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Provisional

President: Ms. Wronecka (Poland)

Members:

Belgium	Mrs. Van Vlierberge
China	Mr. Wu Haitao
Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
Dominican Republic	Mrs. Cedano
Equatorial Guinea	Mrs. Mele Colifa
France	Mrs. Gueguen
Germany	Mr. Schulz
Indonesia	Mr. Djani
Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
Peru	Mr. Duclos
Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
South Africa	Mr. Matjila
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
United States of America	Mr. Cohen

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

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

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs; Dr. Hala, of Syria Bright Future; and Ms. Amina Khouliani, of Families for Freedom.

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

I give the floor to Ms. DiCarlo.

Ms. DiCarlo: I thank you, Madam President, for this opportunity to brief the Security Council on the crucial issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons in Syria. I would like to welcome Dr. Hala and Ms. Khouliani to today's briefing.

In June this year, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2474 (2019), on missing persons in armed conflict. The resolution establishes a clear link between solving the issue of missing persons and resolving conflicts. In conversations with us, many Syrians see resolution 2474 (2019) as a glimmer of hope.

Given the continued lack of access to places of detention and to detainees in Syria, the United Nations has no official statistics on those detained, abducted or missing. What we know comes from accounts recorded and corroborated by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, mandated by the Human Rights Council and human rights organizations, since the start of conflict in 2011.

While the United Nations is not able to verify, reports suggest that more than 100,000 people have so far been detained, abducted, disappeared or gone missing, largely, but not only, at the hands of the Syrian Government. Many families have no information on the fate of their loved ones. Detainees, including women and children, are held without due process or access to legal representation or their families. Places of

detention are not accessible to the United Nations or international monitors.

Records from hospitals or burial sites are not public. Some families have been forced to pay enormous sums of money in the hope of obtaining information — often in vain. Deaths in detention centres have continued to occur, many allegedly as a result of torture, neglect or inhumane conditions. For the families of detainees, their tragedy is compounded by the difficulty of obtaining death certificates or remains. Even if they obtain the certificates, the real causes of death remain hidden.

Women, besides being direct victims, are also impacted when their husbands or male relatives disappear. Syrian women risk losing legal rights, including their housing, land and property rights. That happens if they cannot explain their husband or male relative's whereabouts and lack legal documentation or a death certificate. Many women under those circumstances carry the heavy burden of sustaining their entire families. For refugees and the internally displaced, those challenges are multiplied.

In paragraph 12 of its report, entitled *Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Way Forward*, the Commission of Inquiry has documented since 2011 how the Syrian Government has,

“[p]erpetrated the crimes of extermination, murder, rape or other forms of sexual violence, torture, and imprisonment in the context of its widespread and systematic detentions of dissidents, as well as those perceived to be sympathetic to armed groups”.

Perhaps the most prominent evidence of torture and ill-treatment of detainees in Government detention centres is the more than 50,000 photos smuggled out of Syria by a military defector and made public in 2014. Those photos show nearly 7,000 dead bodies bearing marks of torture. Following the Government's reassertion of control in some areas previously held by armed groups, the United Nations has continued to receive reports of civilians arbitrarily detained or disappeared, including in areas subject to so-called reconciliation agreements. Human rights organizations have reported cases of detention and enforced disappearance of refugees who return to Syria or internally displaced persons who return to their places of origin. Surveys by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicate that fear of detention is among the factors preventing refugees from return.

Those abuses are not limited to the Government forces. According to the Commission of Inquiry, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, both designated by the Council as terrorist organizations, have committed heinous abuses. Armed groups affiliated with the opposition have also committed serious abuses. They have allegedly established makeshift places of detention in different areas under their control where captured Government soldiers, suspected collaborators with the Government or members of opposing armed groups were held and sometimes executed. Reporting from human rights organizations indicates that armed opposition factions currently controlling Afrin have conducted arbitrary detention, torture and the abduction of civilians. The Syrian Democratic Forces have also conducted arbitrary detentions, including the arrest of men attempting to evade forced conscription.

The Government of Syria claims that the number of those detained by armed groups is estimated at 16,000. However, without access to all detention centres in Syria, the United Nations cannot verify the accuracy of this information. Justice and accountability for those abuses must be ensured, regardless of the perpetrators. The United Nations is also concerned that thousands of foreign nationals — many women and children who are family members of alleged ISIL members — are currently being detained in the Al-Hol camp. We call on Member States to ensure that their nationals are repatriated for the purposes of prosecution, rehabilitation or reintegration, as appropriate, and in line with international law and standards.

Special Envoy Pedersen has prioritized the case of detainees, abductees and the missing. Meaningful action on this file would build confidence and move the political process forward. The Special Envoy continues to seek progress within the working group on this issue, in which the United Nations is a member, together with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an observer. Since it was established in December 2017, the working group has facilitated four exchange operations, including one last week. The releases of detainees so far, while welcome, are insufficient in scale and nowhere near commensurate with the magnitude of the problem. Only 109 have been released so far.

We stress the need for the parties to move beyond one-for-one exchanges. All sides should engage in

unilateral releases in the true spirit of resolution 2254 (2015). Furthermore, meetings of the working group should occur regularly and with more frequency. I urge the working group to also adopt the procedures on missing persons that have been submitted by the United Nations, and I reiterate the invitation of the United Nations to host the next meeting of the working group in Geneva.

In its resolutions 2139 (2014), 2254 (2015) and 2165 (2014), the Council called for the release of those arbitrarily detained, particularly women and children. These calls must be heeded especially by those with influence on the Syrian parties. The United Nations stands ready to provide all necessary support. The parties must fulfil their obligations under international law to unilaterally release all the arbitrarily detained or abducted, and most urgently, women, children, the sick and the elderly. They must collect, protect, and manage all relevant data and documents on detainees, abductees and missing persons, and establish a mechanism with the ICRC to manage this information in coordination with the Office of the Special Envoy. Furthermore, they must provide families with information, identify the dead and return remains, wherever possible, to their relatives. Lastly, they should provide, without delay, and through appropriate channels, a list of all places in which persons are being detained and arrange for immediate access to such locations by a neutral third party.

Accountability for serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights is central to achieving and maintaining durable peace in Syria. In that regard, all parties to the conflict must cooperate fully with 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 Commission of Inquiry.

Finally, I reiterate the Secretary-General's call for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court.

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

I now give the floor to Dr. Hala.

Dr. Hala: I thank you, Madam President, for inviting me and my colleague Ms. Amina Khoufani to speak here today.

My name is Hala. I am a doctor and a co-founder of the Families for Freedom movement, which campaigns for freedom and justice for Syria's detainees. I left Syria at the end of 2011 after my husband was detained. He has since been released, but my brother and father-in-law, together with seven of my cousins, were detained in 2013 and remain missing. Many of my medical colleagues have also been detained by the Syrian Government for helping wounded protesters. Some of them have been killed while undergoing torture in detention. It is in memory of them and the hundreds of thousands of disappeared and murdered Syrians that I appear before the Security Council today.

Although it is an honour for me speak here, I cannot help but feel deep frustration at the people in the Chamber for their inaction to end the sorrow of Syrian detainees and their families. We are in the eighth year of the Syrian conflict and at least 100,000 people remain missing, many suffering abuses, deprivation and torture. Syrian families, mine included, need to know what has happened to their loved ones, and those responsible for our suffering need to be held accountable.

The pain Syrian detainees have to endure has been well documented by colleagues in Syrian and international human rights organizations. Since 2011, I have personally met dozens of survivors of detention and torture and documented their stories, while providing psychological care. Detainees in Syria face physical and sexual abuse, torture, starvation and extremely difficult living conditions. They are often crowded into small, dark cells and some are forced to live for months in solitary confinement rooms the size of a coffin. Sometimes detainees are left for days in a cell with dead bodies and develop serious psychological issues, as well as physical problems, as a result. Female detainees have been subjected to sexual and gender-based violence at a high rate.

My husband often speaks to me about his own experience, which left him deeply traumatized. He was subjected to routine beatings. His cell was so tiny that he did not have space to sit down. It was very cold and damp. He and his cellmates were allowed to go to the restroom only once a day.

As families whose loved ones have been forcibly disappeared, we live in a constant state of uncertainty, not knowing where our relatives are or what has happened to them. Mothers in my country take dangerous trips to courthouses and detention centres

every day. They stand for hours waiting for an answer. They often come back home broken with nothing new, yet they make that trip again and again. Families want graves to mourn their loved ones — even that simple right is something we have to ask for today.

As families, we have suffered enough. I am here today to urge the Council to act. The Council must adopt a resolution to put pressure on the Syrian Government and all warring sides to immediately release a list of names of all detainees, along with their current locations and status, and immediately stop torture and mistreatment. In the case of the death of a detainee, a death certificate is not enough; a report on the real cause of death and burial location must be presented to the families.

International humanitarian organizations and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic must be allowed unconditional access to detention facilities. Medical organizations must be allowed to examine the health situation of detainees and provide medical services to those who need it. Those detained must be allowed routine contact with their families. The resolution must demand the immediate and unilateral release of those who have been arbitrarily detained. A timetable must be set for identifying and releasing all detained individuals as part of any peace process, monitored by an international independent body. We do not accept prisoner exchanges arranged between military sides as a replacement for a real solution to the detention crisis in Syria. Exceptional courts, — especially field, war and counter-terrorism courts — must be abolished and fair trials guaranteed under United Nations supervision.

A new, peaceful Syria cannot be built while people are still being tortured and executed. We cannot move on without answers about our loved ones. If the Council fails in delivering what I have called for here, it will again fail the Syrian people and we will hold it responsible.

The President: I thank Dr. Hala for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Khoulani.

Ms. Khoulani (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank you, Madam President, for inviting me to speak here today. My name is Amina Khoulani and my story is one shared by hundreds of thousands of Syrian families who have endured the pain of having their loved

ones snatched from them and disappeared in brutal underground dungeons.

Eight years ago, three of my brothers were taken by the Syrian regime. Their only crime was peacefully protesting for a free and democratic Syria — a vision shared by millions across the country. For years, my family and I hoped that my brothers would one day be released but, sadly, that was not to be. When photos of murdered, tortured detainees were leaked by the military defector Caesar, the first image I saw was of my brother Mouhamad's body. Mouhamad was not only my brother, but my best friend and the person closest to my heart. His wife was pregnant at the time that he disappeared. He never got the chance to see his son, and his son will never have the chance to know his father.

In July last year, the Syrian regime began releasing death notices for people who died in its jails. Four years on from learning of Mouhamad's death, I learned that my other two brothers, Majd and Abdulsattar, had also been killed in detention. I do not have enough words to describe how it felt. Hope was wrenched from me yet again. I could not stop imagining how they might have endured before leaving this world. According to the death notice we received from the regime, they were both sentenced to death on the same day, at the same minute, on 15 January 2013.

I myself was imprisoned for six months, after being arrested by the Air Force Intelligence branch for my peaceful activism. My husband was detained for two and a half years. We were both lucky to survive, but many others were not as lucky.

Today I am one of the founders of Families for Freedom — a women-led movement launched in 2017 by families whose loved ones have been detained and disappeared. The women in our group come from diverse backgrounds, but we are united in one mission — to demand an end to the crime of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance, demand justice for the disappeared and their families and ensure that those responsible for their suffering are held accountable.

As I address the Council today, approximately 100,000 Syrian men, women and children remain missing. The majority are detained by the Syrian regime, but armed opposition groups and extremist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham, are also guilty of detention and disappearance. The people detained may be sick, injured or dying. Many endure barbaric torture on a daily basis. Some may be

scheduled for execution. Hardly any of them will have had a fair trial. The Council can save their lives if it chooses to act today.

As I speak here today, the cases of detention, forced disappearance and torture in Syria are on the rise. I am not telling Council members anything new. They will no doubt have seen Caesar's photos and read the reports issued by Syrian international organizations with regard to the crisis of forced disappearance in Syria and the brutal practice of torture. In spite of those efforts, disappearances have continued to take place to this very day, including to persons who tried to return to Syria.

The Security Council has utterly failed Syrian detainees and their families. It is its responsibility to protect Syrians from a system that kills, tortures and illegally detains its own citizens, in systematic violation of international law, as concluded by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and other relevant bodies. The Council has let vetoes and excuses get in the way of what is right and just. It bears the responsibility of finding a way to end impunity and stop that horror.

Today, I therefore ask the members of the Council, for the Syrian families who have lost their loved ones, to make the issue of detention and forced disappearance in Syria a priority, to adopt a new resolution to pressure not just the Syrian regime but armed opposition groups as well for the names and whereabouts of all those in detention and to allow humanitarian organizations to visit the detention centres, especially the military prison Sednaya. We further call on it to urge the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS) and the Syrian Democratic Forces to uncover the fate of the disappeared by ISIS and give answers to their relatives, so that those of us whose loved ones have been executed or tortured to death can know the location of their burial sites so that we can grieve them properly.

The crimes of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance have plagued my country for decades, and they have become epidemic in the last eight years. They are a horror that have impacted the lives of millions of people, shattering them forever. The first step towards sustainable peace and justice is truth, an end to arbitrary detention and forced disappearance and the release of the thousands of civilians arbitrarily detained and denied their freedom.

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

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

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): I thank Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo for her briefing. I offer a warm welcome to Dr. Hala and Ms. Amina Khouli. I thank them for sharing their stories, and we applaud their extraordinary courage for speaking out about the abuses that they, their families and their fellow Syrians have endured at the direction of Bashar Al-Assad and his military and intelligence commanders.

The issue of detainees and missing persons in Syria is one of the great tragedies of the Syrian conflict. In 2011, as peaceful protesters took to the streets of Damascus to seek modest political reforms and increase social freedoms, Syrians also sought an end to the fear of torture and arbitrary arrest by Syrian intelligence services. It is difficult to find any Syrians who have not been affected by that systematic practice. In August 2013, a military defector known by the codename Caesar smuggled over 53,000 photographs out of Syria of over 6,700 victims of torture who had died in Syrian regime custody. Those photographs have been independently verified and represent damning evidence of the systematic torture that is present in Al-Assad's prisons.

We have heard again and again from Syrian civilians that the fate of those who disappeared at the hands of Al-Assad is foremost on their minds when considering both the prospect of a return to Syria for those who fled the country and the vision for a political solution. Syrians deserve to know the truth about what happened to their family members, receive justice for what they have endured and gain assurances that they and future generations of Syrians can live without the fear of being arbitrarily detained, tortured or disappeared by their own Government. That is why we called for this meeting today.

There is both a humanitarian and a political imperative for improving transparency and access to regime prisons and securing the release of the Syrian civilians who have been arbitrarily detained by the regime. The issue of detainees is central. Resolution 2254 (2015) calls for the release of any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children. There can be no political solution and no stability in Syria without the reversal of those abhorrent practices

and guarantees that regime officials responsible for such practices will be held accountable for their actions.

In addition to the moving testimony of our speakers and the thousands of other Syrians who have bravely spoken out against the regime, as well as the photos that have been mentioned, there is exhaustively researched data demonstrating the scale and severity of the crimes committed against innocent civilians in regime prisons. The Al-Assad regime's attempts to silence dissent and erase its crimes have failed, thanks to the courageous acts of bravery of Syrians like Caesar, Dr. Hala and Ms. Amina Khouli.

Since 2011, Syrian documentation groups estimate that as many as 215,000 persons, including 35,000 prisoners of conscience, have been detained, the vast majority by the regime, and that 14,000 have been killed as a result of torture, including 177 children. Nearly 128,000 people are currently detained by the Syrian regime, including doctors, humanitarian aid workers, human rights defenders, journalists and others, including women and children. Those numbers have been widely documented by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and other reputable organizations.

We have seen reports of specific detention centres, including military intelligence branch numbers 215, 227, 235 and 251; the air force intelligence investigation branch in Mezzeh military airport; and the Sednaya prison, and the names of some of the senior regime officials who were responsible for murder, rape, torture and other mistreatment at such centres. We cannot come to the political solution described in resolution 2254 (2015) until those practices end.

Today, the United States therefore calls for the immediate unilateral release of civilians, including women, children and the elderly, who are being held in Al-Assad regime prisons, in an effort to pave for the path forward for the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). That is an achievable confidence-building measure that would help advance Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts to relaunch the political process, as well as create momentum for the Al-Assad regime and the Syrian opposition to work together.

As part of that effort, we also urge the Al-Assad regime to grant the United Nations and other impartial and independent international entities immediate access to Syrian detention centres, particularly those where numerous credible reports of torture and abuse

have been documented, including by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. United Nations access to those facilities is imperative to ensure that conditions in regime detention facilities are in line with appropriate international legal standards.

We are asking the Al-Assad regime only to abide by its own laws and fulfil its obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law to expedite the release of arbitrarily or unlawfully detained persons, including persons detained due to political beliefs. The Syrian Constitution prohibits arbitrary detention, outlaws the use of torture and humiliation, requires the State to inform the incarcerated of the reasons for his or her arrest and guarantees incarcerated individuals access to legal counsel, a fair trial and due process.

The United States appreciates Special Envoy Pedersen's continued interest in galvanizing progress on the detainee file. Parallel tracts have not produced concrete results to date, and it is time now to consolidate all work on the detainees and missing persons file under the Special Envoy's offices in Geneva and to regularly include updates on progress towards that aspect of resolution 2254 (2015) in monthly Council meetings on Syria.

Unfortunately, efforts to negotiate the release of detainees under the auspices of the Astana guarantors have focused on one-for-one prisoner exchanges between the regime and Syrian armed opposition forces, largely ignoring the plight of the many thousands of Syrian civilians who represent the vast majority of individuals held by the regime. And even those efforts have been undermined, as the regime has detained hundreds of former fighters in the past year who had signed so-called reconciliation agreements brokered by the Russian Federation. We ask our Russian partners, on behalf of the Astana guarantors, to consolidate the efforts of its working group, under the leadership of United Nations Special Envoy Pedersen, and to renew their commitments to negotiating the release of victims, pressing for an end to the regime's detention practices and strongly supporting mechanisms for truth and accountability.

Progress on Syrian detainees is essential to the success of any political solution, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). In a show of good faith to reinvigorate the political process, we strongly urge the Al-Assad regime and its supporters to take the concrete steps

that I have outlined to address that issue. To Amina Khouliani, Dr. Hala and the hundreds of thousands of Syrians affected by the Al-Assad regime's practice of arbitrary detention, torture, disappearance and killing, the United States stands with them in their pursuit of justice and will spare no effort to bring the regime's torture to a halt. The Syrian people deserve an end to their suffering, a pathway to justice and a chance to live in peace.

Mrs. Gueguen (France) (*spoke in French*): The Syrian regime's use of torture, arbitrary arrest and detention and enforced disappearances dates back to long before the 2011 uprising. Those abuses have always been a distinctive feature of the regime, and in a push to eliminate all forms of opposition, they have reached an unprecedented scale during the eight years of conflict, with their widespread and systematic use by security forces. The testimonies we heard today illustrate that poignantly. The victims are political opponents, peaceful activists, intellectuals, artists and ordinary Syrians — victims of merciless methods. The settlement of the issue of detainees and missing persons is inextricably linked to the search for a political solution to the Syrian crisis, which, at its core, is a crisis of massive violations of human rights. It is therefore essential that the Security Council remain seized of the issue. In that regard, I would like to highlight three imperatives

The first imperative is truth. All information on the massive human rights violations committed in Syria by all actors must be brought to light. In that connection, France commends the invaluable contribution of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, whose impartial and independent reports reflect the reality of the Syrian tragedy. In particular, we welcome the report on detentions that was published and presented to the Security Council during an Arria Formula meeting in November. The Council must continue to hear regular briefings on this issue. That was the thrust of the joint statement issued by France, the United Kingdom and the United States at an event held during the high-level week in September in the presence of Families for Freedom and other Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The second imperative is justice. Crimes committed by the regime must not remain unpunished. The evidence of those crimes will not disappear. 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, established by the General Assembly, will see to it. It is essential that all Member States, NGOs and international organizations cooperate with the Mechanism. The evidence is intended to be presented before the appropriate national or international courts to ensure that justice is done to victims, including victims of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and torture. Thanks to the Caesar file, delivered to the French courts and containing photos of thousands of bodies of hungry and tortured detainees, international arrest warrants were issued by a French examining judge against three senior officials of the repressive Syrian apparatus. They have been charged with torture, forced disappearances and crimes against humanity.

While that is an essential first step in the fight against impunity, I also recall the importance of ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in order to combat impunity for this crime. I also reiterate that the death certificates issued by the Damascus regime do not exempt it from its obligation to ensure justice. Nor are they the dignified answer that the victims' families and loved ones expect in order to properly grieve. They have the right to the truth.

The third imperative is the safety of people. The situation in Syria cannot be normalized without creating a safe environment on the ground for civilians — a precondition for any credible political settlement in Syria and what Syrians, including refugees and displaced persons, expect. We note that the regime's systematic use of such practices is responsible for the departure of thousands of people from Syria and continues to prevent them from returning. Creating a safe and neutral environment means, first and foremost, a change in the regime's behaviour. That will require putting an end to such practices and allowing immediate and unfettered access of neutral parties to all detention centres. Security Council resolutions have explicitly called for this since 2011.

In view of the scale of the arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances, it is clear that any progress on this issue will require the unconditional releases of all persons detained for political reasons. France calls on the allies of the Syrian regime to pressure it to do so. It is a simple confidence-building measure that the Special Envoy rightly pointed out. It is within the context of its

mediation that this issue must be addressed, through discussions led by the United Nations in Geneva, in consideration of the whole problem and not only certain categories of detainees or the exchange of a limited number of prisoners.

At the heart of the Syrian tragedy is an unnamed cruelty. Giving freedom to the thousands of arbitrarily detained prisoners and recreating the conditions for a safe and dignified life in Syria for all is not only a moral obligation, it is a political necessity. As we all know, there can be no lasting and inclusive peace in Syria unless justice is rendered and a credible political solution is reached, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Schulz (Germany): First, I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo for her briefing, as well as Ms. Amina Khouli and Dr. Hala for sharing their moving stories with us. The losses and heavy blows of fate they and your families have suffered stand for thousands of other Syrian families who have lost loved ones in Syrian prisons or are still left in the dark about their fate or whereabouts.

We welcome that Special Envoy Pedersen has made concrete action on the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons one of his five priorities. We support his efforts and his engagement with the Syrian parties and all the relevant States. We hope that his efforts will soon result in meaningful and tangible progress on this issue. We agree with his assessment that progress on this issue would be an important confidence-building measure. Resolution 2254 (2015) is very clear. It calls on the parties to immediately release any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children.

But today's meeting on detainees and missing persons in Syria reminds us that, eight years after the beginning of the conflict and five years after the publication of the Caesar photos, the situation in Syrian prisons is still unbearable. For example, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, at least 140,000 individuals are still detained or have disappeared at the hands of the main parties to the conflict in Syria. It is important to note that it is reported that Syrian regime forces account for around 90 per cent of those cases. More than 14,000 have allegedly died due to torture. And this gruesome practice is still ongoing. According to estimates by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, around 1,700 persons were arbitrarily arrested and more than 140 persons died from torture in the Syrian

regime's prisons this year alone. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has called this systematic pattern of mass arrests and enforced disappearance by the Syrian regime a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population.

The Syrian regime continues to arbitrarily detain thousands of innocent Syrians merely because they dare to make use of their freedom of expression. It has tortured thousands of innocent Syrians to death merely because they dared to ask for political reforms and freedom in Syria. We are talking about ordinary people and engaged citizens. Calling them terrorists in order to create a pretext for their arrest and torture is scandalous and extremely cynical.

The crimes committed against detainees in the Syrian regime's prisons are broadly documented. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry has rightfully named such crimes war crimes. Arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, enforced disappearances and executions in Syrian prisons must stop immediately. While we welcome the four prisoner exchanges facilitated by the Astana working group on detentions and abductions in the Syrian conflict, given the high estimates of detained and missing Syrians, those reciprocal low-level exchanges are clearly insufficient. Considering that the majority are being detained by the Syrian regime, the regime's insistence on reciprocal exchanges is unacceptable.

The Syrian regime must immediately release all political prisoners and arbitrarily held detainees. It must agree to a timetable for identifying and releasing all detained individuals. It is crucial that the Syrian regime publish a comprehensive list of the names of all detainees and inform the families of the tens of thousands of missing persons about the fate of their loved ones.

As we heard this morning during the briefing, the regime simultaneously issued thousands of death notifications for detained and missing persons — listing heart failure or stroke as the cause of death. Often, groups of people detained in the same facility share death dates, making summary executions seem likely. That must be further investigated.

The Syrian regime should also provide families with notifications of the burial sites of all detainees, abductees and missing persons who have deceased. Not even allowing families to grieve and to know about

their loved one's fate only adds to the abominable crimes committed by the regime in its prisons.

The crimes and atrocities committed on all sides during the Syrian conflict, including horrific accounts of murder, torture and sexual violence in Syrian prisons, must be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice.

National reconciliation and lasting peace in Syria will not be possible without accountability. The International Impartial and Independent Mechanism has become a central repository of information and evidence of the crimes committed in Syria. It therefore has a crucial role to play in the prosecution of crimes committed during the Syrian conflict. We will continue to support the work of the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism and of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and to pursue accountability in order to achieve justice for the victims and eventually enable national reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to thank Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo for her valuable briefing. I would also like to thank Dr. Hala and Ms. Amina Khouliani for their participation and for their moving testimonies, which shed light on the scale of the suffering and pain of thousands of Syrian families who do not know the fate of their loved ones, whether detained, missing or abducted.

Nine years into the conflict in Syria, questions have surfaced regarding the fate of detainees and missing persons. According to independent international investigative committees, there are thousands of detainees and missing persons in Syria who remain unaccounted for. Given the long-term impact of that humanitarian issue, the State of Kuwait has joined other countries in calling for this meeting.

Let us remember that this issue is first and foremost a humanitarian one and the release of detainees is called for in a number of Security Council resolutions on Syria, particularly resolutions 2254 (2015), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018). Progress on the issue would move forward the political track and would be one of many confidence-building measures among the parties.

In that regard, we reiterate our support to Special Envoy Pedersen, and we take note of the efforts made by the Astana working group. We welcome any agreement reached within that mechanism on exchanging detainees

and prisoners and we call for stepping up efforts to accelerate the release of more detainees and prisoners.

This year we mark the seventieth anniversary of the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols and the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the first Security Council resolution on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. We must align our words and actions with the principles and standards in the resolutions adopted to address the issue of detainees, missing persons and prisoners of war. As the Council, our demands must therefore be in line with such resolutions and we must address the issue in terms of its humanitarian context with clarity and transparency. We would like to stress the following demands.

First, we call on the Syrian authorities and all parties to the conflict to immediately stop all inhumane practices in prisons and detention centres, which are in violation of international law and international humanitarian law, as reaffirmed by a number of reports issued by independent international parties.

Secondly, we call for the release of women, children, the elderly, the sick and people with disabilities.

Thirdly, we call for allowing families to ascertain the fate of their loved ones and their whereabouts and to allow them to visit their loved ones, in cooperation with all relevant parties, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Fourthly, we call for the provision of health care, food, water and all basic necessities to detainees.

Fifthly, we urge the parties to the conflict in Syria to take all appropriate measures to locate persons reported missing without discrimination, while creating the appropriate channels to communicate with their families.

Sixthly, we call on all parties to the conflict, particularly the Syrian authorities, to report the numbers of the deceased and to identify them, while locating their burial sites and returning their remains, where possible, to their families, in line with their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

We call those responsible to be held accountable for such heinous crimes, which run counter to international law. We stress the need to avoid impunity for the most heinous crimes committed in the Syrian crisis since 2011. We once again underline the fact that lasting

and comprehensive peace in Syria cannot be achieved without justice.

We are all too familiar with the human and social suffering linked to the issue of detainees, prisoners and missing persons given our bitter experience in 1990. We know that the issue cannot be settled instantly. For example, Iraqi-Kuwaiti joint efforts continue to locate the remains of missing persons and detainees, whether they are Kuwaiti or third-country nationals, even three decades after they went missing. We stress the need to ensure close cooperation with all relevant parties and coordination with international mechanisms, including the ICRC, which has extensive experience in that regard.

The Security Council adopted unanimously resolution 2474 (2019) on missing persons in armed conflict. That issue is truly a hidden tragedy in all conflicts. The resolution must be translated into action and its provisions implemented in all conflict areas, including the conflict in Syria.

In conclusion, we call on the Syrian parties to cooperate with the Special Envoy, Mr. Pedersen, and his team in order to ensure progress on the release of detainees and on locating, or ascertaining the fate of, missing persons in Syria. That would represent a confidence-building measure between parties as part of the Special Envoy's efforts to resume the political process in Syria in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I thank the Under-Secretary-General and the two briefers from civil society.

We join other speakers in welcoming the fact that this long-overdue subject is now being debated in the Security Council. It is worth recalling that the arbitrary detention of civilians by the Syrian regime is one of the factors that catalysed protests in 2011. As others have noted, more than eight years later, that repressive practice is still ongoing. Tens of thousands of Syrians have been detained, tortured, subject to sexual violence and killed in detention centres by the regime since the start of the conflict. That is not to underplay what Da'esh has done. We agree that there is a very clear need for those who have committed appalling crimes for Da'esh also to be brought to justice. But today's debate is about a Government's persecution of its own people.

This year, after waiting for years, thousands of families were informed that their loved ones had died

in the detention centres with no explanation and no accountability. Many more are still waiting to find out if their relatives are alive or dead, which is unbelievably cruel. Other speakers have made reference to resolution 2474 (2019). In line with that resolution, the families must be informed of what has happened to their loved ones.

So I would like to echo the appeal of the United States representative today in calling for the release of all those arbitrarily detained. That is quite a dramatic step. It is important for it to happen soon. It is an important element of any political process.

I want to pick up on the calls from the civil society briefers for a step that the Syrian authorities take straightaway: they could agree to give the United Nations and the Commission of Inquiry access to detention facilities and agree to provide a list of names of all the detainees and their locations. Those are easy steps. I look to the representative of Syria to undertake to transmit those requests to his Government, and I would suggest that he let you, Madam President, on behalf of the Security Council, obtain an acknowledgement from his Government this week that those lists will be provided. I would like to include access to burial grounds on that list.

The United Kingdom is the penholder for the Human Rights Council resolution on Syria. We will continue in the Human Rights Council in Geneva to call for the release of the detainees and for access by independent monitors to detention facilities. I would like to use this occasion to also pay tribute to the work of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry and the brave journalists and non-governmental organizations that continue to document the violations and abuses.

A number of people have mentioned the importance that the Special Envoy attaches to this issue, and we too support all his efforts. We welcome the continued facilitation by Turkey and Russia of prisoner swaps between regime and opposition armed groups, including those released ahead of the Astana meeting on 1 August. However, that is by no means the same as the wholesale release of arbitrarily detained persons that the Council that has demanded in various resolutions.

I would like to make a broader point, if I may. Delivering justice for the families of those detained is not only the right and moral thing to do, but it is also a necessary if we are to tackle the drivers and root causes of Syria's conflict. A credible, substantive and

genuine political settlement will need to address the issue of political detainees. All Syrian citizens need to be able to live free from fear of arbitrary arrest, torture and execution. As we have said several times in the Security Council, if Syria cannot resolve the issues that led to the original conflict in 2011, it has no hope of rehabilitation and reconstruction within the country and no hope of reintegration into the international community of nations.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): Côte d'Ivoire welcomes the holding of this briefing on the issue of persons who are victims of enforced disappearance or who are detained in conditions that do not comply with international standards in this regard, particularly in the Syrian Arab Republic. We congratulate Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Dr. Hala and Ms. Amina Khouliani, members of civil society, for their thorough briefings.

In my country's view, this issue is all the more important given that formulating adequate responses to the plight of detained or missing persons is an integral part of the crisis resolution and peacebuilding processes. In the absence of appropriate responses, in accordance with international humanitarian law and human rights law, the situation of detained or missing persons contributes to fuelling resentment, and is therefore an obstacle to the conduct of any post-crisis and peacebuilding process. It thereby carries the seeds of the resurgence of conflicts. Accordingly, it seems necessary that this important dimension be taken into account in the ongoing peace efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria.

Even if, according to Ms. Reena Ghelani, Director for Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, there are no reliable statistics, the International Committee of the Red Cross has received about 10,000 requests for information on missing persons. These figures challenge the Council to consider the seriousness of the problem and take action to provide appropriate answers to this question, which comes in addition to the already worrisome humanitarian situation. In that regard, my delegation urges the Council to contribute further to the implementation of the relevant provisions of resolution 2474 (2019), on missing persons in armed conflict. The resolution represents a significant step forward in the normative framework and concrete measures,

taking into account the issue of persons detained or disappeared during conflicts. It aims to

“contribute to the process of confidence building between parties to armed conflict, expediting peace negotiations and settlement, transitional justice processes, reconciliation, peacebuilding and sustaining peace” (*resolution 2474 (2019), para. 16*).

My country also believes that international law relating to the fate of persons detained and disappeared during conflicts should apply to all warring parties in Syria. It is therefore incumbent upon the Syrian Government and the rebel groups to take all the necessary measures to ensure the protection of civilians, but also to ensure that detained persons are treated with dignity and in strict compliance with international standards in this regard. Similarly, it is their responsibility to fully contribute to investigations to identify and locate missing persons. Accordingly, my delegation believes that the registration of detainees, the appropriate training of the armed forces, the production and distribution of adequate means of identification, including to members of the armed forces and the establishment of grave-registration services and death registers will contribute to better management of the situation of detained or missing persons.

My country welcomes the reciprocal release of detainees in Syria on 31 July, under the fourth project of the working group on the release of detainees/abductees, handover of bodies and identification of missing persons, as provided for by the Astana process. This operation, designed to strengthen trust between the conflicting parties, is in addition to the first exchanges of detainees on 24 November 2018 and 12 February and 22 April 2019. My delegation therefore encourages the parties concerned to pursue these initiatives, which will enable families in particular to mourn and contribute to the return of peace and stability in Syria.

In conclusion, Côte d’Ivoire urges the warring parties in Syria to respect international humanitarian law, particularly with regard to the fate of detainees and missing persons. We also call on them to cease hostilities and give priority to a political solution, in accordance with the relevant provisions of resolution 2254 (2015).

Mrs. Cedano (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): Allow me to reiterate the Dominican Republic’s commitment to a comprehensive, credible

and inclusive political process in the Syrian Arab Republic that will open the doors to sustainable peace in that country once and for all.

We are grateful for today’s briefings, including that of Ms. DiCarlo’s, which confirm to us that when we consider the future of the Syrian Arab Republic, it is essential to address the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons resulting from the conflict in the country. In addition to having a humanitarian dimension, we consider it essential to building the population’s trust in the political process, as family reunification after a conflict touches the deepest fibres in society. First and foremost, the parties to the conflict have an obligation to ensure the physical safety and psychological dignity of persons detained, in accordance with international humanitarian law. In that context, we would like to highlight a few points.

To begin with, it is paramount to immediately halt all arbitrary detentions in the Syrian Arab Republic. It is also fundamental and an obligation of the parties to prevent disappearances resulting from hostilities or following any arrest. The unilateral release of detainees, particularly women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities, must take place without delay, and all forms of protection and access to basic education and health services that they require must be restored to them.

As principally responsible for the protection of the civilian population, the Syrian Government must first and foremost establish preventive measures that will enable it to account for persons immediately after their disappearance and thereby minimize the uncertainty and vulnerability of the families that they leave behind, particularly women, children and the elderly.

Secondly, it must facilitate the impartial and independent establishment of the causes and conditions by and in which thousands of Syrians lost their lives after being detained or abducted, including making the results of such investigations accessible to their families, including the dignified handling of their remains. We believe that both the families and civil society organizations can and should play a significant role in such matters to safeguard the credibility of the process, which will undoubtedly take years.

The Dominican Republic shares the genuine aspiration of the families of the disappeared to find out the truth concerning the whereabouts of their relatives, which we believe to be a right. Psychological, legal,

economic and protective support for those families is crucial to the process of healing and reconciliation. Failure to address those needs and respect the human rights of those released and their families will result in perpetuating feelings of resentment and exclusion for decades to come.

In conclusion, I reaffirm the importance that, in every individual case, once those responsible for the violations perpetrated have been identified, they must answer for their actions. If we aspire to achieving sustainable peace, the hundreds of thousands of wounds must be closed. Impunity is not a viable option.

Mrs. Van Vlierberge (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I thank Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo for her briefing. I also thank Ms. Amina Khouli and Dr. Hala for their moving testimony. We can only be inspired by their courage and dedication.

As we have already stressed many times, and will not cease from doing, there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria. A political solution through dialogue is the only way to achieve a stable and lasting peace. Such dialogue requires trust among the parties to the conflict. Creating such trust will therefore remain impossible in the absence of a horizon of justice and accountability.

In that regard, we continue to fully support the Special Envoy in his pursuit of undertaking concrete actions and confidence-building measures for the benefit of detainees, abductees and disappeared. We have taken note of the prisoner exchanges in recent months. The road ahead, however, remains long, as highlighted by Ms. DiCarlo and many of my colleagues who spoke before me.

Ms. Khouli and Dr. Hala just joined their voices to those of the thousands of Syrians whose close relatives have been arbitrarily detained in inhumane circumstances, most of whom by the Syrian Government. They also echoed the thousands upon thousands of Syrians who continue to wait for a sign of life from their loved ones. Human rights, international humanitarian law and the relevant Security Council resolutions impose clear obligations, which are being violated daily. Failure to comply with those obligations cannot be allowed to continue unanswered.

Justice must be done. We have established tools to that end. Belgium continues to support the work of the Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the

Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

Tens of thousands of people have been arbitrarily and illegally detained. They are detained without respect for their human rights, due process or access to a lawyer or their families, in inhumane conditions and while subjected to torture and sexual and gender-based violence, to name only a few examples. Women and children are disproportionately affected. All the parties to the conflict must ensure respect for the dignity and physical and psychological integrity of detainees.

We call on all Member States to use their influence on the parties to the conflict to promote the release of those arbitrarily and illegally detained. We call on all parties to exchange information concerning their detainees. We call for the United Nations to be provided with free and unconditional access to all places of detention. Victims and their families have the right to justice and reparations, which also means that the Syrian authorities provide them with the necessary documentation for that purpose, including duly completed death certificates.

Many families are living in uncertainty with regard to the fate of their loved ones. The impact of disappearances on individuals, families and communities is one of the most devastating and lasting consequences of armed conflict. We are convinced that reconciliation and peace efforts will be put in jeopardy if entire families are left completely in the dark with regard to the fate of their loved ones, with no prospect of reparations, while impunity for the disappearances is allowed to prevail. We recall resolution 2474 (2019), which was recently adopted by the Council. Families have a right to information that must be respected by all parties to the conflict.

In our role as members of the Security Council, the fate of persons detained, abducted or reported missing must call us to action. Uncertainty and the search for answers can last for several generations, thereby marking the history of entire communities and risking the creation of new conflicts. Instead of sowing the seeds of discord, let us plant the seeds for achieving a just, stable and lasting peace.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): First of all, my delegations wishes to thank Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo,

Dr. Hala and Ms. Khoulani for their briefings, which provided insight on this very important issue. Indonesia wishes to highlight three points.

First, we agree that the progress on the issue of detainees and missing persons is indeed important and could send a positive signal to the Syrian people and the international community. Indonesia appreciates the determination of the Astana guarantors to advancing their efforts within the context of the relevant working group, of which the United Nations is also a member. The working group is indeed needed to build confidence and trust among the Syrian parties, and we hope that the Group will generate more concrete results on this particular issue.

Secondly, since this is already a complex issue, Indonesia believes that we should genuinely improve the ongoing efforts without complicating the situation. Certainly, we should also avoid politicizing the issue, as that would lead us nowhere. A constructive approach based on enhanced communication and dialogue is key in that regard.

Thirdly, it remains Indonesia's view that the international community should strengthen its efforts to achieve and support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process with full respect for the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. We will always support a comprehensive settlement to the Syrian issue through negotiations and peaceful means.

In the same vein, I wish to recall the legal obligations of all parties under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as well as all relevant decisions of the Security Council, and, of course, the need for every country to promote the human rights of its citizens.

We also take note of the briefing by Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo with regard to the efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen to prioritize the situation of detainees, abductees and missing persons, as well as the activities of the working group on this issue. Although the work of the working group is still limited, we believe that we are moving in the right direction and need to nurture that development.

In conclusion, let me also reiterate my delegation's full support for Special Envoy Pedersen's mandate in advancing the political process in Syria and leading the

way to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, based on resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo for her briefing on developments in the Syrian Arab Republic. We listened carefully to the briefings made by Dr. Hala, head of Syria Bright Future, and Ms. Amina Khoulani of Families for Freedom.

We were perplexed by the initiative taken by our Western colleagues to call for today's meeting. The thoughts it evokes are not the most positive. Instead of reliable information, we have once again heard speculation based on unverified and extremely biased information regarding the situation in Syria. The sources of such information have lied time and again. We view steps to exacerbate and distort the situation in and around Syria as part of an attempt to continue to hinder the political settlement process in the country.

I will be frank. We were very disappointed about the statements made by our Western colleagues, in particular that of our American colleague. Since the United States and States that support it have initiated today's meeting on the topic, we expected them to finally provide us with information on the situation in the territory of Syria that they de facto occupy. What are the laws governing the lives of its people? How is justice being administered? That is the big question. In whose interests are large armed groups and law enforcement bodies — if they can even be called that — being prepared? How many people are detained or missing? Regrettably, we have not received any answers to those questions today.

The information we receive from human rights organizations is, frankly, horrifying. We have repeatedly stated that politicizing humanitarian and human rights issues is unacceptable. However, we have again heard accusations being levelled against only one of the parties — the official authorities in Damascus — while outright terrorists, who, let me remind the Council, have introduced the practice of public executions and torture in that country, are being presented as innocent victims. We are convinced that the international community should instead, not only in word but in deed, help Syria recover after the very serious crisis, which, incidentally, was fuelled and exacerbated by outside forces, including by some of those who now express concern about the humanitarian situation in the country. Nonetheless, action should not

fan the flames of scandal but consistently strengthen Government bodies and the justice system, assist economic recovery and repair broken connections among the people of the country.

Allow me to inform the Council that the thirteenth international meeting on Syria in the Astana format was held in Nur-Sultan on 1 and 2 August. As the Council knows, as part of the process, we have a successfully functioning working group on detentions, abductions and missing persons, which is comprised of representatives of Russia, Iran, Turkey and experts from the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). That unique mechanism has demonstrated its effectiveness in restoring trust among the Syrian parties. Last week, on 31 July, the fourth operation to liberate detainees took place and an exchange of prisoners was conducted on a 14-for-15 basis. In this way, the total number of persons released thanks to the Astana working group is in excess of 110 people. Similar operations took place in November 2018 and in February and April this year. In addition, it is important to recall the common practice of the local exchange of prisoners in Syria, which occurs almost daily.

The group is also focused on the issue of missing persons. Together with experts of the United Nations and the ICRC, we are in the process of developing procedures and modalities for compiling databases of people who are considered by the Syrian Government and the opposition to be missing, as well as for further action in that area. At the same time, we must recall that such issues are extremely sensitive. We count on our Security Council partners to understand that it is a humanitarian issue that should not be publicized, much less politicized. We have serious concerns about the fact that addressing the issue in the Security Council could have the opposite effect and disrupt the very complex process of establishing trust among the parties to the conflict. We would hope that no one is interested in such a negative development. We would also like to ask our Western colleagues who support the armed Syrian opposition to help the international community determine what happened to the thousands of people who were forcibly held by militants in eastern Ghouta, Homs and south-western Syria and are currently reported to be missing. It is obvious that those questions should not be posed to Damascus.

All those present here, as well as the representatives of interested organizations, have had the opportunity to

familiarize themselves with the most recent report of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on the humanitarian situation in Syria. The maps show locations where humanitarian activity is being conducted at both the domestic and international levels. The area beyond the Euphrates river is a blank spot on the map and not because the situation is fine there. On the contrary, the north-east is in ruins. According to information from our military, more than 300 terrorist acts took place in June and July alone. According to Western non-governmental organizations, more than 1,200 people — most of them civilians — died as a result of mass coalition air strikes in Deir ez-Zor province just in the first quarter of 2019 alone.

The situation in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Rukban remains complex. However, thanks to the efforts of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic and of the Government of Syria, more than 17,000 people have been able to leave Rukban. We will continue to work with the United Nations to address the issue of returning refugees and ensure they have all they need.

The situation in the Al-Hol camp is truly catastrophic. Half of the camp's residents are women and children. If preserving the status quo in the camp and spreading jihadist ideology are not goals in and of themselves, then it is high time to consider transferring that territory to Syrian control in order to address the IDP issue. However, for the time being, we are under the impression that the Al-Hol camp, where 11,000 of the 73,000 residents are foreign citizens, and the jails in the north-west that are not under the control of Damascus are just one big concentration camp.

We are also concerned about the situation in the Al-Tanf area. With regard to the territories that have been listed, we recall once again that the occupying Power bears responsibility for the people in the occupied territories, in accordance with the Geneva Conventions.

In conclusion, I would like to pause to underscore that, although we listened to our United States colleagues regarding the humanitarian and human rights aspects of the situation in Syria, that does not mean that the ongoing illegal American military presence in that country is legitimate in the eyes of Syrians or the entire international community. Based on the conflicting statements of American leadership, it would appear that the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been

defeated in Syria and Iraq, whereas combating ISIL was the initial goal announced for the American presence in the area. However, continued American presence leads us to believe that there are other goals that are not in line with the principles of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic,

For its part, Russia will continue providing the necessary assistance to help the Syrians overcome their difficulties and reach political agreements regarding a political settlement, the humanitarian situation and post-conflict recovery. We will do that both nationally and in multilateral formats in cooperation with the interested parties. We call on all forces of good to join those efforts.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo for her briefing. I also listened to the statements made by Dr. Hala and Ms. Khouhani.

The United Nations attaches great importance to addressing the issue of detainees and missing persons in Syria. The Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Pedersen, told the Security Council that he had five priority objectives to achieve, the second of which is making progress on detainees, abductees and missing persons. For some time now, Special Envoy Pedersen has conducted good offices and maintained a positive and cooperative relationship with all Syrian parties, including the Syrian Government. China supports Special Envoy Pedersen in his continued dialogue and consultation with all Syrian parties and encourages all parties to build mutual trust through measures such as the exchange of prisoners.

The Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2474 (2019) in June, on the subject of missing persons in armed conflict; it should be implemented in earnest. Recently, with the efforts of the relevant working group under the Astana framework, the Syrian Government and its opposition simultaneously released some prisoners. Good progress has therefore been made in that regard. The working group has committed to pushing all Syrian parties towards making progress on releasing prisoners of war, detainees and abductees, handing over bodies and identifying missing persons. That is an effective and necessary mechanism that will lead to increased mutual trust among all Syrian parties. China supports the working group in continuing to play its constructive role.

China is concerned by the overall humanitarian situation in Syria and the livelihood of the Syrian people. Years of conflict have resulted in a tremendous need for humanitarian assistance in Syria, and economic sanctions further erode the living conditions of the Syrian people. The international community should continue to provide monetary and material assistance to the Syrian people and support the rebuilding efforts of the Syrian Government and people.

The international community, in carrying out its humanitarian work in Syria, should fully respect the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria; strictly follow Security Council resolutions, the United Nations humanitarian assistance guidelines and the relevant provisions of international law; adhere to the principles of neutrality, fairness and non-politicization; and strengthen communication and coordination with the Syrian Government.

A political solution is the only way to settle the Syrian issue. The international community should support the United Nations in playing its main role of offering its good offices and support Special Envoy Pedersen in his effort to advance the political process, in accordance with the Syrian-owned and Syrian-led principle and resolution 2254 (2015).

Syrian parties should proceed by taking into account the future of the country and the fundamental interests of its people, defuse differences through negotiations, advance national reconciliation and gradually find a political solution, in line with the reality of Syria and the legitimate concerns of all parties.

The international community should encourage the Syrian parties to voluntarily adopt measures that are conducive to reconciliation and continuously build mutual trust. Moreover, efforts should be undertaken to continue to support the role of the Astana process, with a view to assisting all Syrian parties in engaging in full dialogue and consultation.

Mr. Duclos (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We appreciate the convening of this meeting and thank the speakers for their enlightening briefings.

We would like to begin by underscoring the importance of the topic that brings us together today, in particular the high levels of human suffering, the economic impact and the breakdown of the society that lead to the detention and disappearance of persons in

conflict situations, which is especially dire in the case of Syria.

We must remember that international humanitarian law provides us with a mandatory minimum basis for limiting unacceptable practices that violate the dignity of individuals and, therefore, of the international community as a whole. Consequently, Peru regrets and condemns any kind of excess and abuse of that international norm, as such practices only hinder and undermine peace in Syria.

Making progress in that area would therefore represent a gesture of humanity that has the courage to attend to the open wounds and ease tensions, both of the families concerned and of Syrian society. That would also help to create a better climate of understanding in order to advance the process of political dialogue, accountability and reconciliation. Peru commends the work done in that regard by the Astana group, which is achieving auspicious results, including the release of dozens of detainees since November 2018.

The severity and scale of the problem, however, require even greater efforts. As Special Envoy Geir Pedersen noted in April,

“there is considerable room for improvement in terms of the procedures to be followed during future release operations” (*S/PV.8520, p.3*).

In that vein, we welcome the ongoing engagement and proactive role of the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross in the sessions of the Astana group and in the implementation of release operations on the ground.

We also believe that it is crucial to have more accurate records of information on the situation of detained or disappeared persons, which will require the implementation of more efficient data collection, management and protection systems, and a more fluid exchange among the parties. That also entails the development and adoption of national laws to ensure the protection of detainees before, during and after their release, as well as the minimum coverage of the material, psychological and legal needs of the families of the disappeared.

In that regard, we highlight the main role that the international community can play in those matters, whether through the adoption of a set of best practices and technical standards, the provision of financial resources or the positive influence that some States can

exert on the parties to the conflict. Particular attention should be given to the cases of missing Syrian children, given the extreme situation of vulnerability to which they are exposed.

As noted, it is crucial that the Syrian Government and the opposition focus on broader solutions that transcend the current schemes of the individual and reciprocal exchange of prisoners and consider the simultaneous release of groups of people, based on the necessary political will.

I conclude by underscoring the importance of resolution 2474 (2019) for those purposes, as well as the renewed sense of urgency that we must accord the settlement of the drastic situation in Syria, the victims of which include numerous innocent families.

Mrs. Mele Colifa (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): We join previous delegations in conveying our appreciation for the convening of this meeting. We also thank Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, Dr. Hala and Ms. Amina Khouliani for sharing their moving and regrettable testimonies and briefings on the issue before us today.

Although the humanitarian situation in Syria remains difficult, the issue of detainees and missing persons must remain a core issue, of which the Security Council must continue to accord its useful consideration. It should be recalled that this issue is one of the five priority objectives, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), and that it is not only necessary to building confidence between the parties to the conflict but would also ease tensions with the millions of refugees in neighbouring countries who lack information on the whereabouts and well-being of their families who are allegedly detained or missing, including women and children. Recent reports on this issue are clear and unambiguous. While arbitrary detentions across the country continue to be perpetrated by all warring parties, nowhere has the phenomenon been more widespread than in areas under Government control.

In that context, the parties should take all possible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of hostilities and provide their relatives with any information they have about their whereabouts. Moreover, we recall that resolutions 2254 (2015) and 2258 (2015) urge all parties to the conflict to release any person arbitrarily detained, especially women and children, and call on the Government authorities to immediately release any individual whose continued detention cannot be legally justified. We also believe

that the families of victims of enforced disappearances have the right to know the truth about the circumstances of the disappearance and fate of the victims and to recover the remains of their relatives who allegedly died while detained or were executed.

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea commends the work of the working group on detainees, abductees, the handover of bodies and identification of missing persons, with the participation of the United Nations, and encourages them to spare no effort to secure the combined release of as many people as possible. In that regard, we welcome the recent prisoner exchange in the framework of the Astana process and we agree with other delegations that all detainees must be released.

On several occasions, the Secretary-General has noted in his reports the situation of the personnel of United Nations agencies, programmes or funds who have been arrested or have disappeared in Syria. We therefore call on all parties to take all measures to ensure that they are released and allowed to continue their humanitarian work.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that progress in reaching a political agreement and enduring peace in Syria cannot be made without urgently addressing the need to deliver justice to Syrian victims and survivors, as well as their families. Accordingly, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea supports initiatives to establish a national reparations mechanism in the Syrian Arab Republic to assess damages, hear complaints and award appropriate individual or community reparations and other suitable remedies, financial or otherwise.

Mr. Matjila (South Africa): Allow me to begin by thanking Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo for her briefing. I also thank the civil society briefers, Dr. Hala and Ms. Khouliani, for their statements this morning.

Since the creation of the United Nations in 1945 from the vestiges of the brutal and devastating Second World War, the United Nations and its Member States have had to acknowledge and address the challenges of missing and detained persons as a result of conflict. Today, in a world of seemingly endless conflicts, the question of missing and detained persons prevails in all parts of the world — in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, Palestine, Western Sahara, Colombia and other trouble spots worldwide.

And since the colonial subjugation of Africans and the slave trade of centuries past, many Africans have perished in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Four hundred years after we were first forcefully removed from Africa as slaves, we are still waiting for full accountability for the persons who went missing during those years.

The long-term impact of being unable to account for missing persons in armed conflict extends beyond the victims themselves and, as we have heard here today, has lasting and prolonged consequences for affected families, friends, communities and countries as a whole. In that regard, all parties to a conflict, be they an occupying Power, a State or a non-State actor, must be cognizant of and respect their legal and moral obligations to ensure that the people within their borders, areas of control or occupation are protected and that detailed records are kept of those detained. We would also like to highlight the importance of addressing the return of mortal remains to families as a way to begin the healing process.

From our own history and experience of national reconciliation, I would like to highlight the importance of truth, justice and accountability in solidifying the peace process, bringing closure to families and beginning the process of reconciliation and integration. The ultimate goal is long-term peace, stability and prosperity for all — victims and the State alike. In that regard, my delegation would like to welcome the efforts of the Astana group and the United Nations that resulted in the recent prisoner swap on 31 July between the Syrian Government and the opposition parties in Abu Al-Zindeen, in northern Aleppo. South Africa urges all parties to agree to additional prisoner exchanges and to move away from one-to-one exchanges in favour of the release of larger numbers of detainees by both parties to the conflict.

In order to continue to build on that positive momentum, South Africa calls on all parties to make every effort to release civilians — particularly women, children, the elderly, the sick and those with disabilities — from detention as a gesture of good faith and confidence-building among the parties to the conflict. No child should be kept in detention indefinitely, under any circumstances.

In the meantime, and in order to enhance accountability to our own societies and communities, let us make efforts to welcome and receive our nationals

into our countries from Syrian refugee and detention centres. That would support Mr. Geir Pedersen's role in facilitating political dialogue, particularly on the matter of prisoners and missing persons, among the various stakeholders in the Syrian conflict

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate South Africa's position that the only way to achieve long-term peace and stability in Syria is through an inclusive Syrian-led and -owned political dialogue, facilitated by the United Nations, on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015). In order to continue to make progress on the matter of missing persons and detainees, progress must be made in the political process.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my national capacity.

I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo's for her comprehensive briefing. I would also like to thank the civil society representatives, Dr. Hala and Ms. Amina Khouliani, for their valuable briefings today. Poland will continue to support all efforts aimed at the creation of a peaceful, sovereign, democratic, independent and integral Syria. However, strong support for the United Nations-led process in Geneva and the Special Envoy for Syria is not enough. We need practical steps, and Special Envoy Pedersen indicated them in his five-point plan presented to the Security Council earlier this year (see S/PV.8475). In that framework, there is the extremely important issue of detainees, including abductees and missing persons in Syria.

Eight years of war have brought unspeakable suffering to the once peaceful country. Thousands of people remain in arbitrary detention, where many are subjected to various forms of ill-treatment, including torture and rape. At the same time, thousands remain missing, with their relatives deprived of any information of their fate.

Poland calls for the release of all arbitrarily held detainees, particularly children, women and the elderly. Progress in that area would help to raise the level of confidence between the parties and would greatly contribute to the efforts to reach a lasting peace in Syria. It is one of the most important, if not the most important confidence-building measure between the parties to the conflict. Work on that particular issue should be implemented now as a priority and further steps should swiftly follow. We strongly believe that this could be one of the first steps in enabling a

negotiated political transition process. It requires the full and constructive engagement of all the parties to the conflict to participate in the negotiations in good faith and without preconditions.

In conclusion, continued efforts to build confidence between the parties, including endeavours on the issue of detainees and missing persons, remain high on the list of priorities to contribute to the political process. It is also a matter of respect for the fundamental human rights standards with which all sides are obliged to fully comply.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

Mr. Falouh (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, my country, the Syrian Arab Republic, rejects and denounces the systematic practices, as seen on the part of the permanent delegations of the United States of America, France and the United Kingdom. Those practices exploit the Chamber provided by the Security Council in order to denigrate the Syrian Government. Those delegations have no legal, or indeed moral, legitimacy to call for the holding of a meeting that focuses on humanitarian issues in my country, Syria, because to date those Governments have been involved in the direct military aggression visited upon my country. Those Governments have harboured armed terrorist groups, killed thousands of Syrians, destroyed their property, abducted, displaced them and stripped them of their homes and property. Those Governments have also imposed unilateral coercive economic measures on the Syrian people.

Those Governments have the responsibility to ensure the maintenance of international peace and security. However, they have not really shown an interest in human rights, the well-being of people or the sovereignty of countries. For centuries those Governments have behaved immorally. They have distorted noble humanitarian goals for their own agendas. They have manipulated the principles and provisions of international humanitarian law and the Charter of the United Nations to implement an ongoing, hostile colonial agenda that legitimizes foreign interference and seeks to topple legitimate regimes by force, thereby destabilizing countries along sectarian

and religious lines. The list of examples of such conduct is long and one of which all members are aware.

My Government does not oppose in principle the convening of meetings on the situation in Syria, including all aspects, when the sole purpose of such meetings is to exchange points of view and opinions in a transparent, professional and sincere way in order to assist my country and to find genuine solutions that will restore security and stability, as well as prosperity, for all Syrian citizens without exception. Those citizens have been worn down and are exhausted by the terrorist war imposed on them for nine years now.

I call on the Security Council to seriously consider what has been spent by the Governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France, along with other countries in the region, in terms of budget, efforts and weapons to ultimately harm Syria, its land, its people and its Government and to settle new and old scores with that Government. In so doing, they are risking the lives, wealth and civilization of Syria and its people. We are deeply concerned that those Governments continue to impose their positions and policies in many areas of the work of the United Nation and on some of its civil servants so as to ultimately sow a campaign of disinformation and to distort the truth about what is taking place in Syria. They work on the basis of dubious information and they use sly and cunning terms in their reports and statements in order to mislead international opinion and conceal the suffering of civilians and the misdeeds of armed terrorist groups. For the past nine years, those groups have used civilians as human shields in the regions that they control. They have attacked hospitals and schools and turned them into military facilities and detention centres for abductees. Those terrorist groups have bombarded civilian areas with indiscriminate bombs of hatred.

The Security Council remains unable to find the means to really make it possible to tackle the primary cause of the suffering of the Syrian people, namely, terrorism and those who support it, owing to the hostile positions adopted by many Governments towards my country, Syria, including by the leadership of the Governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France. Those Governments refuse to combat terrorism, which plagues many regions of Syria, in particular the north-western part of the country, in order to protect the Al-Nusra Front terrorist group. Those very Governments supported

armed terrorist groups that exfiltrated abductees from Aleppo and rural Latakia to Turkey. Their fate is still unknown. Those terrorist groups also abducted thousands of civilians and put them in Al-Tawba prison, in eastern Ghouta. Representatives will remember the video recordings that were disseminated by the terrorists when they controlled that region. The video recordings showed the cruelty of those groups when they handcuffed women and children and threw them into cages and out into the street in heart-breaking and horrific scenes, which recalled the very worst of the darkest times of slavery.

To deliberately ignore referring to the fate of thousands of missing persons and detainees at the hands of terrorist groups and the suffering of their families affirms once again the policy of double standard that we see being adopted by a number of United Nations mechanisms and countries in dealing with humanitarian issues. The information that has been gathered following the freeing of eastern Ghouta and the eastern sections of Aleppo, as well as many other regions of Syria, shows that terrorist groups had assassinated thousands of Syrians and buried them in mass graves. Every village town and region in Syria that has been the victim of terrorism has its own tale of the scandalous acts perpetrated by those Governments that have supported religious and extremist terrorists, financed and armed terrorists, and afforded them political and media coverage while characterizing them as “the moderate Syrian opposition”, when what we are actually talking about is terrorist groups that include thousands of foreign terrorist fighters.

Some people are determined to exhaust the Council by weighing down its agenda with meetings. At the same time, the Government of my country is dealing with the issue of detainees and missing persons from a purely humanitarian perspective, setting aside any political manipulation of humanitarian issues. The working group on the release of detainees/abductees, handover of bodies and identification of missing persons has been established as part of the Astana process. The working group is responsible for dealing with the issues of missing persons — in terms of providing clarification around their fate — and of the release of detainees. It is also responsible for dealing with prisoner swaps. My Government is approaching the issue constructively and believes that the working group is also functioning constructively. Practical measures have been put in place, the most recent of which was an exchange

of prisoners last week, with the participation of the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. We commend this work. This humanitarian issue is being exploited for improper purposes, which casts a shadow on the work and endeavours of this mechanism, just as it casts a shadow over the positive measures that have been put in place.

We would also say that the initiatives for national reconciliation and the efforts of the Syrian Red Crescent have borne fruit and made it possible to develop significant measures on this issue. We affirm that relevant legal authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic are exercising their privileges and competencies in addressing this issue, pursuant to the Constitution and the substantive rules and procedures provided for in civil and criminal law, including the code of criminal procedure.

My country is participating in serious and determined efforts undertaken with the Iranian and Russian guarantors of the Astana process and cooperating with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General's work in order to achieve a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political process, without foreign interference of any kind. In Syria, we are committed to finding a national political Syrian solution that is lasting in nature. We are committed to destroying hotbeds of terrorism in our country. We are also committed to removing all occupying foreign forces, whose presence is an attack on the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria. We will not accept the blackmail practiced by some parties in the Security Council or on Syrian territory.

In conclusion, over the past eight years the Security Council has heard many provocative statements against the Government of my country. Many of these statements lack all credibility and are based, in the majority of cases, on absolutely unreliable information. What we are seeing is an attempt to provide disinformation. We hope that, now that these eight years have elapsed, the Council will be able to adopt an objective approach by listening to the testimony of families whose members have been subject to the worst forms of torture at the hands of those whom the countries that have called for the convening of this meeting call the "armed moderate opposition" — a moderate opposition that has gone so far as to throw abductees alive into ovens. We do not want to see parties invited to these meetings that are close to the intelligence services of Governments that

have supported and financed the terrorism responsible for the worst possible crimes against the Syrian people.

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

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I will be brief. I just want to say for the record that the Security Council can discuss any issue it wants relating to international peace and security. The representative of Syria might like to know that nine countries called for this meeting and not a single country objected, so it absolutely is a valid subject for the Council to discuss, and it would be better if he used his remarks to actually engage with the issue at hand, rather than to insult the Council.

It was interesting to hear about the prisoner swaps, but we are also very interested in the issues of the detainees — ordinary people arbitrarily detained — which a number of speakers, including the civil society briefers, addressed this morning. I therefore repeat my request: I would ask the Syrian authorities to kindly provide a list of who is detained, where they are detained, and for those people who have died their burial sites. I would also ask that they allow, if not the Commission of Inquiry, then the International Committee of the Red Cross access to the detention sites.

Notwithstanding the parallel universe that the Syrian representative described, there is a war in Syria because the Syrian Government is attacking its own people, pure and simple. The way out of that is to cooperate with the Special Envoy in ensuring a sustainable peace process and allowing the United Nations to have humanitarian access and help civilians, as it has been trying to do since 2012.

The President: The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has asked for the floor to make a further statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Falouh (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): In response to what the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom has said today, which is similar to what she has said in previous meetings in which the situation in Syria has been discussed, I would like to reaffirm yet again that asking questions is the right of all parties concerned as long as the sole purpose is to reach serious solutions based on the Charter of the United Nations and the resolutions of the Security Council, all of which have stipulated the need to respect the sovereignty, independence, unity

and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as well as the need to eradicate terrorism, putting an end to it in all its forms, including the support for it.

I would therefore like to ask the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, as well as the representatives of Governments that have an illegal military presence in my country, Syria, to inform the Security Council of the date when they will end their aggressive and illegal military presence and activities on Syrian soil. I would also ask that they inform the Council when they intend to put an end to the unilateral coercive economic measures imposed on the Syrian people through which they are seeking to undermine the reconstruction process and the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes. I would also like them to inform the Council of when they intend to put an end to their interference in a political process that is supposed to be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, without any foreign interference whatsoever. Most importantly, I would ask that these countries inform the Security Council of their position with respect to the terrorist activities of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and the Al-Nusra Front in Idlib and other areas in north-western Syria. Together with other terrorist groups, comprised in part of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters, the Al-Nusra Front is using crossing points along the border with Turkey to smuggle terrorists and weapons and funds into Syria.

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

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I am sorry, but I cannot let some of the preceding statements go unchallenged.

The United Kingdom and its partners do not support terrorism. We fight terrorism wherever we see it. The Syrian representative's last remarks were quite unjustified and wholly without foundation and I invite him to withdraw them. We do not support terrorists. It is that simple.

On the other issues concerning the deadline, it is in Syria's hands. When there is a viable political process in

Syria, the rehabilitation of Syria and its reconstruction, financed by Western money, can start. But until there is a viable political process brokered by the United Nations, we will not be able to start the reconstruction. We have made that abundantly clear in the Council. The way forward lies in Syria's hands, and nothing that we have said today about the detainee issue contravenes the sovereignty, territorial integrity or unity of Syria. People in Syria simply want to know where their family members are.

I note that he has not answered the question. We would like him to go and transmit to his authorities requests from the Council to provide information about the detainees and to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to them. That is a very simple request. It does not trample upon sovereignty. Other people allow the ICRC access to their detention facilities in their countries. We are simply asking for the same.

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

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Frankly, I did not want to take the floor once again, but after listening to the two statements made by my United Kingdom colleague, I cannot help thinking that she wants to demonstrate that there is unity within the Council on the issues that she just brought up, whereas her communication with the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic was more akin to what a prosecutor says to an accused person. We believe that to be unacceptable.

In our own statement, we raised a number of questions that she and her Western colleagues have yet to answer. If we are to turn this meeting into a court proceeding, as she is attempting to do, then the ones who should be on trial are those who caused the country to end up in its current state through their external interference. I ask that this be borne in mind.

The meeting rose at 12.10 p.m.