



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

8694th meeting

Thursday, 19 December 2019, 10.50 a.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Ms. Norman-Chalet/Mr. Barkin (United States of America)

<i>Members:</i>	Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
	Dominican Republic	Mr. Trullols Yabra
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	France	Mrs. Gueguen
	Germany	Mr. Heusgen
	Indonesia	Mr. Djani
	Kuwait	Mr. Aljarallah
	Peru	Mr. Popolizio Bardales
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	South Africa	Mr. Mabhongo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . . .	Ms. Pierce

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/949)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.50 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/949)

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

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

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

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2019/949, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018).

I now give the floor to Ms. Mueller.

Ms. Mueller: With the end of 2019 approaching, I am afraid that the humanitarian situation for the people in many parts of Syria is worse than when the year began. The most recent report of the Secretary-General (S/2019/949) provides updates about many concerning developments. I would like to touch on a few of these developments today and highlight the ongoing humanitarian efforts aimed at assisting people in need. I will also speak to the continued importance of cross-border humanitarian operations, and I will conclude by highlighting several trends that may increasingly shape the humanitarian outlook in Syria during the year ahead.

To begin with, in north-west Syria, the situation remains alarming. Syrian Government forces and their allies continue to shell and conduct air strikes on areas under the control of non-State armed groups, including

listed terrorist entities, in Idlib and Aleppo. For their part, non-State armed groups have escalated attacks against areas controlled by Government forces in southern Idlib and Aleppo.

Civilians on both sides of the front line suffer the consequences. On 20 November, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that a missile reportedly fired from Government-held territory hit the Qah al-Qadim camp in Idlib. At least 16 people were allegedly killed, and 30 more were injured. The following day, on 21 November, ground-based attacks on several neighbourhoods of the Government-held city of Aleppo reportedly killed seven children and injured 29 others. Some 23 civilians were reportedly killed in little more than 24 hours, with many more wounded.

Medical personnel and facilities have also suffered. OHCHR confirmed that, on 4 and 6 November, a total of four separate health-care facilities in Idlib were affected by hostilities. At least three medical personnel were reported injured, and medical activities were interrupted. At the same time, the listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham continues to harass and intimidate health-care services providers and other civilians in areas under its control.

Across north-west Syria, civilians live the consequences of the continued violence. Humanitarian networks report that hostilities have displaced up to 60,000 people in Idlib in recent weeks. Rain, cold and other winter conditions have compounded hardship for many displaced families and their host communities.

At the same time, the price of fuel required for heating remains above the national average, owing to a supply shortage and inflation linked to the depreciation of the Syrian pound on the unofficial market. Earlier this month, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs received reports of families in Idlib burning tires, old clothes and other household items to stay warm.

Humanitarian organizations are doing everything possible to assist the most vulnerable. Partners continue to provide food assistance to newly displaced households, increase health-care services in areas that are receiving an influx of internally displaced persons and provide emergency protection services. In recent months, the World Food Programme has increased the number of people to be assisted via its cross-border modalities to more than 1 million people per month.

Tens of thousands of people have received supplies, services and support, including education materials, non-food items, clean water, shelter, emergency nutrition and winter supplies.

By some measures, the intensity of hostilities remains below levels seen in the middle of the year, when fighting was most acute in northern Hama and southern Idlib. Nonetheless, the impact of current hostilities in north-west Syria remains concerning. As the Secretary-General continues to warn,

“A full-scale military offensive would result in a devastating humanitarian cost for the 3 million people living in the area. It must be avoided”
(S/2019/949, para. 51).

In this context, the internal United Nations Headquarters board of inquiry established by the Secretary-General continues its work to investigate a series of incidents that have occurred in north-west Syria since September 2018 causing damage or destruction to civilian facilities.

In north-east Syria, the humanitarian situation remains serious, even as hostilities have decreased in recent weeks. After Turkey and allied non-State armed groups launched Operation Peace Spring in the area between Tall Abyad and Ra’s Al-Ayn in Syria on 9 October, more than 200,000 people fled the area. As of 26 November, 123,000 people had returned to their areas of origin. More than 70,000 people remain displaced from Al-Hasakah, Raqqa and Aleppo governorates. Nearly 17,000 people have fled to Iraq.

Humanitarian organizations have mounted a significant response so as to assist the hundreds of thousands of people affected by hostilities in the north-east. As the Secretary-General notes, humanitarian organizations in the area have been very adaptive in order to ensure that the necessary assistance reaches those most in need. With approximately 1.8 million people in need in north-east Syria, the task is considerable.

Rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access remains essential for all facets of the ongoing humanitarian response in the north-east. Assessments must be facilitated in order to identify the most pressing needs and vulnerable populations. Supply lines via the M4 highway and various border crossings must remain open for humanitarian cargo. The delivery of humanitarian assistance must be allowed without interference by the parties. Finally, monitoring missions must be allowed to confirm that needs are being met. We expect all parties

to the conflict to facilitate a sustained and scaled-up coordinated response.

The situation in Al-Hol camp also requires a dedicated and urgent response. As noted in the Secretary-General’s report, some 46,400 people remain in the camp, 94 per cent of whom are women and children. I join OHCHR in urging Governments to immediately take back their nationals, who are the most vulnerable. Many of those individuals, including orphans and unaccompanied children, may require further assistance, given the presence of potential abuse and trauma. Ultimately, though, the best chance they have of a better future is for their Governments to respond.

As the Under-Secretary-General stressed in his briefing last month, the humanitarian situation in north-west and north-east Syria would be markedly worse without the cross-border operation. The aid provided through the modalities set out in the relevant resolutions have staved off an even larger humanitarian crisis inside Syria. Without the cross-border operation, we would see an immediate end of aid supporting millions of civilians. That would cause a rapid increase in hunger and disease, resulting in death, suffering and further displacement — including across borders — for a vulnerable population that has already suffered unspeakable tragedy as a result of almost nine years of conflict. As the Secretary-General notes in his latest report, he counts on

“Security Council members to ensure that the United Nations is authorized to meet the needs of all who need humanitarian assistance, including by the swift renewal of the modalities set out in its resolution 2165 (2014) and subsequent resolutions”
(S/2019/949, para. 55).

In a letter to Council members yesterday, the Emergency Relief Coordinator made clear the position of the United Nations on the importance of maintaining all four border crossings, including Tall Abyad. The timely renewal of cross-border resolution is vital to ensuring that lifesaving work in Syria continues.

In Rukban, efforts continue to assist the remaining population until durable solutions can be found for them. Despite repeated efforts, the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent have been unable to return to the area since September to support voluntary departures to shelters in Government-controlled areas. Efforts continue in order to secure the necessary

agreements from all parties for a humanitarian mission to proceed in a safe manner. We remain hopeful that it will proceed in the weeks ahead. Many Rukban residents express their desire to leave the area. At least 640 people have left the camp for areas under the Syrian Government through their own means since the previous United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent mission. Others are expected to follow. Financial constraints, however, prevent others from being able to leave the camp without support.

In the meantime, I am encouraged that, earlier this month, the Syrian Government permitted the United Nations to conduct monitoring missions to the two shelters in Homs where people from Rukban pass through. We hope that such access will continue in the weeks to come. Across the country, I urge all parties — States and armed groups — to spare civilians and civilian infrastructure and to facilitate humanitarian activities without hindrance. For humanitarian reasons and as a matter of international humanitarian law, human suffering must be minimized.

Before the Security Council concludes its work for the year, I would like to draw members' attention to several trends that may become more significant in 2020 for civilians living through the Syrian crisis. Three of those deserve special consideration.

First, the scale of humanitarian needs in Syria will remain vast. As members will have seen in the *Global Humanitarian Overview 2020*, which was released earlier this month, current estimates project that some 11 million people in Syria will need regular humanitarian assistance. Five million of those are in acute need of assistance. The United Nations estimates that the overall financial requirements for the humanitarian response in 2020 will be similar to the \$3.3 billion requested in 2019. Moreover, across the region, some 5.6 million Syrian refugees need assistance, more than 70 per cent of whom live in poverty. The current plan to assist that refugee population and their host community remains considerable, with projected costs of \$5.2 billion. Financial support for both the response in Syria and the wider region remains vital.

I am pleased to confirm that, earlier this month, the Under-Secretary-General selected Syria to receive a provisional allocation of \$25 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund Underfunded Emergencies Window. Those funds will be used to support the most critical collective priorities within the humanitarian

response plan. Much more support is required to sustain humanitarian operations in Syria and neighbouring countries. We will count on donor generosity during the year ahead to help humanitarians reach more people in need with the most appropriate and effective assistance.

Secondly, the economic situation across Syria stands to compound humanitarian needs. Syria's currency has lost half of its value this year. The factors behind recent economic shocks may be debated, but basic indicators present a concerning economic outlook for civilians in Syria — the cost of living grows, income stagnates and currency loses value. We know that the most vulnerable populations are the ones least able to afford the increasing cost of living. Communities struggle to respond to sudden emergencies if they are just getting by. Families will adopt more extreme measures to cope with chronic hardship. Humanitarian organizations will seek more ways to ensure that the poorest and those on the brink of poverty do not slip into an even worse state. We need to ensure the life and dignity of those in need, including by finding new ways to restore essential and lifesaving services.

Thirdly and finally, insecurity continues to endanger civilians across much of Syria, including areas away from front lines. Earlier this month, for example, OHCHR warned about the increasing number of incidents in northern Syria involving improvised explosive devices in marketplaces, residential neighbourhoods and other populated areas. Some 49 incidents have been verified since late October, 43 of which were in areas under the control of Turkish forces and affiliated non-State armed groups. At least 78 civilians were killed, and more than 300 persons were injured in those incidents.

Similarly, in south-western Syria, civilians face persistent risks amid continued violence. OHCHR has recorded growing instances of detentions, improvised explosive attacks and assassination attempts against both pro-Government and former opposition-linked individuals. Such patterns of violence pose considerable risks to civilians and their efforts to pursue a safe and dignified life.

As this is the final scheduled humanitarian briefing on Syria for this year, I would like to conclude with a genuine wish that the year ahead will be a better one for the people of Syria.

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

I wish to draw the attention of speakers to paragraph 22 of presidential note S/2017/507, which encourages all participants in Council meetings to deliver their statements in five minutes or less, in line with the Security Council's commitment to making more effective use of open meetings.

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

Mr. Heusgen (Germany): At the outset, and on behalf of my fellow co-penholders, Kuwait and Belgium, let me thank Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller for her comprehensive briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria. We once again reiterate our appreciation for all the efforts of humanitarian and medical personnel to alleviate human suffering in Syria.

We meet once again having heard from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) about the dire humanitarian situation in Syria, especially in the north-west of the country. We condemn the recent intensification of hostilities, in particular aerial bombardments that have killed civilians, including women and children. While we are preparing for the holidays, almost 3 million people in Idlib are in desperate need of shelter, food and medicine and do not know what tomorrow brings.

We also wish to thank the Secretary-General for his latest report on the humanitarian dimension of the crisis in Syria (S/2019/949). The numbers in the report speak for themselves. The Secretary-General calls on the Security Council to

“ensure that the United Nations is authorized to meet the needs of all who need humanitarian assistance”,
and reiterates that

“the United Nations does not have an alternative means of reaching people in need in the areas in which cross-border assistance is being provided.”
(S/2019/949, para. 55)

He has asked for a swift renewal of the cross-border resolution.

That is why, later today, we plan to vote on a draft resolution proposed by the Syria humanitarian co-penholders. We have been negotiating that text in an inclusive, transparent and thorough manner for the past few weeks with all Council members, while also consulting OCHA and neighbouring countries. The aim of the text is to ensure life-saving cross-border

assistance for more than 4 million people. The World Health Organization approached us today once again about the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing — they really need it, as 40 per cent of all medical goods pass through there. During our negotiations, we reached out to find compromises to ensure the Security Council speaks with one voice. Guided by humanitarian needs, we listened to the concerns of all Member States and did not ignore recent developments. We went a long way to try to get everybody and take everything on board. The text, which was put in blue yesterday, is a result of that inclusive process. Some members may think that there is still room for improvement, but that is exactly what compromise means — there will be always room for improvement, and it is never a matter of “take it or leave it”. We ask the Council to send a strong signal of unity at the end of this year. The world is watching us.

As the year comes to an end, five elected countries will soon leave the Council after two years of hard and constructive work. We thank them all. Today we are honoured by the presence of His Excellency Mr. Khaled Aljarallah, Deputy Foreign Minister of Kuwait. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Kuwait for being such a dedicated co-penholder on this difficult file. Minister Aljarallah's colleagues here in New York did a great job, and we will miss their inspiration, creativity, efficacy, efficiency and in-depth knowledge of the region. We thank Ambassador Alotaibi and his team.

The co-penholders, but mostly millions of people in need in Syria, count on the support of the Council this afternoon.

Mr. Aljarallah (Kuwait) (*speak in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to thank the Assistant Secretary-General, Ms. Ursula Mueller, for her valuable briefing on the latest developments relating to the humanitarian situation in Syria.

We align ourselves with the statement delivered by the representative of Germany on behalf of the Syria humanitarian co-penholders. I would like to make the following points in my national capacity.

The co-penholders — Kuwait, Belgium and Germany — have presented a draft resolution to renew the work of the cross-border mechanism for the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria. There is currently no alternative to the mechanism, which is relied upon by 4 million people in need of humanitarian aid, mostly in northern Syria. Several rounds of negotiations and consultations were held in recent weeks but,

unfortunately, the Security Council has yet to reach an agreement to renew the work of the mechanism, which has become the difference between survival and death for those who desperately need that assistance to continue. Alongside Belgium and Germany, we will continue and intensify our efforts to renew the work of the mechanism. We call on all parties and Security Council members to cooperate with us in order to adopt a draft resolution to that end, which is a key shared humanitarian responsibility.

We have witnessed this year significant humanitarian tragedies in Syria as a result of the ongoing conflict in the country, which has caused immense suffering since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011. The crisis, which has affected the Middle East and far beyond, poses a flagrant threat to regional and international peace and security. The Syrian crisis has resulted in one of the largest humanitarian tragedies in modern history, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, displacing 6 million Syrians internally and creating over 5 million Syrian refugees. As we enter 2020, 11 million people will still be in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria. All of the horrific statistics issued by the United Nations clearly show the extent of the human suffering faced by this brotherly Arab people, who have for years been the subject of flagrant violations of all the basic principles of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

In the light of the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, the State of Kuwait adopted over the past years a policy underpinned by the humanitarian dimension of the Syrian crisis and its repercussions, as we believe in the importance of standing alongside the brotherly Syrian people and alleviating their suffering. We have been proactive in hosting three donor conferences and co-chaired the subsequent conferences in London and Brussels. During those conferences, Kuwait contributed \$1.9 billion, rendering it one of the largest donors to the humanitarian response.

The Council was not able to adopt a draft resolution (S/2019/756) submitted by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany for a ceasefire in Idlib governorate, which is home to nearly 3 million people (see S/PV.8623). The United Nations has issued repeated warnings about the potential occurrence of the largest humanitarian catastrophe in the twenty-first century if the military operations there continue on a massive scale.

In that connection, we renew our condemnation of the targeting of civilians by any party and of attacks that target hospitals and health and civilian facilities. Terrorism is a serious scourge that threatens international peace and security. We all agree on the importance of combating terrorism anywhere, including Idlib governorate. However, we also reiterate our earlier statement, with which many Council members agree, that counter-terrorism operations do not in any way absolve parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law, including their obligations to protect civilians and civilian facilities and to comply with the principles of proportionality, distinction and caution.

We reiterate the fact that there can be no lasting peace in Syria without justice, and we stress the need to hold to account all those who have committed serious violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law and to eradicate impunity.

We therefore support the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since 2011, as well as that of the board of inquiry established by the Secretary-General to investigate incidents that targeted medical and civilian facilities in north-western Syria.

We stress that the return of refugees and displaced persons must be safe, voluntary and dignified. In addition, we stress the need to make progress in the dossier concerning detainees and missing persons and to allow relevant international organizations to visit detention centres and prisons in Syria in accordance with the provisions of international humanitarian law and resolution 2474 (2019).

In conclusion, as this is the last scheduled meeting on the Syrian humanitarian dossier before our membership of the Security Council expires, I would like to extend many thanks to Belgium and Germany for their cooperation with us in the course of discharging our responsibility as co-penholders on the Syrian humanitarian dossier. I would like to take this opportunity to renew my thanks and deepest appreciation to the United Nations and its specialized agencies, funds and programmes, as well as to all humanitarian workers for their noble efforts and humanitarian work in Syria. I assure them that the State of Kuwait is committed to continuing its support for those humanitarian efforts aimed at alleviating human

suffering in Syria and strengthening the partnership between my country and the United Nations in the humanitarian field.

Mrs. Gueguen (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I extend my sincere thanks to Ms. Ursula Mueller for her briefing. I welcome the participation of the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait at this meeting. And I fully echo the congratulations expressed by Ambassador Heusgen to Kuwait on its outstanding contribution to the work of the Security Council.

I will not repeat the figures cited by the Under-Secretary-General, as they speak for themselves — cross-border humanitarian assistance is essential and irreplaceable. The renewal of the United Nations cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism is imperative. Humanitarian agencies, the Secretariat, starting with the Secretary-General himself, and the countries of the region are all insistent on the need to preserve that mechanism. Allow me to give a brief reminder as to why.

First, cross-border humanitarian assistance is crucial to bringing aid to the more than 4 million people in need, as the regime of Bashar Al-Assad continues to hinder humanitarian access and use humanitarian assistance for political purposes, at a time when the situation remains unstable throughout the country, including in those areas regained by the regime. There is therefore no alternative.

Secondly, the Syrian population is preparing to face the rigours of a new winter of war. As in previous years, it is essential to have access to the population throughout the Syrian territory by the most direct roads and the fastest means. The survival of millions of men, women and children depend on it. With regard to border crossings, the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing is of vital importance, as it is the route of transport for 40 per cent of medicines destined for humanitarian operations in the north-east.

Certain among us insist that cross-border humanitarian assistance is no longer necessary, following the regime's recovery of several territories, particularly in the south-west. We know, however, that humanitarian access to those areas is still largely hampered by Damascus. In that regard, we call once again on those actors that hold influence over Damascus to guarantee safe, comprehensive and unobstructed humanitarian access throughout the entire Syrian territory — including those areas in which the regime

has recently regained control — in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and international humanitarian law.

France calls on members of the Council to demonstrate unity and responsibility in preserving the indispensable cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism by renewing resolution 2165 (2014) for a further 12 months.

As we have been tirelessly repeating, respect for international humanitarian law by all is essential and non-negotiable. The protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel, is an absolute priority. We reiterate our condemnation of the attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, especially medical infrastructure, and most notably those that have taken place in north-western Syria. The board of inquiry set up by the Secretary-General on those attacks, to which we give our full support, should make it possible to shed full light on those incidents. In view of the displacement of over 70,000 more people in November and the setting in of winter, everything must be done to restore the ceasefire in Idlib.

No-one denies the fact that the fight against terrorism is a crucial issue, but it cannot be used to justify violations of international humanitarian law. Those responsible for such acts must be held accountable before the courts. Evidence will not be buried, thanks to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic. We call for cooperation with all mechanisms that contribute to the fight against impunity for the crimes committed in Syria.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate that a lasting end cannot be put to the humanitarian tragedy that Syrian women and men are enduring without a credible political process. Beyond the humanitarian response, only an inclusive political solution can bring the suffering of the Syrian people to an end. I would like in this regard to reiterate that until a credible political solution has been resolutely implemented, France, like its partners in the European Union, will not participate in the funding of reconstruction. Resolution 2254 (2015) remains our road map, and all its components must be implemented. We will have the opportunity tomorrow, during our meeting with the Special Envoy, to return to

this topic and reflect on the insufficient progress made in the context of the Geneva process despite his efforts.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation welcomes the holding of this meeting on the latest developments in the humanitarian situation in Syria and commends Ms. Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, for her valuable briefing. We also extend a warm welcome to the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

My delegation remains deeply concerned by the resurgence in hostilities, which is exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation in Syria. According to Mr. Stéphane Dujarric, Spokesman for the Secretary-General, air strikes over recent days have hit dozens of communities in the governorates of Idlib, Hama, Aleppo and Latakia, displacing approximately 60,000 people. These bombings and clashes have also left several people dead, destroyed or damaged civilian infrastructure in the region, including schools and hospitals, and hampered the response capacity of humanitarian actors.

In this regard, my country commends the efforts of the United Nations and humanitarian organizations to meet the needs of populations in distress under particularly difficult conditions. According to the United Nations, an average of 5.6 million civilians have access to humanitarian aid every month, mainly from inside Syria. In that context, Côte d'Ivoire reiterates its call on all parties to the conflict to cease hostilities, guarantee the protection of civilians during military operations and respect international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. We also urge them to respect the Russian-Turkish agreement on the establishment of a demilitarized zone in Idlib, signed on 17 September 2018, as well as the agreements concluded on 17 October 2019, between the United States of America and Turkey on the safe zone in north-eastern Syria, and on 22 October 2019, between Russia and Turkey on control of the Syrian border.

My country welcomes the efforts aimed at ensuring the continuation of cross-border humanitarian deliveries for thousands of people affected by the conflict, in particular the cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism established by resolution 2165 (2014). We further urge the international community to support efforts to ensure safe, swift, unhindered

and sustainable humanitarian access to populations in distress. My country also calls for the renewal of the mandate of the cross-border humanitarian assistance delivery mechanism.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire urges all parties to the conflict to cease hostilities throughout Syrian territory and calls once again on the international community to support the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General in his tireless efforts aimed at reaching a peaceful and lasting solution to the Syrian crisis and thereby promoting peace, stability and development in the region.

Mr. Trullols Yabra (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Ms. Mueller for her briefing and express once again our profound gratitude to the humanitarian workers and organizations that continue to provide life-saving assistance in the Syrian Arab Republic despite the many obstacles.

At the outset, we wish to reiterate our commitment to the provision of humanitarian assistance based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence — principles that take on paramount importance in a situation as complex as this one, not only on the ground but also in the context of a polarized Security Council.

As Ms. Muller reiterated, humanitarian needs in Syria are vast and continue to grow with each escalation in violence. In the north-east, the situation following the Turkish incursion of October remains fragile: 75,000 people remain displaced, and hundreds of thousands are enduring critical shortages of water, shelter and health care. These conditions also affect the Al Hol camp, populated mainly by women and children, whose situation requires an urgent humanitarian response, including the repatriation of non-Syrian nationals to their countries of origin.

However, in the north-west, despite the most recent ceasefire, we continue to observe the occurrence of attacks and crossfire that have already claimed the lives of more than 1,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more, including women and children.

Without a doubt, the situation in Syria remains critical, fragile and volatile. It is at times like this that it is more crucial than ever to place humanitarian imperatives at the centre of the decisions of the Security Council. Restoring a spirit of humanity to our political decisions is a task in which we at times fall short. Today,

the responsibility to safeguard humanitarian assistance for 4 million people in northern Syria through the cross-border mechanism has been placed on our shoulders. This is an exclusive responsibility of the Security Council — a non-transferable, moral responsibility that we cannot delegate. That is to say that each of us has the chance to allow or halt the passage of 41 per cent of the humanitarian assistance provided in Syria. Hungry, in acute need and in mortal danger, these people deserve from us courage, political will and determined action.

The Dominican Republic reiterates its support for the extension of the cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism in the Syrian Arab Republic because it is the only means of survival for millions of people. Today, and whenever necessary, we must be on the side of Syrian men, women, young people and children who expect us to meet their needs and to live up to their legitimate aspirations.

Our collective obligation is to provide the help they deserve, prevent further suffering and lay the groundwork for a peaceful future, including a credible and inclusive political process that sets the stage for broad-based renewal by and for Syrian women and men of goodwill. We therefore call once again on the Security Council to show unity and focus its attention on the lives and the survival of the civilian population, which has paid the highest price in this human tragedy.

This afternoon, we will return to this Chamber with the conviction that, despite our differences, we have managed to build the bridges needed to reach an agreement and, as I said before, restore a spirit of humanity to the crucially important decisions we must take.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*speak in Spanish*): Equatorial Guinea welcomes the timely convening of this briefing and thanks Ms. Ursula Mueller for her presentation.

After two years of debate on humanitarian issues in Syria, the Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea continues to observe with great regret the clear consolidation of two diametrically opposed fronts on this matter.

As we have reiterated, the big picture of the humanitarian and security situation in Syria requires that the members of the Security Council — guarantors of international peace and security — transcend their geostrategic interests. That requires us to focus on

human beings as the crux of all discussions and binding decisions. That is a very clear and objective position that some members of the Council have been advocating, but it remains stymied, perhaps by the inability to exercise any significant influence on the parties to the conflict.

We recall that the possibility of a major operation in Idlib and neighbouring regions where Government forces, the Al-Nusra Front and forces opposing the Syrian Government are continuing to fight would undoubtedly have very serious consequences for millions of civilians and the work of humanitarian agencies.

As has already been mentioned, some 4 million people, including around 3 million in the north-western regions, which cannot be reached from the centre of the country, depend on the cross-border assistance mechanism and crossing points coordinated by the United Nations. Our Government is fully aware that the humanitarian situation has become extremely difficult for vulnerable persons in Syria, and when it comes to saving lives, no better partner or ally exists than the very people suffering the impact of international tensions.

Consequently, until we put an end to that prolonged conflict, Equatorial Guinea will continue to lend its support to all mechanisms that aim to prevent an even graver humanitarian crisis in Syria. We are all aware that it is imperative to renew cross-border assistance in Syria, given that the more than 1 million people who receive assistance every month depend on that mechanism.

However, we must continue to prioritize dialogue among all parties, including the Government of Damascus. Any initiative undertaken or decision supported by the United Nations must include the involvement of the Syrian authorities. In that regard, given the current context, we urge the Syrian authorities to spare no effort to guarantee safe and unhindered access to humanitarian assistance in all the areas that need it and through the most direct routes.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*speak in Chinese*): China thanks Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for her briefing. We also welcome the presence of the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

At present, many people are still in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria. China commends the fact that the United Nations and various humanitarian agencies have made unremitting efforts to effectively improve the living conditions of the Syrian people.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Syria is closely related to the political, security and counter-terrorism backdrop. To resolve the humanitarian issue, we must adopt a holistic approach with comprehensive measures. In that regard, I would like to make the following observations.

First, it is essential to effectively respect and safeguard Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. A political settlement is the fundamental means of improving the humanitarian situation in Syria. China welcomes the progress made in the work of Syria's Constitutional Committee and supports the United Nations, particularly Special Envoy Pedersen, in its continuous mediation efforts, in line with the principle of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process, with a view to promoting a political solution that takes into account the concerns of all parties. It is essential to maintain the independence of the Constitutional Committee without external interference.

Secondly, it is necessary to redouble humanitarian relief efforts, lift the economic sanctions against Syria, promote the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes and support the Syrian Government in its post-war reconstruction efforts to fundamentally improve the living conditions of the Syrian people. Efforts must be made to improve Syria's economic situation, assist with the safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees and support the Syrian Government in repairing and rebuilding housing, people's livelihoods and medical and educational facilities. China has provided food, medicine, public transportation and human-resource training to Syria and stands ready to continue to play an active role in Syria's economic and social reconstruction.

Thirdly, efforts must continue to unify standards and combat all forms of terrorism in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and international law. Eliminating terrorist forces is a necessary security guarantee for the Syrian people to resume a peaceful, orderly life. At present, terrorist forces still occupy a large part of Idlib, threatening the safety of civilians, destroying infrastructure and worsening the humanitarian situation. We hope that at the next meeting the Secretariat will provide detailed information and analyses in that regard. The issue of foreign terrorist fighters is a common challenge to peace and security in the Middle East and the world over. The Secretariat should remain seized of the issue

and gather information. The international community should work together to bring all terrorists to justice.

Members of the Security Council have held many discussions on the extension of the mandate of cross-border humanitarian mechanisms in Syria. On the whole, China has reservations about the cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism. We believe that this mechanism is a special relief method under specific circumstances and should be evaluated and adjusted in line with developments on the ground. The Syrian Government bears the primary responsibility for improving the humanitarian situation in Syria. Any humanitarian relief operation in the country should fully respect Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity and heed the views of and strengthen coordination with the Syrian Government.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): I would like to thank Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for her detailed briefing, as well as to welcome my brother His Excellency Mr. Aljarallah, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

My delegation is seriously concerned about the recent escalation of hostilities in north-west Syria, the ongoing hostilities in the north-east and, as mentioned in the Secretary-General's report (S/2019/949), the increasing tensions in the south-west. We are extremely troubled by the risk of a worsening humanitarian situation in those areas as a result of hostilities — the deaths of civilians, including women and children, injuries, displacements, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and further suffering. The world is watching. The international community is watching. But we are not here to just watch; we are here to help and take action. Our mandate is to save lives, and that is exactly what we need to do as members of the Security Council.

My delegation would like to highlight three points.

First, Indonesia calls for immediate de-escalation and urges all relevant parties to strictly uphold their obligations under international law. We urge all parties to cease all attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including the indiscriminate use of weapons, barrel bombs and air strikes. It is crucial to protect civilians from attacks and the effects of hostilities and to allow them to voluntarily move to safe places.

Secondly, it is important for all parties to allow unimpeded, safe, timely and sustained access for the

delivery of humanitarian assistance, in order for the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to be able to reach all people in need in Syria. We commend the tireless work of the United Nations in continuing to provide life-saving assistance to millions of people in need, despite the various challenges.

Thirdly, my delegation endorses the Secretary-General's call regarding the renewal of the cross-border mechanism. It is clear that 4 million people are dependent on that mechanism — a mechanism that has no other alternative, as stated many times by the United Nations. My delegation strongly believes that we cannot jeopardize the ongoing cross-border operations that provide food aid, medicines and other immediate humanitarian needs. The suffering of the Syrian people must end, and we in the Council can start to ease the suffering by setting our differences aside and focusing on the 4 million people who need the cross-border operations. That is the least we can do for them. Civilian lives are at stake, and people have been suffering for far too long. Again, as far as my delegation is concerned, saving people's lives is not an option but the main goal.

This afternoon the Council is scheduled to take action on a draft resolution on the cross-border humanitarian aid. We acknowledge the existing dynamics, as well as the differing views of Council members, and I appeal to all my colleagues to use the time remaining before the meeting to intensify our efforts and to speak to one another in an objective manner with a view to saving human lives. It is not about us. It is all about saving Syrian civilians, people on the ground. I once again appeal to all the members of the Council to do the right thing, particularly in this season of joy when people are united in a spirit of hope and love.

Mr. Mabhongo (South Africa): Let me begin by thanking Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for her briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

South Africa remains gravely concerned about the dire humanitarian situation in Syria. We, as Council members, have had many discussions on the plight of the Syrian people and how best to improve their circumstances. In that regard, South Africa welcomes the efforts of the United Nations and its implementing agencies in providing life-saving aid to millions of Syrians through the cross-border humanitarian assistance operations. We fully support the need for the programme and hopes that its mandate will be renewed in due course.

My delegation has noted the reports of an escalation in hostilities in north-western Syria with concern. The destruction of civilian infrastructure, particularly health and education facilities, is particularly alarming, as it has a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable groups of society, that is, women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities. South Africa reiterates its call to all the parties to comply with their obligations under international law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. It is also important that the parties to the various ceasefire agreements abide by their obligations under them. With regard to Rukban, we note the fact that approximately 4,000 people want to leave the camp and urge all parties to provide the assistance needed to support their departure in a safe and dignified manner. My delegation also recognizes the importance of providing the assistance needed for those remaining in Rukban and call on the relevant parties to ensure that.

In conclusion, South Africa urges all the parties to exercise the utmost restraint and to work to de-escalate the hostilities and ensure respect for Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty. As we have said many times before, the situation in Syria cannot be solved through military means. The only way for long-term peace, stability and prosperity for Syria and her people is through dialogue, negotiation and the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). We look forward to Special Envoy Pedersen's briefing tomorrow, particularly with regard to the work of the Constitutional Committee. And like others, I want to welcome the Deputy Minister of Kuwait, who is here with us today.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller for her briefing and to express our gratitude for the tireless efforts of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in support of the people of Syria. I would like to also welcome the presence in the Chamber today of Mr. Khaled Sulaiman Aljarallah, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

As we have just heard, civilians in Syria continue to face significant hardships. We have to acknowledge that the conflict has caused violence as well as violations and abuses of international law, including human rights law, and has brought suffering to the civilian population of Syria on a scale that is unique in today's world. It is civilians, including children, who continue to pay the highest price in the ongoing hostilities in

Syria. It is unacceptable that health-care and education facilities continue to be attacked. Just two days ago, the air bombardments in Idlib intensified, killing children and wounding other people. We therefore reiterate our call to the parties to the conflict to implement all ceasefire agreements and ensure unhindered and safe humanitarian access for all humanitarian actors to the whole of Syrian territory.

Access should first be granted to priority areas, including for cross-border deliveries of humanitarian assistance in which the safety of humanitarian personnel is ensured. We also want to underline the obligation of all parties to the conflict to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. The protection of civilians, including children, in armed conflict should be at the centre of our debate. We must put practical measures in place to effectively prevent or minimize civilian casualties and incidental damage to civilian facilities.

While I am touching on practical issues, I want to underline how enormous the humanitarian needs are in Syria. On average, in every month in 2019 the United Nations has reached around 5.6 million people in need all over the country, including children. In November, humanitarian assistance provided by United Nations agencies included the delivery of food for 4.2 million people. For a population that is highly vulnerable, cross-border humanitarian assistance remains vitally important. In that regard, we would like to reiterate our strong support for the renewal of the mechanism that enables humanitarian supplies to be brought into Syria, provides aid to those in urgent need and supports the delivery of basic services. Without it, it would be impossible to ensure life-saving assistance for millions and to reach those in need.

The scale of the Syrian crisis and humanitarian needs remain enormous. I want to stress our concern about the terrible state of health-care facilities in Syria. Most are not functional and those still operating are too poorly equipped to provide proper care to patients. In our opinion, the international community and especially the Security Council should vigorously advocate for health care and the protection of civilians, especially women, children and persons with disabilities, as stated in resolution 2475 (2019), which we adopted in June.

As we are going to discuss the political track tomorrow, I want to conclude by underlining that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. A political agreement remains the only path to peace.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*speak in Russian*): We thank Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller for her briefing and also welcome the participation of Mr. Khaled Sulaiman Aljarallah, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

The most problematic humanitarian and military situation is still in the territories outside the control of the Syrian Government on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, in the Idlib de-escalation zone and the United States-occupied zone around Al-Tanf. We have carefully studied the assessments of the situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone, which continues to be a breeding ground for international terrorism, especially Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. We regret the fact that information on the shelling of the surrounding areas where militants have established themselves takes up only a single line in the United Nations reports. We have established that there were some 600 such attacks and assaults in October, and the intensity of the radicals' firing on Aleppo has increased in the past two weeks. While in November the city's residential areas were shelled 191 times, the corresponding total for the first half of December is already 139. The use of multiple launch systems and mortars is increasing. In the first week of December there were 32 missile launches in residential areas of Aleppo. In November and December 11 civilians died and 41 were injured in Aleppo alone. On 4 December, jihadists shelled a sports club in Tal Rifaat in Aleppo governorate, killing eight children. And for some reason not a single person has wondered where these militants continue to get their munitions from.

Unfortunately, neither have our colleagues' statements mentioned the many incidents in which militants are terrorizing local populations and using civilian infrastructure for military purposes and civilians as human shields. There are reports of executions, detentions and the brutal dispersal of ordinary people protesting the terrorists' control in Idlib. Some of those incidents are mentioned in the United Nations reports. These acts of terror should be firmly condemned and appropriately repudiated. We see in the silence about such crimes an attempt to whitewash these bandits as the so-called moderate opposition. But those who want to solve the problems in Syria peacefully long ago joined the negotiating process, including in the framework of the Constitutional Committee, while those who have continued their armed struggle, including against Syrians, are militants who have rejected dialogue. As

the guarantor nations of the Astana process, Russia, Turkey and Iran are ready to continue to assist the Syrian parties and Special Envoy Pedersen in the quest for a political solution to the Syrian conflict. The relevance of the Astana process was confirmed at another useful meeting of the participants in the format in Nur-Sultan on 10 and 11 December.

We have once again been hearing accusations that the Syrian Army and its allies have been targeting civilian facilities in Idlib with air strikes. And we once again assert that the Syrian authorities are observing the ceasefire and that the military activity is in response to violations of the ceasefire by terrorists.

With regard to north-eastern Syria, Russia is working with Ankara to implement the memorandum of 22 October in the interests of preventing armed clashes and restoring the humanitarian situation. We are also working to establish contacts between the Kurds and Damascus and to repair the damage caused by the illegal occupation of the area and the dangerous experiment in demographic engineering undertaken there. We want to draw the Council's attention to the dire situation in Raqqa, which was subjected to massive bombardment by the so-called international coalition and held captive for more than four years by militants of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. On 7 December a Russian contingent conducted a humanitarian operation there. Through our direct presence on the ground, we ascertained that the civilian infrastructure has been almost entirely destroyed. The work on rubble removal and demining the area has still not been completed and there are shortages of drinking water, medicine and food.

We share the concerns expressed about the increasing terrorist threats in various parts of Syria, including in the north-east. We call on those who managed and built prisons there not to shift onto others the responsibility for preventing jihadists of every sort from scattering throughout the region.

Together with the Government of Syria, Russia is taking steps to create the necessary conditions for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons. More than 2 million Syrians have already returned to their homes so far, including more than 1.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). More than 1,500 houses, 95 medical facilities and 210 educational institutions have been repaired and begun functioning since the beginning of the year, and electricity, water

and industrial facilities are being restored and built. The numbers are incontestable proof of how effective the measures taken by the Syrian authorities have been in creating the necessary conditions for the voluntary, dignified and safe return of refugees.

We call on international organizations, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian entities, to take action in this arena. Unfortunately, such activities are often being artificially delayed. We also urge the members of the international community to get involved in post-conflict reconstruction projects in Syria and lift unilateral sanctions in the interests of normalizing Syrians' lives, without surrounding them with political conditions. That would be a serious contribution to improving the humanitarian situation in Syria. Incidentally, if control of the illegally held oilfields were returned to Damascus it would go a long way to helping to provide Syrians with fuel and resolve humanitarian problems.

With assistance from the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and the Syrian Government, together with the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, efforts to resettle the Rukban camp have been continuing. However, owing to the desire of the armed groups there to maintain control, they are stalled. We hope that the problem of the IDPs and refugees there will soon be resolved. The situation at Al-Hol camp remains difficult and has been exacerbated by the significant number of refugees who have moved there from other camps in the north-east. More than half of the people in the camp are women and children. It is high time to think about transferring the illegally occupied territory to the Syrian authorities in the interests of resolving the IDP problem.

We heard the assessment of how the cross-border operation is functioning. We want to make it clear that we are in favour of removing the Al-Ramtha and Al-Yarubiyah checkpoints for the following reasons. The Jordanian border crossing at Al-Ramtha has not been used since July 2018. We are not convinced by the argument that it is needed just in case. The situation in south-western Syria changed long ago, after the reconciliation achieved with Russia's assistance, and the Syrian authorities are working to rebuild the region, which endured years of crisis. There will be no "just in case" there, especially since normally there are official

checkpoints that could be activated if humanitarian deliveries have to be made from Jordan.

The situation on the Syrian-Iraqi border has changed radically. The border crossings controlled by the Syrian army have been reopened. The transfer of control over other checkpoints from the Kurds to the Syrian authorities is under discussion. A dialogue is also under way with the Kurds about getting access to humanitarian assistance to the eastern bank of the Euphrates from within Syria itself rather than across the border. The Secretary General's latest report (S/2019/949) clearly indicates the volume of humanitarian aid being delivered through Al-Yarubiyah, not on a regular basis but as needed. The data clearly show that humanitarian convoys can be sent through official channels with the agreement of the Syrian authorities.

As far as Idlib is concerned, we agree that this area of Syria is still in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Aid is being sent there through two Turkish checkpoints, Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salam. We support their continued functioning because it is based on the humanitarian needs of Syrians.

Mr. Popolizio Bardales (Peru) (*speak in Spanish*): We welcome the convening of this meeting and Ms. Ursula Mueller's comprehensive briefing. We also welcome the presence here this morning of the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait, Khaled Sulaiman Aljarallah.

Peru notes with deep concern the continuing conflict and the seriousness of the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. While there have clearly been significant developments on the political and military fronts in recent months, it is also clear that millions of people are still facing incredibly precarious conditions, further exacerbated by the harsh winter weather. It is because of the daily risks and suffering facing Syrians that it is essential to provide immediate, unrestricted access for humanitarian assistance through the efficient use of all available means, including cross-border access. Peru is of the view that it is essential to extend that assistance for another 12 months owing to the high degree of sophistication and security it offers and the lack of any real alternative to it for those who are most vulnerable. We hope that this crucial issue will be addressed this afternoon from the sole perspective of alleviating human suffering and that the Security Council will remain united in its responsibility to protect the people of Syria.

The north-western part of the country remains the focus of attention because of its population density, high volatility and latent risks owing to terrorist groups' extensive control of the area. We are alarmed that the levels of violence in that area have been increasing since October and that, as a result, another 136 people have been killed amid arbitrary arrests, kidnappings and the destruction of infrastructure.

Peru reiterates its condemnation of terrorism in the strongest terms and believes that the terrorist groups remaining in Idlib and other areas of the Syrian territory must be held accountable and brought to justice. We nevertheless stress that we must not use the fight against this scourge as a means to justify putting the lives of millions of people at risk.

On the other hand, Peru commends the remarkable efforts being made by the United Nations and other humanitarian actors, under extremely complex logistical circumstances, to provide sustained assistance to the more than 67,000 internally displaced persons in Al-Hol camp. We note that almost half of these displaced persons are from Iraq, which is why we encourage the authorities of that country to continue their efforts to facilitate the return of their nationals, a process that we stress must take place within internationally accepted parameters and with the support of the United Nations.

Also with regard to displaced persons, we stress that any initiative that would lead to the return to Syria of its millions of refugees and internally displaced persons must be carried out within internationally accepted parameters that guarantee their dignified, safe and voluntary return. To that end, we consider it essential for the parties to continue to develop measures that might promote a better climate of understanding, including the release of detainees, the identification of missing persons and the return of mortal remains. We welcome the work being done in this regard through the Astana framework, but we note the urgency of achieving more substantial progress in this area. We also stress the importance of mobilizing international community support for humanitarian mine clearance and the removal of improvised explosive devices in Syria. These devices continue to wreak havoc on the population and hinder the delivery of assistance.

I conclude by reaffirming that only by achieving a political solution on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) will it be possible to overcome the humanitarian disaster in

Syria while fully respecting the country's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I join others in welcoming the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait to the Security Council. His country has made an outstanding contribution as a donor and as a member of the Security Council. It has been an honour to work with his country's delegation, which has always focused on the heart of the issue, whether we are considering international peace and security or, as we are doing today, the relief of human suffering. I thank Kuwait very much for everything that it has done for the Security Council.

We share the concerns that have been expressed around the table, and I think they follow a common theme. For various reasons, since 2012, the international community has not served the Syrian people as well as we might have, despite some specific heroic efforts involving the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations and such volunteers as the White Helmets. I would like to once again salute, through the Assistant Secretary-General, the work that OCHA and the other humanitarian agencies do to help the Syrian people.

And now, as others have noted, after seven long and terrible years, the political process may finally have an opportunity to turn the corner. We, of course, support that effort and will do what we can to help Special Envoy Pedersen deliver results to that end. However, we are very sad to relate that other areas on the ground have not made such progress. But that is not due to the international community; it is due to the Syrian authorities and the countries that give them the most support. In particular, I think we need to look at Idlib and Rukban, the added upcoming pressure of winter, as others have said, the targeting of civilian objects around Idlib and the need for international humanitarian law to be upheld. Terrorism is no justification for violating the Geneva Conventions. We say it every time we meet in the Chamber, but it remains as true today as it did when the Geneva Conventions were first drawn up.

But the worst situation of all, I believe, is the one that the Assistant Secretary-General outlined in her briefing. The humanitarian situation is getting worse, and 4 million people are at very grave risk, which is why, exceptionally, cross-border assistance remains needed — and it has been needed since 2014. That is set out clearly in the Emergency Relief Coordinator's

letter to the Security Council, and in correspondence from others over the past few days. Having heard the Assistant Secretary-General's briefing, we have no doubt that the fewer than four border crossings in less than 12 months have led to saving fewer of the 4 million lives at stake, which means more suffering for the Syrian people.

Turning to the impending draft resolution, as others have said, the representative of Germany set out in his statement why his delegation drafted it the way it did, and we respect that. The penholders are trying to find a way through on this very important issue so that as many of those 4 million lives as possible can be saved and their suffering relieved. But it is not clear to us what has changed since last year, when the Council adopted resolution 2449 (2018) on cross-border access to Syria. What has changed to justify such a dramatic reduction in cross-border assistance, down to two border crossings in only six months, as other members of the Council have proposed? In the past, the Council unanimously adopted resolution 2165 (2014) on cross-border access, as well as resolutions 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016). In 2017, the Council adopted resolution 2393 (2017) with 12 votes in favour, with three abstentions, and in 2018, the Council adopted resolution 2449 (2018) with 13 votes in favour, with two abstentions. I therefore repeat that it is not at all clear why the situation should be deemed by some to be so drastically different today.

I would also join others in making a real appeal for us to examine the penholder text and do the very best we can to protect the Syrian people. This is a humanitarian briefing. There are some very important humanitarians around the table today. The most important thing we can do, as Ms. Mueller said, is to adopt a draft resolution that brings genuine relief over a significant period of time, based on an end-state and not on an end-date, and which authorizes all the crossings that the United Nations believes it needs.

OCHA is the component of the international system that we, States Members of the United Nations, have all charged with coordinating humanitarian efforts. We may not always agree with OCHA or the United Nations on every individual point or issue, but they are discharging their responsibilities to the membership and to the Syrian people to ensure that the assistance reaches the communities that need it the most. If the United Nations does not help these communities, there is no evidence at all to believe that the Syrian Government either wants to, can or will provide that

assistance. I therefore hope that we can find a way forward on the draft resolution so that the Assistant Secretary-General and her teams can do the job we have mandated them to do.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of the United States.

I thank Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for her briefing. I join others in welcoming His Excellency Mr. Aljarallah, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait, and in commending Kuwait on its term on the Security Council and the strong partnership and leadership which that country has exhibited on several issues, including the humanitarian issues that we are discussing today. We look forward to continuing our strong partnership with Kuwait.

A new year is on the horizon in Syria, and with it comes the hope not only that the Council's efforts in the country will improve, but also that the 11 million Syrians who have endured years of suffering might see an end to the violent conflict. However, before we look ahead to what the Council should do next year to improve humanitarian conditions in Syria, there is still one thing the Council must achieve in 2019, and that is the renewal of the life-saving provisions of the Security Council's cross-border aid mandate — resolution 2165 (2014).

The United States rises alongside the Secretary-General, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the millions of Syrians who depend on that resolution, and United Nations implementers to demand the renewal of the resolution's provisions for all existing crossings. As we set our intentions for the new year, we see several achievable steps that the Council can take to demonstrate our commitment to real peace for Syrians in 2020.

First, the Council can and should do much more to demand that the parties on the ground verifiably improve humanitarian access. In 2020, no Syrian should be denied lifesaving assistance because he or she lives in an area not under regime control or fears that military operations by the Al-Assad regime, Russia or any other party will cause United Nations aid convoys to turn back before completing a delivery.

We call on the Al-Assad regime and the Russian Federation to uphold an immediate cessation of hostilities in north-western Syria and in the rest of the country. A ceasefire is essential to addressing the needs of the people in Idlib and to honouring commitments

made by Presidents Putin and Erdogan in Sochi in 2018. The regime's cynical strategy of attacking its own population, while asking the international community to provide reconstruction assistance to Damascus, will not go without a response. But our response cannot come at the expense of innocent victims. Rather, the Council must redouble its commitment to the political process outlined in resolution 2254 (2015) and its promise to reform how the Al-Assad regime treats the Syrian people.

Secondly, the Security Council must take steps to increase the quality and quantity of United Nations regular access to Syria, which remains at just 30 per cent of the desired level. The United Nations must be allowed to expand operations to areas including south-western Syria, Homs, and the Damascus suburbs. For too long, the world has watched the Al-Assad regime block the delivery of food, medicine and other humanitarian relief to reassert control over the Syrian people. Next year, the Council must work together and press Damascus to permit the United Nations to have regular and unhindered access to people in need throughout the country.

Thirdly, we ask that the Council support humanitarian access to north-eastern Syria for all relevant partners, including the United Nations and other international humanitarian organizations. Access to north-eastern Syria is critical to ensuring that communities recovering from the scourge of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS) can receive the provisions they need. It is equally critical to ensuring that ISIS cannot re-emerge in Iraq or Syria.

Finally, the Council must remain united in its efforts to keep the United Nations at the centre of any attempts to facilitate the principled return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons to a place of their choosing. The United States is alarmed by reports that more than 150 people who voluntarily left the Rukban encampment for Homs were arrested and arbitrarily detained by the regime, and that that was carried out despite the United Nations, the United States and the Russian Federation working together to facilitate safe and informed departures. We call for the immediate release of those civilians in regime custody and for the regime to stop its use of torture and the denial of due process.

The Council must not retreat from its commitment to ensuring that the conditions on the ground are

verifiably safe for people to return home after years of war. The United States believes that, with focus and effort, the Council can achieve the goals that I just described in the next 12 months. Doing so would represent a meaningful and necessary step towards a more lasting peace in line with resolution 2254 (2015) — a peace that would allow the Syrian people to at last begin the work of rebuilding their lives.

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) (*speak in Arabic*): In recent years, the Syrian Arab Republic has made considerable efforts, in cooperation with the relevant United Nations agencies, to ensure the continued provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance to all of its citizens without distinction. Those efforts have encountered major challenges related to terrorism and the expansion of the economic embargo imposed on the Syrian people by the Governments of States that continue their destructive interference in Syrian affairs, thereby preventing any prospect of reaching a solution, impeding the eradication of terrorism and depriving the people of Syria of the ability to rebuild and recover, as well as preventing the voluntary return of Syrian displaced persons and refugees to their homes to lead normal lives safely.

It is deplorable that, in their monthly reports, the representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) continue to disseminate a great deal of error-laden information and assessments for political reasons that are well known to everyone within the Security Council. Such behaviour is not professional and runs contrary to the spirit of cooperation and partnership that the Syrian Arab Republic demonstrated vis-à-vis the relevant United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners, according to admissions by humanitarian workers on the ground.

The representatives of certain States members of the Council have now become completely incapable of thinking and reacting in a positive and constructive manner with regard to the situation in Syria. They only react based on the principle of enmity with Syria and its allies in the fight against terrorism. They have become obsessed with presenting fabricated accusations against Syria, and dismissing efforts made by my country. That was demonstrated by the penholders'

presentation of a draft resolution on the renewal of modalities set out in resolution 2165 (2014), based on a campaign of manipulated statistics and information, which is a standard practice for OCHA every time the resolution comes up for renewal, while at the same time disregarding the fact that most humanitarian assistance winds up in the hands of armed terrorists, not of those who need it.

Over the past weeks, the penholders on the humanitarian issue in Syria have worked on a draft resolution concerning my country that is far from achieving its supposed humanitarian objectives. That is why we reject it in its entirety for various reasons, including the following.

First of all, the penholders continue to overlook the fact that the focal point for taking humanitarian action in Syria is the capital, Damascus. It is a matter of the sacrosanct principle of respect for national sovereignty, as reaffirmed in every relevant resolution on my country.

Secondly, the penholders insist on disregarding developments that have taken place on the ground since the adoption of resolution 2165 (2014) in July 2014. The Syrian State has restored its control over all of the areas identified previously by the United Nations as being under siege or inaccessible and achieved stability in those areas together with its allies.

Thirdly, neither the leadership of OCHA nor that of the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism were able to provide sufficient clarifications regarding their so-called independent third-party partners or companies contracted to verify the delivery of aid to those in need, despite our repeated official requests in that regard.

Fourthly, the contents of the draft resolution unequivocally reveal the true motives behind it and the insistence of some parties on the delivery of cross-border aid. The most notable motive is to escalate hostility within the Council to target the Syrian Government and its role and status which are essential.

Fifthly, my country remains steadfast in its determination to comply with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 46/182, which emphasizes, first and foremost, respect for national sovereignty. Syria therefore rejects the principle of alerts and warnings, as we believe that it does not meet the minimum requirements of norms relating to transparency, credibility and respect for national sovereignty.

We in the Syrian Arab Republic continue to be as realistic and patient as possible in dealing with the negative political polarization practiced by the permanent delegations of the United States, France and the United Kingdom in addressing the Syrian question. Nevertheless, we continue to call on the Secretariat and, in particular, OCHA officials to distance themselves from such attempts at political polarization and to instead build a professional relationship with the Syrian Government and local humanitarian partners that is based on good will, partnership and respect for the principles of humanitarian action in order to achieve the desired goals of such action. In that connection, those concerned must refrain from using the Syrian dossier as a tool to pressure, coerce and blackmail the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and its people.

Finally, after nine years of the terrorist war imposed on Syria, the Governments that contributed to igniting terrorism in the country and exacerbated the situation continue to refuse to admit in a serious and responsible manner that ending the suffering of the Syrian people requires respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. They must also support the efforts of the Syrian Government and its allies to combat the remnants of terrorist organizations and foreign terrorist fighters in the country and lift the unilateral coercive economic measures imposed on the Syrian people.

Moreover, the illegal presence of foreign forces in Syria must come to an end, which must include the withdrawal of the occupying American forces from oil and gas sites in Syria. There must be a definitive end to the first-degree piracy operations being conducted by the United States today against the oil and gas revenues that belong exclusively to the Syrian State and no other party.

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

I now give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. Sinirlioğlu (Turkey): I should like to thank you, Mr. President, for organizing this meeting, as well as Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for her comprehensive briefing.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains catastrophic. We are extremely worried about the escalation of violence in Idlib. The Al-Assad regime

continues to kill civilians and destroy civilian infrastructure. The regime is more brutal, blatant and outrageous than ever. Al-Assad knows that the reaction of the international community will be limited to calls and condemnations. Al-Assad knows that the Security Council will meet, talk and adjourn. That is why he continues with business as usual — why he continues to kill. He does not need a message; he needs to see that his actions will not go unpunished.

The presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other terrorist extremist groups is an additional reason for fragility of the situation in the region. However, the killing of civilians under the pretext of fighting against terrorism cannot be accepted. International humanitarian law must be respected under all circumstances. Let me recall once again that the ongoing escalation in Idlib is triggering new waves of displacements, potentially leading to a chain reaction. As of this morning, 50,000 people have been moving towards the Turkish border from the Idlib area, which will affect not only Turkey, but beyond. We must therefore all make every effort to preserve the status of Idlib as a de-escalation zone.

In the Operation Peace Spring area, in the north-east of the country, the normalization of life is under way, thanks to our cooperation with Russia and the United States. The strip of land stretching from Afrin all the way to Iraq along the Turkish-Syrian border has been freed from terror organizations and the situation is more secure and stable. Turkish agencies have been providing humanitarian aid to the region since mid-October. Following the previous two operations that Turkey carried out in north-western Syria, more than 370,000 people have already returned voluntarily to their homes and lands. We are working towards the same objective in the north-east. All returns will continue to be voluntary, safe and dignified, in close cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Some 123,000 people have already returned to their areas of origin in the north-east. Local populations that have been expelled from the north-east since 2011 want and continue to return to their homes.

We all heard the statement delivered by Assistant Secretary-General Ursula Mueller. There is one undisputable fact — the United Nations cross-border mechanism is vital for millions of people in Syria. This is not a political matter; it is a humanitarian urgency. This afternoon, when the Council votes, the choice is between the needs of the Syrian people and the wishes of the Al-Assad regime. The Council will either decide

to extend a lifeline to the Syrian people or extend a helping hand to the Syrian regime. Members of the Council must leave aside their political calculations and focus on the humanitarian consequences.

The first revised draft resolution included the addition of Tall Abyad to the crossings mandated for use by the United Nations. The importance of the Tall Abyad crossing point for United Nations operations has already been explained by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock, as well as by Assistant Secretary-General Mueller this morning. It is an old and functional crossing point that was promoted to category A in 2008. The Bab Al-Hawa and the Bab Al-Salam border crossings, which are also among the cross-border mechanism crossing points, are also designated under the same category. The Tall Abyad area is convenient to establish a United Nations logistics cluster for the collection and distribution of aid items.

In the short term, the Tall Abyad crossing point will serve the needs of the current population and will be instrumental to reach people in need in Raqqa and Al-Hasakah, which have a total population of approximately 450,000. In the medium and long terms, humanitarian aid delivered through the Tall Abyad crossing point can also be expanded to other regions in the north-eastern part of Syria. Throughout

the negotiations, a great majority of Member States supported the inclusion of the Tall Abyad crossing point in the mechanism.

It has been claimed that the addition of the Tall Abyad crossing point is an attempt to legitimize the situation in the north-east. Turkey does not need the blessing of any other country to defend itself against terrorist threats. Operation Peace Spring was a limited cross-border counter-terrorism operation to fight terror organizations, such as the Kurdish Workers Party, the Democratic Union Party and the People's Protection Units and Da'esh. As President Erdogan has emphasized on multiple occasions, Turkey cannot and will not tolerate any terrorist activity along its borders.

During the negotiations, no objection was raised as to the benefits of the addition of the Tall Abyad crossing point. All the counter-arguments were political in nature. Discussions on the draft resolution and the addition of the Tall Abyad crossing point must focus only on humanitarian issues and needs. The politicization of this issue will not serve the needs of the Syrian people. It is high time for the Council to do what is right and to renew the cross-border mechanism for 12 months, with the addition of Tall Abyad to the crossing points mandated for use by the United Nations.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.