



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

8589th meeting
 Tuesday, 30 July 2019, 10 a.m.
 New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru)

Members:

Belgium	Mrs. Van Vlierberge
China	Mr. Wu Haitao
Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Moriko
Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
France	Mr. De Rivière
Germany	Mr. Schulz
Indonesia	Mr. Syihab
Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
Poland	Ms. Wronecka
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
South Africa	Ms. Mogashoa
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
United States of America	Ms. Norman-Chalet

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator; and Ms. Susannah Sirkin, Director for International Policy and Partnerships, Physicians for Human Rights.

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

I give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: Last Friday, 26 July, I spoke via a video link to Dr. Mohammed Abrash, a surgeon at Idlib Central Hospital. Trained in Aleppo, he has been a physician for 28 years, and since 2011 he has been in Idlib. Dr. Abrash told me he is afraid. He has a room at the top of the building. He says the lower floors and basement are the safest places, so that is where the patients are. A few days before I spoke to him, a bomb landing 50 metres away blew out all the glass and windows of his room. A day or so before that, another bomb had hit a gynaecological facility 200 metres away. Dr. Abrash's hospital is deconflicted under the United Nations system. Everyone knows where it is.

I spoke to Dr. Abrash because two days prior, on 24 July, three young sisters were taken to his hospital by emergency ambulance. Their house had been hit by a bomb dropped by a war plane. Dalia, the 9-year-old, lay on the bed behind Dr. Abrash, as we spoke while he tended to her.

Everyone has seen the pictures of her two younger sisters, because they were printed on the front pages of newspapers all across the world — Rawan, a 3-year-old, buried by rubble, covered in dust and clinging on to the T-shirt of her baby sister, Tuka, in a desperate effort to stop her from falling to her death off the precipice that the bomb had made of the upper storeys of their home. Their mother, just 25-years old, and 5-year-old sister Reham were killed in the attack. Rawan, that brave little three-year-old, died of her injuries the day after

the attack. She had saved her baby sister, who has now been discharged from Dr. Abrash's hospital.

For more than 90 days now, bombing and shelling by the Government of Syria, backed by the Russian Federation, has produced carnage in the so-called de-escalation zone of Idlib. On 26 July, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights identified at least 450 civilians who had been killed since late April, including more than 100 in the past two weeks alone. We have seen continued reports of attacks killing civilians, including further attacks in the town of those little girls. Many hundreds more have been injured. More than 440,000 have been displaced. Dozens of civilians have also been killed or injured as a result of shelling by Security Council listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and the non-State armed groups associated with it.

My office and I have now briefed Council members on the situation seven times since 29 April when the current onslaught started. Members will all have seen the statement of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued on 26 July. Let me quote from it.

“Despite repeated calls by the United Nations to respect the principle of precaution and distinction in their conduct of hostilities, this latest relentless campaign of air strikes by the Government and its allies has continued to hit medical facilities, schools and other civilian infrastructure, such as markets and bakeries. These are civilian objects, and it seems highly unlikely, given the persistent pattern of such attacks, that they are all being hit by accident.”

She emphasized,

“Intentional attacks against civilians are war crimes, and those who have ordered them or carried them out are criminally responsible for their actions”.

I last briefed the Council at its closed meeting on 18 July. I said then that I would respond today to a number of questions that Council members asked me, first, about the information sources we use to determine what is going on; secondly, an update on the de-confliction system; thirdly, about the letter sent to you, Mr. President, and the Secretary General on 16 July by the Permanent Representative of Syria (S/2019/572) and, fourthly, whether we would pass on to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism

to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic the information we hold about attacks on civilians and civilian objects.

First, with regard to information sources, many Council members provide us with information, which we study carefully. Information that I provide to the Council is information that is from direct or verified sources, triangulated, reviewed and confirmed. Our teams on the ground tell us what they see. Our partners, with whom we have worked sometimes for many years and with whom many of the countries represented here in the Council also work, provide information. Testimony comes from those closest to the source who are assessed by the United Nations as credible. We use imagery, including satellite imagery, or geotagged and time stamped pictures of medical facilities that have been analysed and assessed by the United Nations. We see videos of explosions, destroyed buildings, scorched bodies and screaming children. We triangulate all our information.

There are many other sources of information. Media organizations report extensively on what is happening. Members have all seen their reports and footage. There is a great deal of satellite imagery illustrating the impact of the fighting on towns and villages in southern Idlib over the past three months. If, for example, we compare satellite photos of Kafr Nabutha, a town in southern Idlib, taken at the end of April and then again at the end of June, which is what analysts at the Operational Satellite Applications Programme of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research — the United Nations body with capacity in that area — have done, what we see is a level of destruction consistent with a bombing campaign aimed at a scorched-earth policy. Almost every building was destroyed in a three-month period. Such satellite imagery has shown 17 entire villages almost completely destroyed and emptied.

Then there is information from organizations delivering humanitarian assistance, including United Nations agencies, such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund and others, and the many humanitarian partners they finance. Those organizations are all financed by the Member States on a voluntary basis. Members require them to provide information on how they are spending

Members' money as a basis for financing them. Some Members hire other independent bodies to double check that what the delivery organizations tell them is true. Those organizations have staff totalling thousands of people, most of them Syrians, and many of them like Dr. Abrash. Members can talk to them, too, just as I have done.

Then, of course, there is the testimony of the people of Idlib themselves. I spoke yesterday by video link to two groups of displaced people in different parts of Idlib. I asked them what was happening where they were. They said, "We are being bombed every day by the Russians and the regime". I asked them what they needed. They said, "We just want the bombing to stop".

"Do you feel safe?"

"No. We are afraid."

"What is your hope for the future?"

"We just want to live in peace."

We know there are people from the Security Council listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in Idlib who make daily life there difficult for ordinary people, but we also know that estimates suggest there are about 100 civilians for every fighter. Do the answers from the people I spoke to yesterday sound like the words of terrorists? I do not think so, especially because the people to whom I spoke ranged in age from 8 years old to 12 years old. They are children — little boys and girls. There are a million children just like them in that part of Syria, many forced to flee with their families from elsewhere in the country. I asked if any of them go to school. "No. It is not safe. They hit our schools."

There is no shortage of information about Idlib. We all know exactly what has been happening over the past three months.

Secondly, I was again asked for information on the de-confliction system. Through that system, humanitarian agencies, mainly non-governmental organizations provide information to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to identify static civilian locations or humanitarian movements. The United Nations then shares the coordinates with the international coalition forces, the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation.

When there is an incident on a de-conflicted site, we notify the parties and request that an investigation be undertaken. As I said to the Council last week, whether

the information provided through the de-confliction system is being used by the parties to protect civilian facilities from attack or to target them for attack is an extremely important question. As members know, I have asked the Russian Federation for clarification of what it does with the information we give it. I continue to hope to receive further clarification.

We have also sent notes verbales to parties to the conflict in respect of six different attacks in north-west Syria in 2019 in relation to de-conflicted locations or movements. While we have received a formal response from Turkey, we have not received one from the Russian Federation.

In spite of our efforts to work with parties to the conflict to prevent attacks on civilian objects and humanitarian workers, I have come to the conclusion that, in the current environment, de-confliction is not proving to be effective in helping to protect those who utilize the system. I have asked my team to meet again with the humanitarian organizations that would like their activities to be de-conflicted to update them on the current situation and again determine whether or not we should continue to provide information to the parties on new sites or humanitarian movements.

Thirdly, I have now seen the letter of 16 July from the Syrian authorities (see S/2019/572), which I was asked about when I last briefed the Council (see S/PV.8561). As members know, the letter says that 119 hospitals in Idlib governorate have been taken over by terrorist groups, no longer serve their original purpose and cannot be considered hospitals, health-care centres or even civilian objects.

Few of the facilities referred to in the letter are named, but Maarat Al-Numan Hospital is among those that are. According to the United Nations-led health cluster, it has been functioning as a hospital since December 2014. The current operating partner, helped by the United Nations, has been supporting the hospital since April 2015, and it is still supporting it today. Another facility that is named is Ibn Sina Hospital, where the basement floors were rehabilitated with funds from the United Nations and other donors and which has been in operation since April.

The letter also says that there is no ambulance network left in existence in Idlib. Members of the Council have all in recent days seen footage and photos of ambulances in Idlib, including one used to take those three little girls I talked about earlier, Rawan, Tuka

and Dalia, to be treated by Dr. Abrash. The United Nations continues to support organizations operating ambulance systems in Idlib. As members are aware, medical facilities and transports are entitled to special protection under international humanitarian law, requiring steps to spare them even if they are being used for military purposes.

Fourthly, on the question of whether we will pass on relevant information that we hold to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, in order to support investigations into the potential violations we are seeing, the answer is yes, we will do that, subject only to the proviso that those giving us sensitive information consent to it being shared.

Between January and May this year, more than 6 million people in Syria were provided with humanitarian assistance with financing provided by donors to allow us to implement the United Nations humanitarian response plan. An average of 2.9 million people were given some form of help every month. The humanitarian response plan is needs-based. Eighty-five per cent of all assistance provided reached areas of high-severity need — areas where multiple, urgent needs have converged and require a systematic and sustained response. There is also a response in areas of lower severity, including for life-saving activities, such as vaccination campaigns and nutrition screening.

Some recent reports have claimed that United Nations humanitarian assistance reaches only those in areas not controlled by the Government. That is untrue. In fact, most of those reached with United Nations assistance are in areas controlled by the Government of Syria. Access to the estimated 1.1 million people in need living in areas that changed control in 2018 continues to improve. In southern Syria, for example, half a million people in need have been reached at least once with some form of humanitarian assistance over the past five months, despite increased insecurity in recent months. Significant gaps in access still remain across many of those areas. Eastern Ghouta, for example, remains heavily dependent upon water trucking more than a year after changes in control. I also remain concerned for those 24,000 people remaining in Rukban, and I call again for access to reach them.

In the north-east, 734,000 people also receive assistance on a monthly basis, including 70,000 civilians currently in Al-Hol camp. Humanitarian agencies have significantly scaled up their response to meet needs in Al-Hol, opening three field hospitals in the past month. I nevertheless remain extremely concerned about people there. I call again on all Member States to repatriate their civilians and take all the necessary steps to avoid statelessness. I also call on all Member States to de-escalate growing tensions along the borders in the north-east and avoid any actions that might cause further displacement, casualties and suffering.

In addition, humanitarian agencies have significantly scaled up cross-border operations authorized under resolution 2165 (2014), particularly for those who have fled to the northern part of Idlib during the current fighting. This month, cross-border aid aims to reach some 1.2 million people with food assistance. In the current circumstances, there is no other way to provide adequate support to the 3 million civilians who are in the area.

I am not sure that I have told the Council anything today that is different from what all those present already know. Many people have told the Council what is happening in Idlib for many months now. I asked Dr. Abrash and the children that I spoke to yesterday if they had a message for the Council. They do, and it is “[w]e are afraid. Please help us. Make it stop.”

The Security Council has ignored all the previous pleas it has heard. The Council knows what is happening, and it has done nothing for 90 days, as the carnage continues in front of its eyes. Are members of the Council again going to shrug their shoulders, as Michelle Bachelet said? Or are they going to listen to the children of Idlib, and do something about it?

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

I now give the floor Ms. Sirkin.

Ms. Sirkin: I thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to address the Security Council regarding attacks on health facilities and personnel and their impact on civilians in Syria. Under-Secretary-General Lowcock just provided insight into the horrific humanitarian crisis taking place in north-west Syria as we speak here today.

My name is Susannah Sirkin, and I am the Director of Policy at Physicians for Human Rights, which is

an international non-governmental organization that brings the expertise of science and medicine to the defence of human rights. Our researchers at Physicians for Human Rights have been rigorously corroborating, documenting and reporting on violations in the Syrian conflict for the past eight years.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the ongoing assault on health-care facilities and personnel has been a defining factor and a deliberate, inhumane and illegal strategy of war. When hospitals are destroyed, the loss is far greater than the buildings. When medical workers are killed, the human toll is not just their lives but also the exponential number of people who suffer and die without medical treatment. Our years of meticulously gathered documentation lay bare the blatant disregard for civilian life in the Syria conflict, as revealed by the Syrian Government’s repeated attacks since 2011 on health facilities and personnel. The numbers I am about to share with the Council are an undercounting, because we apply a conservative methodology.

From March 2011 through July 2019, Physicians for Human Rights corroborated 578 attacks on at least 350 separate facilities, and we documented the killing of 890 medical personnel. Five hundred and twenty one of those attacks — 91 per cent — were perpetrated by the Syrian Government and allied forces — 297 by Syrian Government forces and 224 by either Russian or Syrian Government forces.

Each of the attacks on a functioning health facility is a war crime. Taken together, those assaults constitute crimes against humanity. The widespread and systematic destruction of health facilities and the killing of hundreds of doctors, nurses, pharmacists and paramedics by Syria and its Russian allies has the apparent aim to break people’s spirits, as one Syrian doctor put it in the powerful new documentary *For Sama*, which I hope all members of the Council will have the chance to see, if they have not already.

That repeated tactic of terror turns places of safety and life into danger zones and death traps. For years, the Secretary-General has routinely shared those data with the Security Council. They have been publicized to the world again and again. Yet, appallingly, those crimes continue to be committed with utter impunity.

In Aleppo, Physicians for Human Rights has documented 161 attacks on health-care facilities, with 54 in 2016 alone. Hospitals attacked then by Syria with

its Russian allies forced tens of thousands of civilians into flight and literally killed patients who were stripped of life-saving care. And now, three years later, the world is watching — silently — the same escalation of brutality in Idlib and north-western Syria, which could result in the worst humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first Century.

On 29 April, as we just heard, the Syrian Government and its Russian ally started their military escalation targeting Idlib and northern Hamah. Since then, Physicians for Human Rights has received reports of 46 attacks on health-care facilities, and so far, using its rigorous methodology, we have confirmed 16 of them and are still counting.

From May to 15 July, the number of newly internally displaced persons who are trapped in this so-called demilitarized area has reached close to 500,000, bringing the total there to at least 1.3 million. There are very likely more of them. Many of the families now in Idlib have already been displaced — four, five or more times — throughout the relentless waves of violence in the Syrian conflict. People in Idlib today, as we speak, have nowhere else to go.

Many of the health-care facilities in that area have been forced out of service, but — shockingly — we see that agreements coordinated by the United Nations to notify all parties as to the locations of health-care facilities, which are intended as a strategy to protect them — as we just heard from Under-Secretary General Lowcock — have been violated again and again. The Syrian and Russian Governments know the exact location of most health-care facilities, and yet they continue targeting them.

The courageous remaining medical workers are providing life-saving care while being bombed, and doctors tell us that hospitals, which should be the safest places in Idlib, are the exact opposite. They are targets. At least 14 facilities have been hit, according to the Syrian American Medical Society, despite sharing their coordinates with belligerents through the so-called deconfliction mechanism of Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which, we just heard, is failing.

Physicians for Human Rights has documented attacks, for example, those of 10 July on the Saraqeb Primay health-care centre and the Maarat Al-Numan central hospital — which, as we just heard, has been supported by the United Nations and continues to

function as a hospital despite attacks. Both facilities had shared their coordinates. Three surgical units were attacked on the same day in early May. And the list goes on.

In 2016 when the Council adopted resolution 2286 (2016), on protecting health care in conflict, then-Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated:

“[w]hen so-called surgical strikes end up hitting surgical wards, something is deeply wrong;

“[e]ven wars have rules;

“[t]he Council and Member States must do more than condemn such attacks. They must use every ounce of influence to press parties to respect their obligations” (*S/PV.7685, p. 3*).

The Council’s current collective inaction is a clear derogation of its responsibility to protect. Governments failed to heed the warnings of this criminal strategy of war that has devastated all manner of infrastructure, community and culture. Civilians in Syria have been let down by the Security Council’s failure to act, by individual Governments that were in positions to stop the carnage, as well as — sadly — by United Nations agencies hamstrung by rules that have enabled the perpetrators to flout the most basic humanitarian agreements with zero consequence.

We are calling on Syria and Russia to immediately stop attacks on hospitals and other vital civilian infrastructure. We are adding to the call of those children. And we are calling on all parties to the conflict to cease violence against civilians. We are urging the Secretary-General to launch an immediate investigation into attacks on health-care facilities and personnel in Idlib, northern Hamah and western Aleppo, and investigate the failure of the deconfliction mechanism. All parties must cooperate fully and ensure unimpeded access to investigators.

We call on all Governments, everyone in this Chamber and people of conscience everywhere to do everything in their power to end the slaughter and protect the civilians cornered in Syria. The continued failure of the Security Council to end impunity for those crimes is a blight on the credibility of this organ to carry out its core mandate. Continued inaction sends a message of abandonment and erosion of humanitarian law, not only to those in Syria but to all people subjected to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

I thank Council members for the opportunity to address them today. I would like to add that we at Physicians for Human Rights pay special tribute to health professionals, to those still alive and providing care under fire, to those who were forced to flee and to all those who gave up their lives, for their bravery and commitment to save lives.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Ms. Sirkin for her briefing.

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

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait): I deliver this statement on behalf of the three co-penholders, namely, Belgium, Germany and Kuwait.

I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and Ms. Susannah Sirkin for their briefings, as well as to express our gratitude, deep respect and appreciation to all humanitarian and medical workers throughout Syria, especially those in the very challenging and dangerous environment of north-western Syria.

We heard once again today from the United Nations about the horrors that civilians are facing in north-western Syria — an area that has faced an ongoing military campaign for the past three months. According to the United Nations, hundreds of people have been killed as a result of the latest air strikes. Other reports also state that more children have been killed in the past four weeks in Idlib than in all of 2018.

Hospitals, schools and markets have been deliberately targeted and destroyed by air strikes. Much of that civilian infrastructure was deconflicted, which means that their coordinates were known to the parties. They knew, and they know, what they are doing. Such attacks on deconflicted civilian infrastructure are simply unacceptable and have to stop immediately.

The recent attacks on health-care facilities and markets in Maarat Al-Numan resulting in the death of many civilians are alarming. As co-penholders, we strongly condemn those air strikes deliberately targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure and consequently severely impacting civilians' lives and the humanitarian response in north-western Syria.

We reaffirm that all parties must take all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, as well as humanitarian workers, who were also

directly targeted in the recent attacks, in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. We also call on the parties to the conflict to respect Security Council resolutions pertaining to civilian infrastructure, in particular resolutions 2286 (2016) and 2427 (2018), on the protection of hospitals and schools, respectively.

We remind all parties that counter-terrorism efforts cannot absolve them of their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and the principles of distinction, precaution and proportionality. We reiterate our call for the sustained implementation of the ceasefire arrangements of the Russia-Turkey memorandum of understanding of September 2018. We also reiterate our call for a nationwide cessation of hostilities, in accordance with resolution 2401 (2018). Once again, we reaffirm that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria.

We, the penholders, believe that the Council has a responsibility towards the people of Syria, particularly those living in and around Idlib. We call for the protection of the 3 million civilians living in that area, 1 million of whom are children. That is why, time and time again over the past three months, we have called for meeting after meeting on the situation in north-western Syria, and initiated several draft statements on this military escalation and its humanitarian impact. Unfortunately, the Council has not been able to unite around such initiatives. Nevertheless, we will not tire.

We recall that the number of displaced persons in north-western Syria has almost tripled since we, the penholders, first called for a meeting in early May on the impact of this military escalation. The number of people displaced has risen from 176,000 people at that time to 440,000 today. One cannot help but ponder whether the inaction of the Council is partly to blame for the dramatic increase in the number of displaced and what, if anything, we could have done differently. That is also why we will continue to draw attention to the events unfolding in north-western Syria. The Council cannot continue to stand by and watch Idlib turn into the worst humanitarian catastrophe of the twenty-first century, as Mr. Lowcock has warned us several times. It is time we heard his call and acted upon it.

The situation in the Rukban camp is desperate. The United Nations and its partners must be able to provide assistance to those remaining in the camp. Inhabitants

should be able to make an informed choice on whether or not to leave the camp in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner. For those who are willing to leave the camp, key protection standards must be in place. In the Al-Hol camp, the situation remains deeply concerning for the 70,000 people there, 90 per cent of whom are women and children facing protection concerns. Improved humanitarian access is needed for the population of the camp.

Syria and its people have witnessed some of the most serious crimes defined under international law. We echo the Secretary-General's call in his statement of 11 July that the perpetrators of serious violations of international humanitarian law must be held accountable. There can be no lasting peace in Syria without justice and accountability. We stand firm in our commitment to fighting impunity. In this context, we renew our support for the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

With regard to the return of refugees, our position remains unchanged. All returns must be safe, voluntary and dignified.

Tens of thousands of Syrians remain detained, missing or unaccounted for. Last month, the Council adopted resolution 2474 (2019), the first resolution of the Council on missing persons in armed conflict. This resolution is particularly relevant to the situation in Syria today. The families of those The situation in the Middle East detained or missing deserve to know the fate of their loved ones, and we call for tangible progress on this issue.

As for humanitarian access, we would like to emphasize that it must be provided in an unconditional, safe, timely, unhindered and sustained manner. We remind all parties to the conflict of resolution 2449 (2018), on humanitarian access and cross-border assistance, which calls upon all parties to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2019. It is high time for all parties to the conflict to live up to this obligation and to do more to ensure sustained quality access to all in need throughout Syria.

Finally, we reiterate our full support for Special Envoy Pedersen in his efforts to reach an inclusive

and credible political solution in Syria on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). It will also be conducive to a sustainable, long-term improvement of the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Ms. Norman-Chalet (United States): The United States condemns in the strongest possible terms the escalation of the Al-Assad regime and the Russian Federation's military operations in north-west Syria, which have had a devastating impact on Syrian civilians, medical workers, humanitarians and civilian infrastructure, with an increasingly deadly air and ground assault.

There is no denying that the humanitarian situation in Syria is growing more dangerous by the day. The number of civilians killed and injured is rising, and water facilities, schools and hospitals are targeted by regime and Russian forces. Despite the fact that the coordinates of these locations are shared with the Russian Federation through the United Nations deconfliction mechanism, specifically to prevent them from being hit, we have just heard devastating statistics from Under-Secretary-General Lowcock and Ms. Serkin, reminding us all of the grim facts on the ground that should compel us all to put an immediate end to this violence.

Over 440,000 people have already been internally displaced since the start of the offensive in April, and the grim reality is that there is simply nowhere else for the more than 3.5 million people in Idlib province to run in order to escape the next airstrike. That fact is well known to the Al-Assad regime and the Russian air force.

For the past three months, the United States has called on the Al-Assad regime and the Russian Federation to immediately stop their military campaign and their attacks on civilians and to cease military operations in Idlib, consistent with the Sochi agreement signed by Turkey and the Russian Federation in 2018. Similar calls from other Council partners and dire warnings from the Under-Secretary-General Lowcock and other senior United Nations officials that an offensive in Idlib would unleash the worst humanitarian crisis in Syria to date have all gone unheeded and ignored by Damascus and Moscow. On 22 July, it was with utter revulsion that the United States heard reports of yet more air strikes by the Al-Assad regime and the Russian air force on a

market in the city of Maarat Al-Numan, in Idlib, which killed at least 35 people and left little but rubble behind.

It is important that we be clear about the facts about the violence in Idlib and northern Hama. Russia and the Al-Assad regime are devastating civilian infrastructure and hitting medical facilities. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement on 26 July, these are civilian objects and it seems highly unlikely, given the persistent pattern of such attacks, that they are all being hit by accident. Indeed, when the Al-Assad regime and Russia repeatedly attack hospitals and other civilian objects — many of which, as the parties have been informed in advance, are sheltering vulnerable civilians — it is difficult to deny that the sustained pattern of strikes on markets, hospitals and bakeries is anything but a deliberate act.

The United States also condemns the killing and maiming of humanitarian actors, such as ambulance drivers, health workers and White Helmet volunteers by the Al-Assad regime and its allies' campaign. The United States will not waver in our support for the courageous work that White Helmets and all medical workers and humanitarians do in Syria every day. Doctors, nurses ambulance drivers and White Helmets are not terrorists and deserve our protection. The United States offers its condolences to the families, friends and colleagues of the three ambulance workers killed over the weekend and the four White Helmet volunteers — Amir Al-Bunni, Anas al-Dyab, Mahmoud Al-Ali and Zuhair Al-Rajou — recently killed as they attempted to save victims of the air strikes. The United States forcefully condemns those devastating impacts on civilians in the strongest possible terms and calls for an immediate end to ongoing hostilities. We urge the Al-Assad regime and its allies to immediately return to a ceasefire in the area and allow for unhindered access to address the humanitarian disaster created by the air strikes as outlined in resolution 2254 (2015) and numerous other Security Council resolutions.

We have said it before and must say it again: there is no military solution to this conflict. The latest offensive on Idlib has gained the regime and its allies nothing and serves only to further escalate and destabilize the region. We appreciate the participation of Susannah Sirkin from Physicians for Human Rights in today's briefing.

Accountability cannot be optional for the perpetrators of violence in Syria, in particular the

regime's latest attacks, which have hit known health facilities. The United States fully supports a full and independent investigation into attacks that have hit health facilities in north-west Syria and also continues to encourage United Nations humanitarian agencies to provide any data and information they have on reported attacks on health facilities to the International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic as well as to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, for further action and to ensure that those actions are appropriately documented.

The United States is also deeply concerned by United Nations reports that the military operations in north-west Syria are impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid to 3 million civilians in Idlib governorate. Those communities are deeply dependent upon United Nations cross-border aid. The United States calls on all Security Council members and our regional partners to ensure that the United Nations has the ability to freely implement cross-border aid deliveries throughout all agreed border crossings, in accordance with resolution 2449 (2018). There is no substitute for the United Nations cross-border operations, set forth in resolution 2449 (2018), through all four authorized border crossings, and it is particularly important now, given that we are witnessing a deteriorating humanitarian situation in southern Syria.

The United States also remains gravely concerned about the fate of the thousands of civilians in Rukban. Although as many as 17,000 people have voluntarily left the camp, according to United Nations estimates, as many as 24,000 people remain there and have systematically been denied aid because of bureaucratic delays by the regime and the Russian Federation since the last United Nations convoy reached the camp in February. The United States also strongly urges the Russian Federation to expedite and secure, on behalf of the Al-Assad regime, all the necessary regime approvals for a new United Nations assessment team and aid convoy to Rukban immediately.

The United States affirms the right of the internally displaced persons in Rukban to make their decisions to leave the camp voluntarily. However, it is important to recall that many who remain in Rukban are choosing to stay in the most difficult of humanitarian conditions because either they cannot afford to pay for their

own transportation out of the camp or, as was noted in the United Nations assessment in February, they do not wish to return to areas under the control of the Al-Assad regime out of fear of reprisal attacks, forced conscriptions, despite Russian-brokered deals to the contrary, and arbitrary detentions.

The plight of Syrian civilians arbitrarily detained by the Al-Assad regime is one humanitarian issue that is often overshadowed by the barbarity of the regime's military campaign in broad daylight, the continued forced-starvation siege of Rukban and the ongoing restrictions on United Nations access. There is both a humanitarian and a political imperative for advancing progress on improving transparency and access to regime prisons and securing the release of those Syrians arbitrarily detained by the regime, especially women, children and the elderly. Progress on detainee issues, as Special Envoy Geir Pedersen has said, could be a confidence-building measure to generate trust among the Syrian people, the Syrian-opposition representatives and the Al-Assad regime that will help create momentum towards a political solution. Accordingly, in the coming weeks, the United States intends to call for a Security Council briefing on the topic of detainees and missing persons in Syria in order to mobilize urgently needed action on this issue.

Finally, the reinvigoration of the political process in line with the resolution 2254 (2015) must start with a verifiable ceasefire across all of Syria, and in particular in Idlib and northern Hama. Until then, the United States will continue to apply pressure through all available means in order to isolate the regime and its allies.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I thank our two briefers today, Mark Lowcock and Susannah Sirkin.

I think we all feel that it is deeply frustrating that we come here month after month, but it is better that we come than we do not come. However harrowing it is, it is better that we hear what is happening in Idlib, than we do not hear what is happening there, and however difficult it is, it is better that than we let denial take hold. Indeed, we would like to act, but the responsibility for the fact that we do not act lies with just three States Members of the United Nations, one of them a member of the permanent five of the Security Council. What is happening in Idlib makes a mockery of permanent-five responsibilities.

Ahead of Astana, on 1 to 2 August, and with last week's political session cancelled, there is an opportunity today to get at the facts and ensure that crimes do not go unrecorded. We have heard from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and from Physicians for Human Rights about carnage on the ground, communities turned to rubble, children saving children and then dying in the attempt — all breaches of international humanitarian law — and High Commissioner for Human Rights Bachelet has made clear that those criminally responsible will be held accountable.

The Syrian and Russian units bombing Idlib ought to pause at that prospect. It might not come today, but justice will come. If I may borrow a very famous phrase and use it in a different context, the arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends towards justice. The units taking part in military action against hospitals and medical facilities and personnel need to heed that warning.

I have the number of questions today. I am used to the questions not being answered, but I am going to keep on asking them, because I think they go to the heart of what is happening. I would like to know what is being done by the protagonists, Syria and Russia, to protect civilians on the ground, notably, children. I would like to know how they know or claim to know where the terrorists are, given that we heard from OCHA that there are 100 civilians for every terrorist fighter. And I would like to know how their forces go about distinguishing between terrorists and civilians, given the overwhelming number of civilians.

I would also like to know what part of international humanitarian law they believe allows terrorists to be attacked with no regard to those civilians. I have read all the Geneva Conventions at the weekend and I cannot find a single line in the Conventions or the Protocol Additional thereto — by the way, Syria has not ratified the Additional Protocol — that justifies attacking civilians on the scale we are seeing in Idlib to get at terrorists. I would like to know in particular — you know, Mr. President, we had a briefing from a Russian military general at the other day (see S/PV.8561) — what the Russian and Syrian military doctrines and rules of engagement have to say about international humanitarian law and the principles of proportionality, distinction and neutrality in respect of Idlib. I would simply like to know what the Russian and Syrian rules of engagement are. I would very happy

to have the Russian general back if he can answer those questions.

I would also like to know what is Russia's and Syria's explanation as to why the deconfliction mechanism is not working and why hospitals and facilities that have given their coordinates are being hit. And I would like to know how the Syrian authorities can claim that these hospitals and facilities do not exist or have been decommissioned when the United Nations, Physicians for Human Rights and others have seen them and are in touch with their doctors. One has to ask, who is more likely to be believed, the United Nations or the protagonists on the ground? I hope that we can actually get some concrete answers today.

For the rest, I wanted to join those who so far have called for an investigation into United Nations de-conflicted sites. It is the utmost importance to establish clearly the circumstances of the attacks through a transparent and credible investigation. I welcome what the Under-Secretary-General said about the United Nations being able to give its information to the two United Nations mechanisms already in existence. I think that is very important.

I should also like to touch on the letter from the Syrian Permanent Representative dated 16 July (S/2019/572). Under international humanitarian law, just because a hospital or clinic has been "decommissioned" or "ransacked" does not mean it can be attacked with impunity. I have said before that if, and it is a big if, a hospital is being used as a military target, then the Geneva Conventions, the ones that the Syrians have ratified, require that warnings be given. No warnings are being given. The Syrian Permanent Representative's letter admits to attacks on hospitals. It is hard to deny that that is a war crime and deserves the utmost deep investigation, so that those units responsible, those military commanders responsible and the politicians who give them their instructions can be brought to justice.

A couple more words if I may. I agree with those speakers who are concerned about Rukban. We appeal to the authorities to let the convoys in. We also share those sentiments about the political process. There needs to be a credible and sustainable political process. The constitutional committee is but one step; many more steps need to be taken, and reconstruction assistance from ourselves and our partners will not be available in the absence of a credible political process.

And in the absence of reconstruction, Syria cannot be rehabilitated into the international community; I think that is an important point.

Lastly, if I may, the Charter requires us to act to save future generations from the scourge of war. What part of that is not understood by Syria and Russia in respect of Idlib today?

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China thanks Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing and also listened closely to the statement made by Director Sirkin. China has been closely watching the humanitarian developments in Syria and supports the United Nations and all relevant parties in their unremitting efforts to improve the situation in Syria.

The Syrian people yearn to see an end to the conflict as soon as possible so that they can return to a country of regained peace and order so as to rebuild their homes. China would like to make the following observations.

First, there is a need to work together to seek comprehensive and lasting solutions to the counter-terrorism and humanitarian issues in north-western Syria. Given the complex situation on the ground in Idlib, the parties should engage in dialogue to reach consensus. China supports Russia and Turkey in their continued implementation of the memorandum of understanding to realize de-confliction in Idlib. As Idlib is experiencing rampant terrorist activity, the international community should, in accordance with the relevant Council resolutions and international law, adopt a common standard in resolutely combating terrorist groups. China supports the United Nations and all relevant parties in continuing to scale up humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in north-western Syria.

Secondly, we must tackle in an adequate manner the humanitarian issues confronting all parts of Syria, especially IDP camps. Al-Hol and Rukban camps are facing humanitarian challenges owing to complex causes. The military hostilities in north-eastern Syria have led to the displacement of civilians, especially women and children, and made Al-Hol what it is today. Given the complex composition of the camp's population, it is important to devise a responsible, tailored solution for the settlement of its inhabitants. The vast majority of those living in Rukban camp want to go home. The international community should therefore, through coordinated actions, help them end their displacement.

Thirdly, there is a need to support the Syrian Government's social and economic reconstruction efforts in parts of the country where the security situation is relatively stable. The Syrian Government has been actively clearing explosive remnants of war, rebuilding infrastructure, restoring public services, promoting development and improving lives. These efforts deserve recognition. Economic sanctions have dealt a heavy blow to the Syrian people and do not help to improve the humanitarian situation across Syria. Enabling more and more Syrians to emerge from the shadow of war and lead peaceful, stable and orderly lives should be the common objective of the international community.

Humanitarian relief operations in Syria should fully respect the country's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and should be carried out in strict accordance with Council resolutions, the United Nations Guiding Principles on the Right to Humanitarian Assistance and the relevant provisions of international law. In this process, communication and coordination with the Syrian Government should be strengthened. Committing to a political settlement is a fundamental and realistic pathway to easing humanitarian situation in Syria.

China supports the role of the United Nations as the primary mediator in pushing the Syrian parties to abide by the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned principle and Council resolution 2254 (2015) and to seek a solution that accommodates the concerns of all sides. China takes note of the positive developments relating to consultations among the parties concerned on the setup of the constitutional committee. We look forward to the briefing to be delivered by Special Envoy Pedersen to Council members next month.

At the same time, we wish the next round of Astana talks every success.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would like to thank Mark and Ms. Sirkin for their briefings.

We reiterate the recognition of the Dominican Republic for humanitarian workers in Syria for the work they are doing for the people affected, at the risk of their own lives. We are concerned about access to humanitarian aid for more than 11 million people, half of whom are children, owing to the security situation.

Since the end of April, at least 400 people have died in Idlib, Hama and Aleppo governorates. In the last month alone, 33 children have lost their lives. Death caught all of them unawares in their homes, in schools, in hospitals, in camps for displaced persons or in the marketplace. There are now more than 400,000 displaced persons whose humanitarian needs are ever increasing. Forty attacks on health facilities have been recorded over the past three months. That is one attack every two and a half days.

All of this is cause for alarm and requires immediate action by the Council. We must not be silent witnesses to what some might call just another chapter in the history of Syria. No, the Council must mobilize to bring about the immediate cessation of attacks against civilians in Idlib and the rest of Syria.

We reiterate our conviction that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria. The immediate priority must be to protect the population and ensure their access to humanitarian assistance. We must replace fear, frustration and a lack of faith with the building of a common vision and a new future of sustainable peace. That begins with an inclusive, credible and sustainable political process for and by Syrians, facilitated by the United Nations and based on resolution 2254 (2015), whereby the Council is guarantor. All attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure must be investigated and its authors held accountable. In addition, we wish to see progress in the process of freeing those detained or kidnapped, as well as in finding missing persons.

(*spoke in English*)

The Dominican Republic might have little influence on the parties involved in this conflict. However, it is because of Syria's suffering population that I say this to the Council, on their behalf. I call upon everyone to exercise restraint. I call upon everyone to give peace a chance. I call upon everyone to alleviate the suffering, not to add even more. And I call upon everyone to protect civilians. Hostilities must stop, and they must stop now.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mark Lowcock and commend the outstanding work of his teams in responding to the humanitarian emergency in Syria. I would also like to thank the Policy Director of Physicians for Human Rights for her briefing and for the commitment of humanitarian and medical staff on the ground. The assessment made by our two briefers is

irrefutable — there is a humanitarian disaster taking place in north-west Syria. The lives of more than 3 million civilians, including 1 million children, are at stake. Beyond the emergency response, we must focus more than ever on three priorities.

The first is the restoration of the ceasefire in Idlib, which is an absolute imperative. France condemns in the strongest terms the strikes that continue to indiscriminately target civilians and civilian and humanitarian infrastructure. We call on the signatories to the ceasefire agreement — Turkey and Russia — to honour their commitments and ensure its effective implementation in north-west Syria with a view to establishing a nationwide ceasefire, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). Russia must apply the necessary pressure on the regime to avoid further violence, the primary victims of which are civilians. Fighting the terrorist groups listed by the United Nations is necessary, but that must never be used as an excuse for indiscriminate bombing, which only increases the risk of terrorism and, in particular, the risk of the scattering of jihadists. Moreover, I reiterate that France will be extremely firm and stands ready to react in the event of a new, confirmed use of chemical weapons.

Respect for international humanitarian law is binding on all and is not negotiable. That is the second priority. The parties to the conflict must assume their responsibilities to protect civilians, particularly the most vulnerable and humanitarian and medical personnel. The targeting of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools, including those that have been deconflicted, is an unacceptable violation of international humanitarian law. We call on the United Nations to investigate such incidents. The deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure constitutes a war crime and will not go unpunished.

Immediate, safe, secure, comprehensive, sustainable and unhindered humanitarian access to the entire Syrian territory must be guaranteed. That is the regime's primary responsibility. Humanitarian aid must be able to reach, as a matter of priority, those most in need — women, children, displaced persons and refugees. There is an urgent need for a new aid convoy to be immediately deployed to Rukban camp. We call upon those who have the means to do so to exert the necessary pressure on the regime to ensure such access in all areas under its control, in particular in the territories it reclaimed in 2018, in the south-west

and in eastern Ghouta. The findings of the Human Rights Watch report that documents the regime's obstruction and predatory humanitarian aid practices warrant a response. It is essential that the delivery of humanitarian aid not be arbitrarily impeded when supplied in accordance with the principles of neutrality, independence, humanity and impartiality. Here, too, the regime's supporters have a particular responsibility.

The third priority is the launching of a sustainable political process under the auspices of the United Nations, on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) in its entirety. The Council must be united in that objective. We fully support the Special Envoy's efforts in that regard. We welcome his ongoing efforts and reiterate our call for rapid progress on the political process. We call for a credible and balanced constitutional package, both in the composition of the committee and in its procedural rules. It is the sole responsibility of the Special Envoy to announce the formation of the committee and to convene it in Geneva. If the regime continues to impede it, it will be up to the Special Envoy to tell us when he considers that he has exhausted all possible avenues to reach agreement on the committee. It will then be the responsibility of the Council to decide how to proceed.

In parallel, we must now start preparing for the holding of free and transparent elections, under the supervision of the United Nations, and in which all Syrians, including refugees, will participate, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). To emerge from the Syrian tragedy, it is essential to give Syrians an opportunity to express themselves freely about the future of their country. That work must go hand in hand with the pursuit of confidence-building measures that can contribute to the establishment of a neutral and secure environment.

Without progress on those essential points, there is no reason for France and its partners to change their positions on reconstruction, the lifting of sanctions and normalization. The regime and its supporters are continuing to destroy infrastructure, particularly medical and educational facilities. They have already asked the international community to finance what they are currently destroying. That is out of the question. There can be no military solution to the Syrian crisis.

Mr. Moriko (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation thanks Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for his comprehensive

briefing on the latest developments in the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. We also thank Ms. Susannah Sirkin for her informative briefing.

Côte d'Ivoire once again welcomes the agreement establishing a demilitarized zone in Idlib, signed on 17 September 2018, between Russia and Turkey, which has made it possible to avoid the large-scale offensive so dreaded by the international community. Unfortunately, the agreement has only been partially respected, in some measure because of the refusal of armed groups to withdraw from the demilitarized zone. In addition, my country regrets that, since 29 April, there has been a resumption of fighting in Idlib governorate, which has further exacerbated the already precarious conditions of approximately 3 million people.

According to estimates from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the new outbreak of violence has claimed many lives and led to the displacement of more than 400,000 people, while approximately 11.7 million displaced persons will need urgent assistance, including 5 million who face extreme hardship. The humanitarian situation has become increasingly worrisome, given the recurring attacks over the past few months on vital civilian infrastructure in north-western Syria, in particular health facilities and schools, as well as water treatment plants. In that regard, Côte d'Ivoire again calls on the parties to the conflict to put an immediate end to hostilities and to strictly respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. We encourage them in particular to take all measures necessary to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.

With regard to the serious plight of refugees and internally displaced persons, my country urgently appeals to the international partners to honour the funding pledges they made at the third Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region, held from 12 to 14 March. According to Ms. Najat Rochdi, Senior Humanitarian Adviser to the Special Envoy to Syria, of approximately \$3.3 billion needed to provide assistance for more than 11 million Syrians, only 23 per cent has been raised thus far this year.

The serious humanitarian crisis faced by Syria has been inextricably linked for many years to the conflict in the country. The responds to the needs of people facing extreme hardship must therefore be accompanied by greater efforts aimed at achieving

an immediate ceasefire, which is essential to the safe delivery of humanitarian aid and the resumption of political dialogue, which is the sole prerequisite for a peaceful and lasting solution to the crisis in Syria.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire reiterates its support for the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and encourages him to pursue his mediation efforts with a view to relaunching the political process, in line with the relevant provisions of resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Syihab (Indonesia): At the outset, let me extend our sincere thanks to both Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and Ms. Susannah Sirkin for their very clear and comprehensive briefings.

In the north-west of Syria, as Under-Secretary-General Lowcock has reported, the escalation is ongoing. And sadly, more lives have been lost, more people have been injured and there is a bigger wave of displacement — not to mention the extensive damage done to civilian infrastructure. As a result of hostilities in the area since late April, more than 450 people have been killed. That is indeed horrifying and must stop immediately. We have said that time and again. All parties need to seriously and strongly respect international humanitarian law and prioritize the safety and security of civilians. My delegation wishes to highlight three pertinent points.

First, the suffering of people in north-western Syria must end. Indonesia once again appeals to all parties to refrain from conducting provocative actions and, most importantly, to cease the ongoing violence. Words in the Chamber are not sufficient to describe the severity of the impact of hostilities on civilians, in particular women and children, who make up 76 per cent of the total population of north-western Syria. Data from Save the Children show that more children in the north-west were killed in the past two weeks alone than in all of 2018. My delegation therefore reiterates its call on all parties to stop all attacks and violence against civilians and ensure that access to emergency humanitarian assistance is fully granted.

Secondly, it is beyond frustrating, if not unacceptable, to learn that although a hospital's coordinates had been shared through the de-confliction mechanism, it was still targeted. What should we do when medical facilities are not even safe for people on the ground? What should we do next? Medical infrastructure must not be subjected to direct attacks for military purposes. The destruction of civilian

infrastructure that is key to the survival of the people adds to the suffering of already traumatized men, women and children. While we consider that the existing de-confliction has already been established with good intentions, we see the merit in exploring the possibility of improving the effectiveness of the mechanism.

Thirdly, my delegation also wishes to highlight the humanitarian situation in the Al-Hol and Rukban camps as priorities for the delivery of critical humanitarian responses. Tension remains high in Al-Hol due to uncertainty about the future of more than 70,000 people in the camp. Meanwhile in Rukban, access for the delivery of humanitarian aid is still needed. While approximately 17,000 people have left Rukban, the situation remains dire for more than 24,000 people in the camp.

At this crucial time, particularly within the context of the ongoing escalation in north-western Syria, Indonesia believes that unity in the Council is needed now more than ever. We may have different views on some issues. However, it is vital to be united in protecting people's lives. At the same time, it is also important not to politicize the issue and to genuinely uphold dialogue and coordination among Council members and relevant parties.

Let me end my remarks by paying tribute to all humanitarian workers on the ground who courageously risk their own lives to save others.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Do you know what just came to mind, Mr. President? I recall that when I have heard briefings delivered by Mr. Mark Lowcock on the situation in Yemen or in Libya, the tone and submission of information on those issues was very different from what we hear when Mr. Lowcock delivers briefings on Syria. Do members not think so? I think so, and not for the first time.

As usual, today we heard another series of invectives against Syria and the Russian Federation. Colleagues spouted statistics, quotes and emotional testimony. Incidentally, we are well aware of the value of such emotionally charged testimony. We remember when leading Western media outlets, including the *New York Times*, inflated the tragedy of Omran Daqneesh, a Syrian boy from Aleppo. However, after the liberation of eastern Aleppo, it turned out that the images were staged — a fact that was subsequently confirmed by Omran's parents.

Today, my British colleague accused the Russian Federation of making a mockery of the Security Council. I do not wish to turn today's meeting into a competition. I do not know where she sees the mockery, but let us recall the mockery of the Security Council by countries that have become accustomed to blaming the Russian Federation for everything.

The goal of all those calls "to immediately stop" and invectives is absolutely clear to us — it is to sustain a terrorist presence in Idlib for the future purpose of combating the legitimate Syrian authorities. That has happened each time another terrorist enclave in Syria has almost been shut down. It happened in eastern Aleppo and eastern Ghouta, and now the propaganda machine is firing its full arsenal at the situation in Idlib. What is happening is fully clear to us. And those who yield to that provocation should not be so naive as not to understand the reality behind the appeals we hear today. The main goal is to sustain a terrorist enclave in Idlib. That is the main goal being pursued by our Western colleagues. Today's meeting is being held at a complicated time and affords us another opportunity to shed light on the real humanitarian situation in Syria.

The real humanitarian situation in Syria was the subject of a briefing delivered by the Russian Ministry of Defence yesterday, 29 July. In a spirit of openness, our Defence Ministry always invites accredited foreign colleagues to Moscow to attend such briefings. But since again there was no show of interest in learning the truth and members did not attend, today we will give the Council a brief overview of the content it covered.

I believe that part of what has been set out in this briefing is a response to the questions raised by my British colleague, who enjoys asking questions in this Chamber and frequently takes the tone of a prosecutor. As previous speakers said, the situation in and around Idlib is cause for real concern, although not in the context presented in fake reports, but rather because of the scaled-up attacks by the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists, who attack civilians and use them as victims of their criminal provocations. At the same time, we note that jihadists are stepping up their military capacity by increasing the number of foreign-made weapons, including aircraft and multiple rocket launchers. Mr. Lowcock modestly failed to mention how many civilians have died in the attacks perpetrated by terrorists.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains a subject of speculation. One of the most egregious examples is the latest information about the alleged attacks by the Russian Aerospace Forces on the market and adjacent areas of the city of Maarat Al-Numan, in Idlib province, on 22 July. Allow me to share some of the Defence Ministry briefing.

“On 22 July, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, citing the so-called White Helmets, reported attacks by the Russian Federation’s Aerospace Forces attacks on the Al-Hol market and adjacent residential areas of the city of Maarat Al-Numan in Idlib province, resulting in the death of dozens of civilians. The accusations were cited by some European media outlets and even the leadership of Western countries and certain international organizations. The market in question can easily be located on the Maarat Al-Numan city map, and it is also been indicated on the geographic maps of the corresponding Internet services.

“Russian air assets were not used or flying over that area on 22 July. To verify reports on the destruction of the market in Maarat Al-Numan, Russian unmanned aerial vehicles photographed the site of the area and its adjacent territory twice, on 24 and 26 July, that is, after the alleged air strikes. The briefer invited us to look at the monitor. As we can see, the imagery obtained by the objective monitoring shows no signs of destruction, which would have been inevitable if the area had actually been subjected to an air strike using six bombs.

“That was further confirmed by the images taken by a Russian spacecraft on 25 July, as well as by video footage taken directly at the Al-Hol market in Maarat Al-Numan, which we received the day before yesterday. As we can see, the allegedly destroyed market remains operational. We regret the fact that representatives of eminent international bodies and organizations are once again falling victim to easily verifiable deception disseminated by terrorists, propagating fake news and unverified reports to corroborate unverified accusations.”

That lie, however, is becoming the leitmotif of our meeting today. Our colleagues also had the opportunity to read the information circulated by the Government of Syria about a video recording obtained from one of the eliminated terrorist, which shows White Helmets practicing a staged chemical attack on the town of

Murak. Fortunately, that duplicitous attempt was foiled after the information was published. In that regard, we once again call on the Secretariat and the specialized agencies of the Organization to be less hasty in publishing unverified information and to accept data from only reliable and apolitical sources, which must also be cross-checked.

Today, it was said that Russia deliberately bombed hospitals and schools. That is a lie. I repeat that once again. In Syria, the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic is open 24/7. We have repeatedly proposed that Mark Lowcock should liaise with it in order to verify information about the facilities that have been deconflicted and that we have allegedly attacked. Such attacks are also a lie. That step must be taken, rather than spouting so-called facts here in the Council that are based on dubious and unverified sources, not the so-called directly verified sources that are being cited.

Moreover, as we have often repeated, I cannot recall the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights or the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs making a statement on the principles of precaution and distinction when the coalition razed the cities of Raqqa, Hajin or Mosul to the ground. Why is it that no one said anything about that at that time? I raise that question all the time, but I have still not received an answer. We have long talked of the need to stop the use of double standards regarding developments in Syria. Attempts to shield terrorists in Idlib, whether for a hidden agenda or engagement in a political process as a local authority, no longer stand up to scrutiny.

In case anyone has forgotten, I will recall that Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham is the terrorist organization Jabhat Al-Nusra under a different name. Its so-called good fighters, whom Mark Lowcock referred to when quoting Idlib residents, are intimidating local civilians and using civilian and medical infrastructure for military purposes. They are using civilians as human shields. At the same time, the need to combat terrorism is justified by the continued illegal military presence beyond the Euphrates. That directly contravenes the proclaimed respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and again constitutes a flagrant example of double standards.

A great deal has been said today about hospitals and figures have been invoked. For example, Ms. Sirkin

said that out of 46 attacks on medical facilities, only 15 could be confirmed. How the Organization is able to confirm attacks without being on the ground is a separate issue. It turns out that two-thirds of the reports that the Council received have been fake. We are very troubled by the fact that a United Nations mechanism should be involved in the circulation of such fake information.

Prior to military operations in Syria, there were only 12 hospitals in Idlib. Where did the statistics on the number of allegedly destroyed hospitals come from that United Nations representatives, Member States and representatives of non-governmental organizations have cited earlier and today? I have said this before and repeat it now. There were not as many hospitals in all of pre-conflict Syria as are now being claimed to have been destroyed. Is any tent where wounded fighters are treated considered to be a hospital?

We believe it vital not to remain silent about the situation in the territories not under Government control. Such areas are blank spots on the maps of humanitarian organizations. That is not because everything is fine there. On the contrary, the area beyond the Euphrates lies in ruins, without electricity or access to water or medical care for residents. According to our military figures, there were over 300 terrorist attacks in June and July.

The situation remains difficult in the Rukban internally displaced persons camp. However, thanks to the efforts of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, more than 17,000 people have been relocated from Rukban. We intend to continue to work with the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross to ensure the return of refugees and provide them with everything that they need.

Turning to the Al-Hol camp, the situation there is truly catastrophic due to the limited access of humanitarian agencies and funding. Half of the camp's inhabitants are women and children. That is what people should be truly worried about when we talk about the humanitarian situation in Syria.

We remain troubled by the situation on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, where the Al-Tanf area is illegally occupied by the United States. Since the Geneva Conventions have been mentioned today, I recall once again that the occupying Power is responsible for the population in the occupied territory in accordance with

the Geneva Conventions. However, for some reason, the United States is in no hurry to prove the Rukban camp with what it needs. We are also deeply concerned over information about major armed units being prepared and deployed to Al-Suwayda, Palmyra and Abu Kamal.

In conclusion, I stress that the position of the Russian Federation remains unchanged. We will continue to spare no effort to restore peace in Syria both in our national capacity and as a permanent member of the Security Council and participant in the Astana troika, through which — I recall once again — more was accomplished than in any other format in terms of de-escalation, the elimination of the terrorist threat, broadening the humanitarian response and moving forward the political process. We will continue to work together with Turkey in accordance with the 17 September 2018 memorandum on the stabilization of the situation in the Idlib de-escalation area (see S/2018/852).

We make the appeal that our efforts not be obstructed by the provision of political cover to terrorists or by provocative actions.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and Director Susannah Sirkin for their briefings, which, unfortunately, are extremely alarming.

We usually use expressions such as “greatly concerned” with regard to the current situation in Syria, but the situation is far from being usual. As we speak, we are witnessing a deadly escalation of the conflict in north-west Syria. As we speak, military strikes are destroying the safest spaces, including camps for internally displaced persons and markets.

Any military operation should be fully in line with international humanitarian law and human rights law to prevent harm from coming to the thousands of civilians trapped in the middle of the fighting. The protection of civilians and unhindered access to humanitarian assistance are not a choice but the legal obligation of all sides to the conflict. Those who do not comply should be held accountable.

Hundreds of civilians have lost their lives and more than 440,000 have been newly displaced. The continued presence and activities of United Nations-listed terrorist groups in the area contributes to the suffering of civilians, but combating terrorist groups cannot justify violations of international humanitarian

law, and attacks on medical facilities constitute a serious violation. Such actions have to stop, especially given the fact that the majority of strikes occurred under the de-confliction mechanism. Attacks on densely populated areas resulting in hundreds of dead civilians are unacceptable and must stop as well.

We just heard from Ms. Susannah Sirkin that non-governmental organizations have been documenting attacks on health-care facilities and the deaths of medical personnel since the start of the conflict. Every day we learn about the destruction of civilian infrastructure in Idlib. Sadly, we have to underline that that is a scenario that has already occurred in Syria, Aleppo and eastern Ghouta. Civilians from those areas were evacuated mainly to Idlib. They expected at least a minimum level of protection. Unfortunately, there is none.

I once again underline the importance of ensuring that the de-escalation zone in Idlib established at the initiative of Russia and Turkey is fully respected. It is absolutely crucial to prevent a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe. All parties to the conflict should spare no effort to ensure the full implementation of that agreement on the ground.

Finally, I want to stress our concern about the tragic state of health-care facilities in Syria. Most of them are not functional, and those still operating are too poorly equipped to provide care to patients with injuries and further support to persons with disabilities. In our opinion, the international community, especially the Security Council, should vigorously advocate health care for and the protection of civilians, especially women, children and persons with disabilities.

The situation is extremely worrisome in the north-eastern and north-western parts of Syria, given only the examples of Al-Hol and Rukban camps, where people are still waiting for the third humanitarian convoy, and Raqqa, where it is practically impossible to lead a normal life.

Let me conclude by underlining that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Therefore, I would also like to stress the importance of reaching a political agreement in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). A political settlement is urgently needed, as it remains the only way to achieve sustainable peace under such extremely dire circumstances.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): Equatorial Guinea is grateful for the convening of this meeting and for the useful briefings by Mr. Mark Lowcock and Ms. Susannah Sirkin, which illustrate the current alarming and tragic situation throughout Syria.

The conflict in Syria continues to present us with alarming statistics. The Idlib region has without any doubt become one of the northern governorates hardest hit by the war, as Mr. Lowcock and Ms. Sirkin just described. We are facing a true nightmare, the horror of which is only increasing, as are the current humanitarian challenges. The increase in violence that we have observed in recent weeks in various parts of Syria, especially in the de-escalation zones agreed by the Astana guarantors, reflects the negative trend in Syria and concretely illustrates the extreme volatility of the situation in the country.

We are witnessing some of the deadliest attacks in civilian areas since the beginning of the military escalation almost three months ago. Rockets are now raining down on Idlib, which, as was underlined, have killed more than 450 people, including children, and more than 500,000 people have had to leave their homes owing to the intensification of air strikes. For those who are familiar with the Italian city of Venice, that would be the equivalent of emptying that city of its population twice over.

We are seeing the situation taking on worrisome proportions, and an increasing number of voices have begun in no uncertain terms to point to the failure of international diplomacy and the world's most powerful nations. That belief, shared by many of the world's citizens, calls into question the noble work and the very purpose of international organizations and decision-making bodies such as the Security Council.

It is not surprising that a few days ago, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet emphasized in a statement the "collective shrug" as a response to the great number of civilian casualties, while stressing at the same time the persistent failure of the permanent members of the Security Council to agree to use their power and influence to stop the fighting and killing once and for all. That has always been the position of the Government of Equatorial Guinea, and we hope that this umpteenth call to action and for ending international indifference might achieve the outcome we so long for while halting

the current military campaign and bringing the parties to the political negotiating table.

In such an environment of persistent insecurity, we once again call on the warring parties to safeguard civilian lives and basic infrastructure facilities such as schools and hospitals. Moreover, health-care facilities are becoming all the more crucial as military offensives are causing increasing numbers of deaths and injuries.

In the south of Idlib and throughout the region, as has been stressed, the main operational hospital is Maarat Al-Numan. It is unacceptable that it continues to be subject to regular attacks by any of the parties. There are many humanitarian organizations that spare no effort to support the operation of vital health services, so we cannot allow all international humanitarian action deployed in this area to collapse.

Our position is that respect for medical facilities and their personnel and equipment is essential. We once again echo the call of the Secretary-General in strongly condemning the ongoing air strikes on and shelling of health facilities and medical personnel, despite the fact that we are still struggling to find the words to use to condemn the violence against the civilian population and the use of those civilians as pawns in the fighting between the various groups involved in the conflict.

We believe that even in the fight against terrorism, respect for international humanitarian law must always be guaranteed. In relation to the protection of health facilities and their staff in Idlib, we stress that the parties' allies must step up their involvement to prevent the situation from boiling over, and urge them to do so.

I wish to conclude my statement by expressing the hope that the upcoming meetings on 1 and 2 August in Nursultan between the guarantors of the Astana process will contribute to reducing the escalation and swiftly reactivating the ceasefire that was agreed upon in September 2018.

Ms. Mogashoa (South Africa): Let me begin by thanking you, Mr. President, for the outstanding manner in which you have guided the work of the Council during your presidency this month. We thank you for your conduct in this regard.

I also wish to thank Mr. Lowcock and Ms. Sirkin for their briefings to the Council this morning.

South Africa remains deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Syria. Since the beginning

of the escalation of hostilities in late April, hundreds of civilians — many of whom are women and children — have lost their lives and countless others have suffered severe injuries that are, in many cases, life-altering, leaving them permanently disabled. My delegation is particularly concerned about the attacks in north-west Syria in which civilians, particularly women and children, were killed as a result of air strikes on marketplaces and residential areas in several towns. Those actions have had a particularly severe impact on women and children, who make up 76 per cent of the population.

South Africa is also concerned about the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure. Since late April, at least 37 incidents involving health facilities or personnel have been reported, killing and injuring civilians and damaging or destroying vital health facilities that are essential for the survival and well-being of the people. It has been reported that during the same period, 47 schools and several water stations were damaged or destroyed by air strikes or shelling, disrupting access to clean water and education for hundreds of thousands of people. This is not to mention the mental scars that children will carry with them for decades as a result of the traumas they have experienced. The continued displacement of a large proportion of the population has also led to a number of challenges, including the disruption or, indeed, absence of education at all levels for hundreds of thousands of children and limited access to health care and other basic social services.

South Africa condemns the continued attacks on humanitarian workers, who have put their lives at risk to support and assist those who are in critical need of basic services but are not spared from the continued violence. South Africa urges all parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. It is also important that the signatories to the September 2018 ceasefire memorandum adhere to its provisions.

South Africa reiterates that while we acknowledge the threat of and violence committed by terrorist groups, it is also necessary that no action taken to counter terrorist activities be undertaken at the expense of innocent civilian lives. Any such action should be taken only within the parameters of international law.

Let me turn now to the situations in the Rukban and Al-Hol camps. I would like to reiterate South Africa's position that while we welcome reports that more than 17,000 people have left Rukban, there are those who do not have the resources to leave. It is essential that those who remain in Rukban be provided with the assistance they require, and we call on the relevant parties to grant the required approvals for the delivery of additional aid to the camp. The situation in Al-Hol remains of concern, especially as the rising temperatures in the region create additional challenges. We welcome the work of the numerous humanitarian agencies that provide food, water, sanitation and hygiene services, as well as education and health services, to the camp.

In conclusion, South Africa believes that the only sustainable solution to the Syrian question remains the achievement of a political solution through an inclusive Syrian-led dialogue. We support the efforts of the Secretary-General's Special Envoy, Mr. Geir Pedersen, to facilitate these inclusive negotiations. In this regard, we look forward to Mr. Pedersen's upcoming report on his recent engagements.

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

We thank Ms. Susannah Sirkin and Mr. Mark Lowcock for their important briefings. We would also like to express our appreciation for the efforts they are leading in order to alleviate the suffering in Syria.

Peru is deeply concerned by the intensification of violence on Syrian territory as well as the serious deterioration of the humanitarian situation that this entails. The north-west of the country remains the current focus of our attention due to its population density, high volatility and increased risks as a result of terrorist groups' extensive control of the area. We are alarmed to note that the most basic principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law continue to be ignored in this area, such as the due proportionality of military responses and precautions with regard to their effects.

Peru joins the expressions of deep regret for the deaths of children, which have increased this year as a result of air strikes that do not discriminate between civilians and combatants. We also deplore the destruction of civil infrastructure, including schools, medical centres and drinking-water-supply facilities, aggravated by the fact that the geographical

coordinates of several of those centres had been shared with the Syrian authorities. Such barbaric acts must cease immediately.

We must underline that these acts represent flagrant violations of international law and, due to their deliberate nature and the impact they have on the civilian population, can and should be declared war crimes. We hope that these reprehensible acts will be subject to exhaustive investigations that properly identify their perpetrators and bring them to justice. We wish to highlight the particular responsibility borne by those countries with the capacity to influence the situation, which can and must do more so that the parties abandon all attempts to find a military solution. Preserving the agreement reached by Turkey and Russia in September 2018 is of fundamental importance in these delicate circumstances.

The general focus on the events developing in north-western Syria must in no way detract from the urgency of addressing the humanitarian crises looming over other areas of the Syrian territory. We consider it imperative to direct greater efforts towards meeting the basic needs of the tens of thousands of internally displaced persons who remain in the Al-Hol camp, as well as to promote comprehensive solutions that will allow them to return home safely and in a dignified manner. Accordingly, we encourage the Iraqi Government to finalize the repatriation plan for their over 30,000 citizens, with the assistance of the United Nations. These efforts should also be extended to Raqqa and other urban centres in Deir-*ez-Zor*, since the return of Iraqi nationals is a tangible fact that requires great mobilization by the international community so as to provide them with a minimum of security and proper living conditions. We also urge the Syrian authorities to issue the appropriate authorizations to the United Nations so that it can carry out exhaustive assessments of the living conditions in Rukban camp and provide sustained assistance.

I conclude by reaffirming that only a political solution on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) will allow us to overcome the humanitarian disaster still affecting Syria, with full respect for its sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to Ms. Sirkin to make a further statement.

Ms. Sirkin: I just wanted to correct a misquotation I heard earlier from the representative of the Russian Federation, who stated that two thirds of the reported attacks that we cited from the last month have turned out to be fake. That is absolutely not what I said, and, in fact, we have so far confirmed 16 such attacks, and we are still counting, which is due to the rigour of our process and the fact that indeed we are not naive and do not just take every report and print it out. We have a very serious methodology, and there is absolutely no way that we have cited fake reports. I just wanted to correct that misquotation of my statement.

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

Before adjourning today's meeting, which is the last scheduled meeting in the Chamber for the month of July, I would like to express, on behalf of the Peruvian delegation, our sincere thanks to all the members of the Council for their continued support, cooperation and counsel during a very busy month. We may not always have agreed, but there was no need for any procedural votes, and we unanimously adopted three resolutions, which shows the success of our efforts to maintain Council unity, which is a crucial value and one that we hope will extend to other items on the agenda.

We would like to thank all members of the delegations to the Council, including the Permanent Representatives, as well as the experts on the various issues we have discussed, for their hard work and dedication. We thank Hasmik Egian and James Sutterlin and the efficient Security Council Affairs Division team for their assistance here and during the trip to Colombia, the conference officers, interpreters, verbatim reporters, security staff, press officers and journalists, and the kind members of the Security Council Secretariat Branch. I also thank the members of my team for their work, organization and dedication during our month in the presidency. I am grateful for their unflagging efforts to fulfil — in the most efficient way possible — the delicate task that has been entrusted us for these two years.

I am pleased to turn over the gavel to the Mission of Poland, our friends and neighbours for these two years, and to wish them great success, which I am sure they will achieve under the leadership of Ambassador Wronecka and her efficient team. We offer them our full cooperation in the month to come.

Once again, we wish to express our gratitude and to reiterate distinguished Peruvian diplomat Javier Pérez de Cuéllar's undying commitment to peace: it is not just a simple dream but the most deeply held treasure of humankind.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.