. What is truly important right now is preventing any escalation in the Persian Gulf

as a result of the growing disputes between America and Iran. That would enable us to seriously advance a political settlement throughout the region. Without it, the region threatens to devolve into chaos.

Russia will continue to put its efforts into restoring peace to Syria, in its national capacity and as a permanent member of the Security Council and a member of the Astana troika. More has been done in the framework of the troika than in any other format to ensure de-escalation, reduce the terrorist threat, provide humanitarian assistance and prepare for the political process, which is especially important at this stage.

Mr. Sithole (South Africa): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria. We also thank Under-Secretaries-General Rosemary DiCarlo and Mark Lowcock for their briefings.

South Africa condemns the escalation of violence, particularly in north-west Syria, and the unnecessary loss of innocent lives. The attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, particularly the destruction of schools and health facilities, are unacceptable and must be strongly condemned. It is worrying to note that owing to the stark increase in violence, 16 humanitarian agencies have suspended their activities in the area. The people of Syria, particularly in the Idlib area, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. South Africa calls on all parties to uphold international humanitarian law and protect civilians, and would like to remind them of their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.

We urge the relevant parties to cease hostilities immediately and make the necessary provisions to enable the resumption of humanitarian activity. We wish also to emphasize that counter-terrorism actions cannot be undertaken at the expense of innocent civilian lives and that any such actions should be taken only within the parameters of international law. My delegation supports the Secretary-General's call for all parties to respect international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians, and further urges the parties to the September 2018 memorandum of understanding on the stabilization of the Idlib de-escalation area to adhere to the commitments contained in the memorandum.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would first like to thank Under-Secretaries-General DiCarlo and Lowcock for their briefings.

China is closely monitoring the situation in north-western Syria. Last September, Russia and Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding reiterating their determination to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, with a view to maintaining stability in north-western Syria. In the past few months, terrorist groups have tightened their grip on Idlib, and in the areas they control have threatened civilians' physical safety and launched frequent attacks on Russian military bases and Government-controlled areas, which have resulted in civilian casualties and seriously undermined regional security. The international community will not tolerate such reckless action on the part of terrorist forces. China supports the counterattacks in response to the terrorist groups' heinous acts. We believe that in order to bring about genuine improvement in the situation in Syria, it is imperative to address both the symptoms and root causes of the problem. Here I would like to make the following three points.

First, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), we should continue to promote a Syrian-led and -owned political process. The United Nations should continue to play its role as the main mediation channel and address the legitimate concerns of all parties, including the Syrian Government, in a balanced manner. China supports the joint efforts made to promote the establishment of the constitutional committee and the continued important role of the Astana process. In this regard, we support the work of the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria in consulting with the relevant members of the international community in Geneva, and we look forward to further progress in the consultations.

Secondly, it will be imperative to fight terrorism resolutely and safeguard the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria in order to restore security and stability across the country as soon as possible. Counter-terrorism is a major part of the solution to the Syrian problem. If terrorism is not eradicated, there can be no peace for the Syrian people and no security for the countries of the region. The international community must harmonize standards, crack down resolutely on all terrorist groups listed by the Council and continue to consolidate counter-terrorism achievements.

Thirdly, we must take into full account the humanitarian situation throughout Syria. We commend the United Nations and other relevant parties for their humanitarian operations there. Humanitarian

assistance should be provided to all regions and people in need, and we also support targeted humanitarian assistance measures in north-western Syria. In the long term, the international community should help Syria to restore its basic economic and social order and support the participation of its people in the development and building of their nation.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, China has provided the country with food, medical services, office supplies, public transportation, personnel training and other kinds of humanitarian assistance. In future, we will continue to provide such assistance and support to the best of our ability. China is ready to work with the other members of the Council to promote a political solution to the Syrian problem and jointly address serious counter-terrorism and humanitarian challenges.

Mr. Almunayekh (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): A few moments ago, the Permanent Representative of Belgium made a statement, on behalf of the co-penholders, regarding the humanitarian situation in Idlib and the neighbouring areas. I would now like to address a few points concerning the political process of the Syrian crisis.

The co-penholders — Belgium, Germany and Kuwait — called for the convening of this meeting today because we totally believe that the Security Council has a responsibility to address the accelerated events that are happening in Idlib and its environs. This meeting is a precautionary step to prevent the deterioration of the situation in Idlib. We agree with and support the four appeals made by the Secretary-General António Guterres as the Syrian crisis entered its ninth year. They are as follows.

First, he urged all parties to maintain the Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement in Idlib. Secondly, he called on the parties to respect international humanitarian law and protect human rights when carrying out a military operation. Thirdly, he insisted on the provision of humanitarian assistance as a necessity on a sustained basis. Fourthly, he urged increased international support in order to achieve a political solution that would meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, as well as for support for Mr. Geir Pedersen in the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

As stressed by the representative of Belgium on behalf of the co-penholders, we condemn the terrorist acts carried out by terrorist groups in Idlib. We also

affirm that the fight against terrorist groups cannot exempt any belligerent party from its obligations pursuant to international law, including respect for the principles of distinction, proportionality and the protection of civilians and civilian targets.

We once again condemn the deliberate attacks on populated areas and medical facilities throughout Syria. We call on all parties to respect the Council resolutions on infrastructure, particularly resolution 2286 (2016), on hospitals and health centres, and resolution 2427 (2018), on the protection of schools.

In conclusion, we underscore the importance of making progress on the constitutional committee, which must be balanced, credible and inclusive, bringing together all components of civil society. We reaffirm that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Syria. The only solution is a political one that realizes the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, and maintains the unity, independence and sovereignty of Syria.

Mr. Schulz (Germany): I too would like to start by thanking our briefers, Mr. Mark Lowcock and Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo for their comprehensive, albeit alarming briefings.

As the representative of Belgium has delivered a statement on behalf of the three co-penholders—Belgium, Kuwait and Germany—I will limit my remarks on this particular issue and simply say again that it is absolutely unacceptable that civilian infrastructure is being targeted. We supported the people of Hama and Idlib while they were under dual pressure from the regime and terrorist groups like Islamic State. It did not go unnoticed that the medical facilities that we supported have been reduced to rubble, leading to deaths, displacements and an even more dire lack of medical care for civilians.

We are unified in our rejection of terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. They are not covered by the Idlib agreement and their attacks endanger the well-being of the people they pretend to govern. However, the fight against terrorism, as so many have already said today, can in no way justify indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Counter-terrorism operations do not diminish the responsibility of parties to protect civilians, nor should they impede impartial humanitarian action.

Like my colleague from Kuwait, I would also like to say a few words on the broader political picture.

First of all, let me reiterate that we continue to fully support all the efforts of Special Envoy Geir Pedersen. We remain convinced that only a political solution on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the full implementation of all its elements can achieve sustainable peace and stability in Syria. The formation of a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee, with a clear mandate and transparent operating procedures under United Nations auspices, is overdue and urgently needed as a point of entry into a political transition process.

The second observation I would like to make is that the Syrian regime has to start to live up to its responsibilities. That is part and parcel of a future political solution. As long as basic human rights continue to be massively violated on a daily basis; as long as there is violence in Syria; as long as civilians are being killed, arbitrarily detained, tortured and denied access to humanitarian assistance; as long as we do not see accountability; and as long as there is no sustainable solution to the Syrian crisis, the Council will need to keep its attention on the situation in Syria. It is absolutely essential to create a safe, calm and neutral environment in which political change can take place.

That will require, first and foremost, a change in the behaviour of the Syrian regime. Violations of international humanitarian law and abuses of human rights must finally stop. It is the responsibility of the Syrian Government to provide credible security guarantees that would enable the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Syrians to their country. We emphasize again that it is first and foremost the Syrian regime's policies of repression, persecution and injustice that is keeping internally displaced persons and refugees from returning home. Regime-sanctioned arrests, torture and killings continue to create a climate of fear. Crimes and atrocities already committed on all sides during the Syrian conflict, including horrific accounts of murder, torture, sexual violence and crimes against children, must be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice.

Finally, before concluding, I would add that the Syrian regime continues to arbitrarily prevent humanitarian access from reaching more than a million people living in areas under its control. We urge the

Syrian regime to grant immediate, unimpeded and lasting humanitarian access to all people in need.

The President: I will now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Indonesia.

My delegation wishes to thank Under-Secretaries-General Mark Lowcock and Rosemary DiCarlo for their briefings.

Indonesia, like others, is very concerned about the escalation of violence in north-western Syria, which has resulted in human casualties, particularly in recent weeks. The deteriorating situation has affected the ability of many Syrians to enjoy their basic rights. Schools and health facilities have been damaged, and around 180,000 people have been displaced in the past 10 days alone. The very grim and desperate situation on the ground, as depicted by Under-Secretary-General Lowcock, represents a worsening situation and a looming humanitarian crisis. That is unacceptable. In this context, I would like to briefly highlight three points.

First, civilians should not and must not continue to be the targets and victims of military operations. Moreover, education facilities and medical infrastructure, such as hospitals, must not be subject to direct attacks of a military purpose. All parties should abide by international humanitarian law and faithfully implement resolution 2286 (2016). It is indeed frustrating to see that the current situation in Idlib is at a stage where a military solution is becoming more attractive than pursuing a peaceful resolution.

Secondly, the Council needs to continue reminding all relevant parties to recommit to the Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement. Indonesia also believes that it is crucial for the Astana guarantors and other countries with influence over the parties to the conflict to help prevent further escalation and to engage in a genuine dialogue that would yield concrete measures, with the aim of stabilizing the situation in north-western Syria. A genuine commitment of all parties to pursuing a political solution and reconciliation is needed now more than ever.

Thirdly, my delegation wishes to ensure that the current escalation will not overshadow or derail the progress of the ongoing political process that is being facilitated by Special Envoy Pedersen, in close consultation with all relevant parties. We would therefore like to reiterate our strong support for his work

and his priorities in advancing a political solution in Syria, based on the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015).

Indonesia is of the view that unless there is a durable political solution to the conflict, the humanitarian crisis will be increasingly difficult to resolve. In the meantime, it is important for all parties to step up their efforts to ensure that the humanitarian effort in Syria goes forward without hindrance. At the moment, taking an approach of naming and shaming is not the solution. It is clearly not going to take us anywhere, nor will it contribute to saving innocent Syrians on the ground. We must work together to find solutions. Civilians and refugees do not care about words but about deeds and actions to save their children. We on the Council should really be united in saving people's lives. The Syrian people have every right to live in peace and dignity and without fear.

In conclusion, we urge all the parties to cooperate fully in ensuring the protection of the millions of people in Idlib so as to contribute to stability on the ground at this perilous time. In this holy month of Ramadan, I make a humble appeal. Let there be restraint. Let there be respite so that all citizens in Idlib can break their fast without fear and with food on the table. Let there be peace.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

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

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset I would like to congratulate you, Mr. President, and your friendly country of Indonesia on your successful management of the work of the Security Council this month. Your presidency has taken the task entrusted to it of maintaining international peace and security and respecting the provisions of the Charter seriously, as your important statement showed. I wish you a happy month of Ramadan.

Contrary to the belief of some, we are not opposed to this open meeting, as it provides my country and others with an opportunity to speak the truth about what is happening in the city of Idlib, which is controlled by the terrorist organization Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. However, we have reservations about the systematically politicized approaches taken by some members of the Security Council, who call for such

meetings every time the Syrian Government and its allies take legitimate action to protect Syria's citizens from the acts of terrorist groups.

Those same States closed their eyes and kept silent with regard to the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the illegitimate United States alliance in association with militias such as the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces. They totally destroyed the city of Raqqa, killing and displacing its population, as was recently confirmed by Amnesty International, which found that the international coalition's attacks had resulted in the greatest recorded destruction of a city in modern history. They also committed horrible crimes in Deir ez-Zor governorate that resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and the displacement of tens of thousands more, especially in the area of Baghouz and, just a few days ago, in the village of Al-Shuhail. Besides that, tens of thousands of civilian Syrians have been held hostage as human shields in the Rukban camp.

The selective approach of some Council members is helping terrorist groups and obstructing the efforts of the Syrian State and its allies to protect the Syrian people and combat terrorism. They are mobilizing against the Syrian Government and its allies in order to raise the terrorist groups' morale and provide them with protection and political cover to continue their bloodshed and blackmail. It might be useful for all of us, when discussing the situation in the city of Idlib, to have a description of the actual situation there, which may be summarized as follows.

First, Idlib is a Syrian governorate. It is not in Germany, Belgium or Kuwait. It is therefore the Syrian State that is responsible for protecting it and its Syrian inhabitants from terrorism. It is the Security Council's responsibility to help the Syrian Government in that respect. Idlib covers an area of 6,097 square kilometres, 15 times larger than that of New York City's five boroughs. We are not talking here about caves in the Tora Bora mountains but about a vast territory in Syria occupied by terrorist gangs that the Council has described as a branch of Al-Qaida. Indeed, in Syria, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham means Al-Qaida.

Secondly, we all agree that the city of Idlib and some areas in its vicinity in north-eastern Syria are controlled by the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorist group, which is in fact the Al-Nusra Front, which the Security Council has included on its list of terrorist groups and

entities as an arm of Al-Qaida in Syria. It controls 85 per cent of Idlib.

Thirdly, that terrorist group has exploited the Turkish regime's disregard of its obligations regarding the de-escalation zone and under the Astana and Sochi agreements in order to seize control of Idlib and create a hotbed of terrorism as a way of blackmailing the Syrian Government. In response to the comments by the representative of Belgium on behalf of the penholders, I would like to point out that there have been no random attacks on Syrian civilians in Idlib. There are military operations being conducted by the Syrian army and its allies against a terrorist entity listed by the Security Council, aimed at liberating the civilian population of Idlib and saving them from being used as human shields by Al-Qaida in Syria. The terrorists who control Idlib would not have been able to blackmail millions of Syrians — as the representative of Belgium indicated — without the support of the Turkish authorities for that terrorist group and without their disregard of their commitments under the Astana and Sochi agreements.

Fourthly, that terrorist group has tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters in its ranks who were recruited and sent by countries well known to all of us, some of which are unfortunately members of the Council, with the full knowledge of their Governments. They were sent from all over the world to join terrorist organizations with multiple names and allegiances, such as Huras Al-Din, Jaish Al-Muhajireen Wal-Ansar, the East Turkestan Army and others, as various United Nations reports have corroborated. None of the names of those groups have anything at all to do with Syria. However, some would like to call them the moderate armed Syrian opposition.

Fifth, this terrorist group uses hundreds of thousands of civilians as human shields, commits the most heinous crimes against them and spreads death and destruction, as well as destroying civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, which it turned into military barracks and centres for detaining and torturing all those who reject their extremist takfiri ideologies and thinking. Even worse, those who sponsor it have created a criminal media arm for its support, namely, the White Helmets, which receives care and aid from its sponsors. Sixth, the crimes committed by this terrorist group are not limited to the areas under its control but include the neighbouring populated cities and villages, which were bombed and shelled with random rocket fire, resulting

in the killing of scores of civilian martyrs, most of whom are women and children, in the cities of Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, Muhradah, Al-Suqaylabiyah and others in peaceful Syrian regions. We did not hear anything from the humanitarian co-penholders in the Council regarding a call upon the Council to meet and discuss this inhumane and dangerous development. There should be just one legitimate question to ask, not three or five or six that we all must answer. It is a question that can reassure everyone within and outside the Security Council. It is as follows: when will the Governments of certain countries, members and non-members of the Security Council, stop supporting terrorism in Syria? My American, British and French colleagues have been commending the Turkish policy in north-western Syria. That alone denies credibility to everything they say.

Seventh, the de-escalation agreement in Idlib is a temporary arrangement. It cannot continue indefinitely. It resulted from the Astana agreement and is renewable for six months. Everyone should understand that upholding that agreement means that the Turkish regime must end its occupation of vast areas of Syrian territories. The Turkish regime must also honour its commitments to the Russian and Iranian guarantors and the host country, Kazakhstan. It must stop supporting terrorist groups in Idlib and cease its operations aimed at imposing Turkish identity and building a wall along the border south of the city of Manbij.

Against that backdrop, we believe that the question that should be asked is the following: what options are available to counter this terrorist threat? In order to further simplify the question, let us imagine the following scenarios. Let us imagine, for example, that an Al-Qaida-affiliated terrorist group with thousands of fighters takes over the city of Dortmund, Germany, commits heinous crimes against its inhabitants and attacks the cities of Düsseldorf, Bonn and Cologne with rockets and missiles. Let us imagine that a similar group takes over Antwerp, Belgium, and starts carrying out heinous crimes against its inhabitants and shelling Ghent and Brussels with rockets and missiles. Let us imagine that a third group takes over the city of Abdali, Kuwait, for example and commits heinous crimes against its inhabitants while attacking Bubiyan Island and the capital with rockets and missiles. Let us imagine that a similar fourth group takes over the city of Yonkers, north of New York, perpetrates serious crimes against its inhabitants and attacks Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens with rockets and missiles. Maybe

then we call on Mr. Lowcock to send humanitarian assistance to the Security Council in order to continue holding its meetings.

We never want to see those scenarios take place but, in the case of such a situation, what options would the Governments of those countries have to protect civilians? I believe the answer is simple. No Government will agree to surrender to terrorist threats. No country will agree to endanger the lives of civilians while waiting for the political machinations of some and the hypocrisy associated with humanitarian slogans. No country will allow its sovereign and constitutional rights to protect its territory and its citizens to be undermined. It is a right that is guaranteed by international law, the Charter of the United Nations and all Security Council counter-terrorism resolutions.

Putting an end to the suffering of the Syrians in Idlib means ending hypocrisy and politicization; ceasing to invest in terrorism; stopping to manipulate the fate of peoples; and adopting objective and logical approaches based on a profound knowledge of the realities and available alternatives. It would require a minimum of repatriating foreign terrorist fighters to their countries instead of stripping them of their nationality. Those countries should stop playing the immoral game of telling the Governments of Iraq and Syria to host the terrorists and once again suffer the consequences of their terrorism, which the two countries have already endured for many long years. My questions to the countries that offer us such advice is the following: are you ready to repatriate your citizens who are involved in terrorist acts in Syria? Are you ready to indicate which Governments recruited, funded and trained those terrorists as well as facilitated their transfer into Syria and enabled them to kill Syrians? Are you ready to do that?

We once again warn the members of the Council that the armed terrorist groups are determined to perform a great play to accuse the Syrian Government of using toxic chemical products in Idlib. They fabricate evidence and train some of their elements to pretend that they are suffering from the consequences of a chemical agent and to be filmed by well-known media networks and then accuse the Syrian Arab Republic of such acts, similar to what has happened on several occasions in the past.

In that regard, we have sent hundreds of letters to the Secretary-General, the President of the Security

Council and relevant United Nations counter-terrorism entities involved in the non-proliferation of chemical weapons. However, we are sure that some within the United Nations will once again not hesitate to adopt the rhetoric of armed terrorist groups and accuse the Syrian Government. Why? Simply because the agenda of some within the Organization make it incumbent upon them to become partners in blackmailing the Syrian Arab Republic and to target it along with its allies, which are combating terrorism on behalf of all States.

In conclusion, the continued trade in shedding the blood of Syrians and the suffering that they endure, which is not limited to a purely humanitarian issue, will not prevent the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, supported by its allies, from discharging its constitutional and legal responsibilities in order to combat terrorism and protect its citizens. The humanitarian issue is something, the political track is something else and combating terrorism is yet another thing.

The President: I now give the floor to the Permanent Representative of Turkey.

Mr. Sinirlioğlu (Turkey): I would like to thank Under-Secretaries-General Rosemary DiCarlo and Mark Lowcock for their briefings on the situation in Idlib. We express our appreciation and gratitude to all humanitarian workers for their tireless efforts. Those unsung heroes provide lifeline services to millions of Syrians in need.

Let me repeat what has been said many times in the Chamber: a large-scale military assault on Idlib would cause a major humanitarian catastrophe. So far, we have been able to avoid a major tragedy thanks to the Idlib memorandum of 17 September 2018. It ensured relative calm in the governorate. It is extremely important for the millions of people in Idlib that that remains the case. However, the significant increase in ceasefire violations by the regime, with their number exceeding 600 since the last days of April, is deeply alarming. We are faced with a disaster in the making. The recent aggression of the regime might displace an additional hundreds of thousands of people. It entails serious humanitarian and security risks for Turkey, the rest of Europe and beyond.

The civilian casualties caused by those indiscriminate attacks have surpassed more than 500 in number. There has been yet again an intense use of barrel bombs. The regime deliberately targets civilians,

schools and hospitals with complete disregard for human life. Some 243,000 people have already been displaced, and a trend of migration towards the north is on the rise.

On 4 May, an observation post of the Turkish armed forces was attacked and two of our personnel were injured. Such actions can in no way be justified as part of the fight against terrorism. No country appreciates the need to combat terrorism more than Turkey. However, innocent people cannot be sacrificed in the name of fighting terrorism. That will only create new hotbeds of terrorism and extremism.

The Idlib memorandum has also served the ultimate goal of accelerating the political process and finding a negotiated resolution to the crisis in Syria. It provides the oxygen for the political efforts. The recent belligerence of the regime risks disrupting the political process at a time when we are at the final stages of forming the constitutional committee.

We continue to coordinate with Russia to preserve the status of Idlib as a de-escalation area and end the regime's violations. President Erdoğan and President Putin are in close contact to discuss the measures to be taken to address the current situation on the ground. The Turkish and Russian Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Defence maintain an exchange of views on a regular basis. As a result of contacts at the highest level, a Turkish-Russian working group convened in Ankara in the past two days in order to bring the situation in the de-escalation zone of Idlib under control.

The rest of the international community must also make every effort to ensure that the regime respects the ceasefire. The regime has frequently committed crimes against humanity. Red lines have often been crossed. We cannot repeat the same mistake again. The consequences of inaction are immense. Shelling as well as ground offensives must stop immediately. A return to the status quo ante is essential.

We all agree that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Syria and that the only way to end the conflict is through a United Nations-mediated political process in line with resolution 2254 (2015). Turkey and neighbouring countries continue to bear the brunt of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, but our means and capabilities are not limitless. The Council is responsible for preventing a humanitarian catastrophe. It is time to take action. That requires unity, courage and resilience.

We cannot and should not leave the Syrian people to the mercy of the regime.

With regard to the statement delivered by the regime's representative, I do not consider him as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Therefore, I will not honour him with a response.

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

Mr. Takht Ravanchi (Islamic Republic of Iran): Along with other guarantors of the Astana format, the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to support keeping Idlib as a de-escalation area. That approach is based on a reality and a fundamental principle. There are a large number of civilians there whose lives must be saved.

At the same time, certain questions are in order. Can and should this situation continue indefinitely? Should the Government allow internationally designated terrorist groups to maintain their control over its territory. Should the international community allow such terrorist groups to take a large number of civilians as their hostages?

The answer is clear. The establishment of the Idlib de-escalation area was only a temporary measure, with the exclusive objective of protecting civilians, not providing terrorist groups with such a safe haven. It does not limit the right of the Syrian Government to fight Security Council-designated terrorists, which of course has to be carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law. Therefore, both defeating terrorists and releasing civilians is necessary.

The current situation in Idlib — in which the most dangerous terrorist groups are allowed to use more than 2 million civilians as human shields, continue their control over a large part of a sovereign State's territory and conduct their operations therefrom, attacking both military and civilian targets beyond that area — cannot and must not continue indefinitely. The persistence of that situation would enable the terrorists to kill more civilians. That is in contradiction with the objective of the Idlib de-escalation area's creation. We should be vigilant enough not to confuse the protection of civilians with the protection of terrorists. The continuation of the current state of affairs in Idlib would further interrupt the restoration of the Government's control over all its territory and securing the safety and security of all its citizens, prevent the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, delay the country's reconstruction

and hamper the political solution, all of which are inherently interlinked.

In conclusion, I would like to stress once again the need for full respect by all for the sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. As underlined in the joint statement by the guarantors on the international meeting on Syria in the Astana format held in Nur-Sultan on 25 and 26 April, no action, no matter by whom, should undermine those principles. In that context, the guarantors of the Astana format also rejected all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism. In that regard, the United States must therefore immediately end its illegal presence in parts of Syria.

With that in mind, the Syrian Government must be assisted in the formation of the constitutional committee, facilitated by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Pedersen, whose efforts we support. We encourage him to further strengthen his consultations with the Government of Syria.

As stated in the aforementioned joint statement, there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict, and the only option is to advance the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned and United Nations-facilitated political process. Ultimately, the right to determine the future of Syria belongs exclusively to the Syrians themselves. We must genuinely support the realization of that objective.

The President: The representative of the United Kingdom has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I apologize for taking the floor once again, but I do not think that we have heard an answer with regard to the hospitals. I want to return to that. We are very clear. We do not support terrorism or terrorist acts, and we agree with the representative of Germany that the attacks on Russian bases should be condemned. I also wanted to say, however, that the Al-Assad regime is not leading and has never led the fight against Da'esh. It is the Global Coalition that cleared Da'esh from Raqqa.

The Syrian Ambassador also talked about the Syrian regime only taking legal measures and having responsibility for protecting civilians in Idlib. I therefore ask once again: What is the answer concerning the hospitals? If only Russia and Syria are flying aeroplanes over Idlib, what is happening with regard to the targeting of hospitals? I believe that we need further information. We need to know if the hospitals

are being deliberately targeted, we need to know if the deconfliction mechanism is not working, and we need to know what is going to be done to stop the attacks on the hospitals. Where are the assurances to halt attacks on hospitals, health facilities and schools in areas in which ordinary people, not terrorists, live? What is being done to stop those attacks?

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

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Some years ago, Aleppo had a very advanced eye hospital called Al-Kindi, one of the best in the Middle East. Some Western Governments claimed that it had been bombed by the Government of Syria. At the time, we allowed the representative of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Syria to visit it and to produce a WHO report for all concerned on the reality of the Al-Kindi hospital's situation. As Council members may recall, at that time eastern Aleppo was still under the control of terrorists. The WHO representative visited the hospital under a special arrangement with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. When he reported back to us and to the WHO, he said there was no Al-Kindi hospital. He said that he entered a building that was full of terrorists, with no signs of any kind that it was a medical hospital. By the way, the terrorist entity that was occupying Al-Kindi was the same Al-Nusra Front that has been mentioned today and is currently in Idlib. That was the testimony of the United Nations representative who visited Al-Kindi at the time.

That episode was repeated many times. My colleague Mr. Nebenzia mentioned how hospitals in the city of Raqqa have been destroyed by United States planes, something that no one talks about, not even the penholders for humanitarian, social and philosophical affairs. Dozens of hospitals in Raqqa have been razed to the ground. However, no one has a problem with that because it was the Americans who did it. Furthermore, the British Government sponsored the creation of another terrorist group, the so-called White Helmets, whose main task was to fabricate scenes of chemical attacks in Syria to provide a reason for American, British or French — or tripartite, as they sometimes like to term it — acts of military aggression against my country.

I would like to point out, for the information of our newer colleagues, who may be hearing about the

chemical issue for the first time, that the first chemical attack in Syria occurred in March 2013 on the small village of Khan Al-Assal in rural Aleppo governorate. As a result, 18 Syrian soldiers and a number of civilians were killed. I was instructed by my capital a few hours after the attack to inform then-Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and ask him to provide assistance in verifying whether an attack using a chemical weapon had taken place, and by whom. That was in 2013. Mr. Ban is still alive, so anyone here can check with him about it. He asked me to give him some time. He called me at home a few hours later, at 11 p.m., and told me to inform my Government that he was ready to assist in verifying whether a chemical substance had been used in the attack on Khan Al-Assal. However, with regard to identifying the perpetrator, he apologized, saying that as Secretary-General of the United Nations, he could not assist in the matter. The reason was that the people he was consulting with, both on the Council and beyond, knew who had launched the attack and did not want to reveal the identity of those who were using chemical weapons at the time.

We agreed to cooperate fully with the Secretary-General and to let him help us verify whether or not a chemical weapon had been used in Khan Al-Assal. We hoped that the assistance would be forthcoming as soon as possible, given that the use of chemical materials involves factors such as the so-called chain of custody, evaporation and wind. Every feature of a chemical attack could disappear within a matter of hours or days. We therefore asked the Secretary-General, in the language of Shakespeare, to provide assistance “as soon as possible”. I would like to inform the British Ambassador that it took the Secretary-General four months and 11 days to send Mr. Sellström. “As soon as possible” for the Secretary-General meant four months and 11 days to send Mr. Sellström to investigate what happened in Khan Al-Assal. When Mr. Sellström reached Damascus and was on his way to Aleppo, incidentally, paradoxically and incredibly another chemical attack also took place, this time in Ghouta, in Damascus. The Secretary-General then instructed Mr. Sellström to go, not to Khan Al-Assal, but to Ghouta.

The crux of the story is that what took place in Khan Al-Assal in March 2013 has still not been investigated nor the perpetrators identified, although everyone knows the identity of the people who carried out the attack. We have sent the Council dozens of messages

that include full details of the issue and that identify the people who used the chemical weapon, as well as how the substance was transported, first from Libya to Istanbul and then across the Syrian border to Aleppo.

I would like to ask Council members to stop asking questions that can only cause embarrassment, because we have answers that will embarrass every one of them. And we actually have more information than that.

The President: The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russia Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): The representative of the United Kingdom asked a question that implied that the representatives of Syria and Russia should respond to it. She was absent from the Chamber when I made my statement, for what I know was a perfectly good reason. I want to let her know that we put the same question to the representative of the World Health Organization (WHO), for example, asking for information about the medical infrastructure that had been destroyed and the identity of the source that informed him about it. Our request was met with a categorical refusal and the excuse that it could endanger the people who had provided the information. We are therefore no less interested than our British colleague in this question.

By the way, she also mentioned in connection with the surgical — or allegedly non-surgical — strikes that

the Russian Aerospace Forces allegedly conducted on targets in Idlib governorate that she would not want to receive medical care in Russia. I certainly do not wish for her to need any kind of medical care, heaven forbid, but I want her to know that there are good medical facilities in Russia, should she ever need them. So if the WHO or any other United Nations entity shares information with her on the sources we have been discussing today and she could see her way to sharing it with us, we would be extremely grateful.

The President: The representative of the United Kingdom has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I will be really brief. I just want to say one thing to my colleague the Russian Ambassador. I thank him for his queries about the World Health Organization. That suggests to me that we should get together with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and others to really drill down into what the problem is with deconfliction and the coordinates, because it obviously is a problem.

But I want to say to the representative of Syria that first, I am not embarrassed, and secondly, I did not hear the assurances that I was asking for. I want to state for the record that I did not get the assurances that I was asking for about the civilians in Idlib and protection from air strikes.

The meeting rose at noon.