



Security Council

Seventy-fifth year

8715th meeting

Thursday, 6 February 2020, 3 p.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium)

Members:

China	Mr. Wu Haitao
Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
Estonia	Mr. Jürgenson
France	Mr. De Rivière
Germany	Mr. Heusgen
Indonesia	Mr. Soemirat
Niger	Mr. Aougi
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Ms. King
South Africa	Mr. Van Shalkwyk
Tunisia	Mr. Zenati
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
United States of America	Mrs. Craft
Viet Nam	Mr. Pham

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the translation of speeches delivered in other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room U-0506 (verbatimrecords@un.org). Corrected records will be reissued electronically on the Official Document System of the United Nations (<http://documents.un.org>).

20-03035 (E)



Accessible document

Please recycle



The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock are joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

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

I give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: I thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to brief the Security Council on the alarming situation in north-west Syria, which has further escalated since last week's briefings (see S/PV.8707 and S/PV.8708).

Heavy strikes, from both the air and the ground, are causing massive waves of civilian displacement and major loss of civilian life. We are witnessing the humanitarian catastrophe about which the Secretary-General warned and about which Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock will brief the Council very shortly. It is causing human suffering, which is totally unacceptable, and endangering international peace and security. Yet it can, and therefore must, stop now.

On 12 January, Russia and Turkey announced that they agreed on a fresh ceasefire for the north-west. Yet heavy clashes and mutual shelling continued despite the ceasefire. Two days later, air strikes by the Syrian Government and its allies resumed. Syrian Government forces have since launched a ground offensive in areas south-east of the Idlib de-escalation zone. They have made significant advances, most recently establishing control over the major town of Maarat Al-Numan,

whose population has fled from earlier attacks. Maarat Al-Numan lies on the strategic M5 highway. Pro-Government forces have continued to push north, reaching the city of Saraqib, the junction of the M4 and M5 highways and close to Idlib city.

In Idlib city there are already reports of deep fear and of civilians fleeing or preparing to flee. There are also reports that aerial bombardment in support of the Government's offensive continues. Hostilities have also intensified on other fronts, especially in western Aleppo, where Government forces have advanced.

During the same period, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham — a terrorist organization designated by the Council — and armed opposition groups launched several attacks and counter-attacks along those fronts, including western Aleppo and Al-Bab, in northern Aleppo. There were reports of intensified shelling in civilian areas of western Aleppo and of civilian casualties. There are reports of weaponized drones being launched on Syrian and Russian military installations south-west of Idlib. The Russian Foreign Ministry has stated that Russian military personnel have been killed.

Turkish forces and Syrian Government forces have directly clashed inside Syria. On 3 February, Syrian Government artillery reportedly hit a Turkish observation post near Saraqib. Seven Turkish soldiers were killed and several more injured, according to the Turkish Ministry of Defence. We have since seen differing reports of dozens of Syrian Government forces killed in Turkish strikes on Syrian Government positions.

Statements from the Russian and Turkish leadership in recent days have shown deep differences between the sponsors of the Idlib de-escalation arrangements. Two days ago, the Secretary-General noted his enormous concern about the fact that the most recent developments constituted a change in the nature of the conflict and reiterated his strong appeal for a cessation of hostilities. So far those calls have not been heeded. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in the past two months, more than half a million civilians have been displaced and most are fleeing into ever-shrinking areas, where they still hope to find relative safety. Further mass displacement seems inevitable if fighting continues.

We appear to have lost sight of the principle of proportionality. Let me be very clear and remind all parties that attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including health-care and educational

facilities, are unacceptable. All military operations, including those against and by terrorist groups designated by the Security Council, must respect the requirements of international humanitarian law, including with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian objects.

Ordinary people in Idlib are conveying to me their grave fears for their lives and safety. They feel totally voiceless. Civil society actors inside Idlib, the best antidote and counterweight to radicalism, feel dismayed and abandoned. Syrian women have shared with me their fears of continued insecurity, including increased violence targeting women fleeing and living in displacement.

Idlib is the place that became a refuge for hundreds of thousands of civilians from other parts of Syria who had fled violence. As a result, the population of the Idlib de-escalation zone has now swollen to an estimated 3 million, the vast majority of whom are civilians. It is also the place that fighters who refused to settle their status earlier had also sought refuge. Moreover, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other Security Council-proscribed terrorist groups, including foreign fighters, are a major force in Idlib. Their presence and influence in the area is unacceptable and constitutes a major challenge, first and foremost to the civilian population of Idlib itself and also in the wider sense for Syria, as well as for regional and international security.

But we know from bitter experience that a continued all-out military approach will not solve this problem and that it would come at a completely unacceptable price. What we are now seeing creates the very real prospect of a bloody and protracted last stand on the Turkish border, with grave consequences for civilians and the risk of the dispersal of foreign terrorist fighters and ongoing insurgency afterwards. We know that the continuation of the military approach will only entrench and further harden the deep international divisions over Syria and lead to more and more pressure, thereby weakening prospects for a step-by-step dynamic to build trust and confidence. The events of the last few days, in which the armies of two United Nations Member States — Syria and Turkey — have clashed inside Syria, suggest the very real prospect of conflagration in the immediate region, as well as far beyond.

But we also know something else. We know that it is possible via agreement to stabilize parts of Syria and work on ways out. Idlib is a de-escalation zone

established by agreement in May 2017, and it was the subject of a further Russian-Turkish stabilization memorandum in September 2018. Those agreements do not have third-party monitoring, and we are therefore not in a position to comment on their terms or observance. What we do know is that those agreements can enable prolonged periods of calm. So why can we not make that happen once again? That is the message that I impressed in my meetings recently in Moscow and Damascus, with high-level Turkish officials and with the co-Chairs of the Humanitarian Task Force meeting today in Geneva. I will take this message to Tehran in the coming days, and I will continue to press on the most important actors their responsibility to take a different path.

I do not pretend to have a magical solution for Idlib. But I am convinced that, with a serious attempt at international cooperation, a solution can be found, while building on and augmenting earlier agreements. There is an urgent need for a sustained ceasefire and immediate unfettered humanitarian access to the civilian population. There is a need to contain the situation to give additional time to enable solutions to be found. There must be strengthened engagement with the civilian population. The question of foreign fighters needs to be squarely tackled. The provision of support to internationally proscribed terrorist groups needs to be further restricted. Any use of force against internationally proscribed groups should be carefully targeted. There could be serious exploration of a strengthened international presence, with the consent of the Syrian authorities. The combined resources of the international community need to come together.

I appeal for an end to the hostilities, and I appeal to all to engage in a serious international effort to cooperate on Idlib. It is a humanitarian imperative. It is the way towards effective counter-terrorism. It is in the interests of regional and international peace and security. And it is the essential foundation for a sustainable path out of the Syrian conflict, which is now approaching its tenth year. The Council recognized that when it unanimously adopted resolution 2254 (2015), which stipulated a nationwide ceasefire alongside a cooperative approach to combating terrorism, full respect of Syria's sovereignty and a credible and inclusive United Nations-facilitated political process. That remains the only path to end the conflict. The major players and the members of the Council need to put their full weight behind that logic.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Pedersen for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: Geir Pedersen just updated the Security Council on the political and military developments. Let me therefore update the Security Council on the humanitarian situation.

In the week since I last briefed the Council on the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in north-west Syria (see S/PV.8707), we have seen a further substantial escalation. Every morning we wake up to more reports of shelling and air strikes on dozens of communities throughout the north-west. The impact of military operations on civilians has been severe. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has now documented 373 civilians killed since 1 December. Forty-nine deaths were recorded between 1 and 5 February. Three humanitarian workers from organizations that the United Nations works closely with have also been killed in recent days.

While many of the attacks have been reported close to front lines, we have also seen an escalation in the major civilian centres in the north-west. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported one of the most serious incidents in the last two months on 15 January, when at least 19 civilians are believed to have been killed, and more than 60 others injured, as a result of an air strike that hit the Souq Al-Hal vegetable market in Idlib city.

More than 95 per cent of all civilian deaths were in non-Government-controlled areas. The bombing and shelling have forced hundreds of thousands more people to move in an attempt to find safety. We now estimate that 586,000 people have moved in the last two months. They are mostly children. Two-hundred-thousand people moved in the eight days between 26 January and 2 February. UNICEF reports that some 300,000 children in total have left since 1 December.

We have all seen chaotic pictures in town after town as vehicles line up in every direction trying to flee. And, as we have told the Council before, the vast majority of people continue to move north and west into the ever-smaller enclave controlled by non-Government groups. Those areas are now dramatically overcrowded, and available accommodation is severely congested.

People who have just moved cannot find adequate shelter. The area already hosts large populations

of internally displaced persons (IDPs). There is no unused capacity left in formal camps in Idlib, forcing many IDPs to camp on agricultural land with no infrastructure. Towns and villages in the area are also congested. Approximately 80,000 people are believed to be sheltering in unfinished houses and buildings. We are also seeing more people move north out of Idlib into Turkish-controlled areas in Afrin, Azaz and Al-Bab. Approximately 144,000 people have now moved into those areas.

The United Nations has continued to work with the Russian Federation to try to agree pauses in hostilities along pre-identified routes to allow those fleeing to reach temporary safety. From 27 January to 2 February, approximately 4,000 people were supported by local non-governmental organizations during the pauses to move from Ariha, Saraqib and Sarmin to areas closer to Turkey.

Civilian infrastructure also continues to be damaged and destroyed, or otherwise affected, by the fighting. The World Health Organization reports that 53 medical facilities have stopped operations, either owing to the direct impact of fighting or because the doctors themselves need to move to safer places. Of the 53 facilities, three were affected by air strikes or shelling, including two attacks on 26 and 30 January in and around Ariha in south-east Idlib. The World Health Organization reports that those two attacks killed 10 people and injured 30 others. As health-care services break down, the danger of new disease outbreaks grows. Approximately 26 immunization centres have had to close down since 1 December 2019.

As Geir Pedersen noted, the Secretary-General spoke once again about these issues earlier in the week. He has been very clear. The attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure taking place in north-west Syria are unacceptable; they must be brought to an end. As the Secretary-General has also said, we need an immediate cessation of hostilities. While localized pauses have helped some civilians to flee — and we will continue to work with parties to the conflict to see pauses continue — millions of people continue to face some of the most severe protection challenges that we have seen in all the years of the Syrian crisis. A broader ceasefire continues to be the only way to ensure that civilians are protected.

The United Nations and the broader humanitarian community are doing everything possible to address

the significant needs of approximately 3 million people who need help in north-western Syria. In January, 1,227 trucks of humanitarian assistance were sent from Turkey through the Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salam border crossings. Nearly 900 trucks carried food assistance for some 1.4 million people. Other trucks carried health supplies for almost half a million people, and non-food items for more than 230,000. That is the most aid that the United Nations has sent across the border in any month since the operation was authorized in 2014. The cross-border operation remains essential to the relief effort in Syria. It is still the only way to reach people in need in Idlib.

My team has also this week released another humanitarian readiness and response plan for north-west Syria, requesting an additional \$336 million for the next six months to address the massive displacement that we have seen since 1 December 2019. The greatest need is for shelter and protection against the harsh winter conditions — tents, plastic sheeting, stoves, warm clothes and fuel. We announced in December 2019 the release of \$44 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund, which I manage, for the Syria crisis, both to meet needs in refugee hosting countries and for humanitarian activities across Syria. That was the largest-single allocation from the Central Emergency Response Fund for the Syria crisis since the war began. As of today I am releasing an additional \$30 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund as the first resources for the new response plan in Idlib. I once again thank the donors whose contributions make this possible, but I also note that the Fund's resources are limited. I urge others to provide money for the new plan as soon as possible.

We are also continuing our dialogue with all parties to seek cross-line access. We will use all options available to us to reach people in need, but there has been no substantive progress on cross-line access since I updated the Council last week.

Finally, let me reiterate that, despite the efforts of humanitarian organizations, needs are growing exponentially. There are still hundreds of thousands of civilians in what appears to be the area at risk from the current fighting, in addition to all those who have fled since December 2019. What we have been warning Council members about is therefore happening. How severe the crisis becomes will depend on whether a solution can be found to ease the situation for those who

remain in harm's way and those crammed into an ever-smaller area in the north-west of Idlib.

Time is short. The front line has now moved to within a few kilometres of Idlib city, the largest urban centre in the north-west. I therefore echo Geir Pedersen's appeal for an immediate end for the hostilities and for a serious international effort to cooperate on Idlib. It is indeed a humanitarian imperative.

A ceasefire would be a first step, and compliance with international humanitarian law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure remains fundamental. As Mr. Pedersen also outlined, however, what is needed is a genuine dialogue by the parties to the conflict towards a sustainable political solution pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015).

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

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

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I think that the worst nightmare concerning Idlib has come to pass. As Mark Lowcock just told us, the United Nations has been warning of this day for a long time. And this is within an environment in which nightmares happen 24/7. Idlib has long been, as it were, the refuge of last resort for all those people who had to flee the attacks on Aleppo and elsewhere. Now, having thought that they were safe in Idlib, they find themselves under even greater attack.

As my Foreign Secretary has said, this is vicious campaign of attrition, and it continues to force civilians to flee by targeting their schools, hospitals and emergency first responders. We condemn the repeated flouting of international humanitarian law. Mr. Lowcock explained that millions of people are currently facing a protection crisis. We know that an investigation by the United Nations board of inquiry is under way to determine why deconflicted sites have been targeted. We have heard the statistics of those who — sadly — were killed in January, including as a result of air strikes that incapacitated Al-Shami hospital, the last remaining surgical hospital serving southern Idlib. The continued onslaught by Syrian forces, backed by Russian and Iranian forces, has displaced over 550,000 people since 1 December, more than the entire population of Sochi.

Turkey has made efforts to seek a peaceful solution in Idlib and prevent millions more Syrians having

to seek refuge. However, we have seen the Syrian authorities frustrate and ignore the memorandums of understanding. Multiple ceasefires have been broken — often— and they are violated as quickly as they are announced, after one or two days. Mr. Pedersen outlined the attacks that we have seen in the last few days, which led to Turkish fatalities and increased the risk of a further regional conflagration. We are deeply concerned about the impact of that escalation on Turkey, which is already hosting more than 3.5 million refugees who fled the repression in Syria.

Therefore, the United Kingdom, along with France and the United States, called for this meeting so that we can call once again for an immediate, genuine and lasting ceasefire in Idlib and for a lasting solution to the situation there. Both of the United Nations representatives briefing us today have stressed the imperative of that. We have heard a lot of superlatives today, including what Mr. Lowcock described as the largest single allocation from the Central Emergency Response Fund since the war began.

How many more imperatives are we going to need before the Syrian authorities commit and adhere to a ceasefire? I think it would be very good if the Syrian representative could explain in his intervention why there should not be a ceasefire and why the ceasefires that have been agreed already should not be adhered to. We never get a very clear answer to that question, and yet the number of people, including children, who are suffering from current Syrian policies continues to increase.

Council members have said time and again that the only sustainable way forward for Syria is a political solution under resolution 2254 (2015). The offensive being perpetrated in Idlib and the failure of multiple ceasefires serve only to underline that it is the United Nations and the Security Council — and not the Astana format — that should remain the guardians of the political process, and that our absolute priority should be to achieve a sustainable solution in order to address the humanitarian disaster in north-west Syria. Mr. Lowcock has set out exactly what that means in terms of numbers.

I would also like to use this opportunity to encourage the Secretary-General to consider whether the United Nations, beyond the critical humanitarian role it is already playing, can assist in any way in achieving a lasting ceasefire. As a Security Council

member, the United Kingdom stands ready to support any United Nations-backed agreement. For the record, we continue to support the Special Envoy's work on the political process and encourage him to pursue all of the elements of resolution 2254 (2015).

As discussed at last week's humanitarian briefing (see S/PV.8707), the mass destruction and displacement are already inflicting a terrible toll on the people of north-west Syria. There are more than 3 million people stuck in that ever-shrinking pocket, which has a population density greater than that of the Gaza Strip. The United Kingdom is already providing more than \$50 million in humanitarian assistance to north-west Syria this fiscal year, and we are looking at what more we can do to help. We have spent more than \$3 billion to help Syria since the conflict began. I would like the Syrian representative to explain why the conflict is continuing when it is hurting so many of his own people.

Finally, I want to conclude with a tribute to the United Nations, on both the political and the humanitarian sides, for the work that it does in those terrible circumstances and without the necessary assistance from the host Government.

Mrs. Craft (United States of America): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen and Mr. Mark Lowcock for their briefings.

The United States joined the United Kingdom and France in calling for today's meeting because we are appalled at the Al-Assad regime's escalation of violence in north-west Syria. The Trump Administration condemns in the strongest possible terms the Al-Assad regime, Iran, Hizbullah and Russia's barbaric and unjustified military offensive. To be quite clear, what we are witnessing is deliberate lethal violence against thousands of innocent children, women and men. It is violence that seeks only to terrorize and subdue, and it sends a chilling message: the Al-Assad regime and its allies are rejecting the Security Council's efforts to restore stability in Syria through a United Nations-facilitated political process.

In response to that message, we come here today with a message of our own because here, in this Chamber, if the Security Council is to retain even a shred of credibility, we simply cannot ignore the resolutions we adopt. In 2015, the Council not only adopted resolution 2254 (2015) but did so unanimously. Today all elements of that resolution, including the Constitutional Committee, are in the crosshairs.

Therefore, our message today is the following: the situation in north-west Syria demands an immediate, comprehensive and verifiable ceasefire. If there is one thing we know, however, it is that the Astana format cannot be trusted to deliver such a ceasefire. We know that because it is Russian warplanes that have routinely terminated Russian-brokered ceasefires and because it is Russian bombs that have destroyed Syrian hospitals and driven Syrian children from their homes. The sheer scale of destruction, both endorsed and facilitated by Russia, shows that neither it, nor Iran nor the Al-Assad regime can be trusted to deliver a ceasefire, let alone a political solution.

With no faith whatsoever in the Astana format, we therefore call on the Special Envoy to turn his attention to securing an immediate, comprehensive and verifiable ceasefire in north-west Syria as a means of preserving the progress of the Constitutional Committee's vital work. It is essential for all parties to move forward on the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). The first step is to lend our full support to the United Nations immediate efforts to establish a nationwide ceasefire and ensure that vital United Nations cross-border humanitarian assistance, authorized by resolution 2504 (2020), can continue to reach the millions of civilians trapped by the Al-Assad regime's assault.

The United States believes that the United Nations should use its neutrality and impartiality to secure a ceasefire in north-west Syria. In launching that assault, the Al-Assad regime has not only exacerbated a dire humanitarian situation in the region but also risks a wider escalation of the conflict. That only puts more Syrian lives in danger and threatens the hope for a political solution in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

For months the United Nations warned Council members of an impending humanitarian catastrophe in north-west Syria if violence continued unabated. That catastrophe has now arrived. Up to 700,000 people have been displaced by Syrian and Russian attacks in north-west Syria since September 2018. More than 500 civilians have been killed since the beginning of April. Barring drastic change, it will get worse.

While the regime appears to be fully inoculated against any sense of shame or guilt for the misery it has caused, it should be under no illusions that cruelty and violence will go unanswered. For one, Turkey, as our ally in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, has the full support of the United States to respond in self-

defence to the Al-Assad regime's unjustified attacks on Turkish observation posts that resulted in the deaths of Turkish personnel.

For our part, the United States will continue to withhold reconstruction funding in regime areas of Syria. I am here to say that the Trump Administration will spare no effort in our campaign to isolate the Al-Assad regime both economically and diplomatically for as long as it continues to reject the political process outlined in resolution 2254 (2015).

I want to conclude by speaking directly to the Syrian people. There can be no doubt that these are dark days, but they are not alone and they are not forgotten. As long as Donald Trump is President and I am the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, they will have the untiring and unflinching support of the United States of America.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock for their briefings.

In recent months, we have entered a new phase in the ruthless strategy of the Syrian regime. After the horror of the destruction of Aleppo at the end of 2016 and the battle in Ghouta in 2018, we are now witnessing a similar scenario in Idlib, but this time on an unprecedented scale, as nearly 3 million Syrians are involved.

It is therefore urgent to silence the weapons in Idlib. France condemns in the strongest possible terms the intense bombardments by the regime's air force and its allies, which continue to indiscriminately target the civilian population and infrastructure in the north-west. When entering the Security Council Chamber, one passes a tapestry reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica*. Its meaning is simple — never again.

Three million people — nearly 80 per cent of them women and children — and nearly 600,000 people newly displaced since December are exposed to daily attacks by the regime and its allies. Through those strikes, the regime and its allies are turning thousands of civilians onto the streets. That will do nothing to enable the voluntary return of refugees.

In the face of that tragedy, de-escalation must be a priority for us all. The High Representative of the European Union expressed that view today in Brussels. France will support the Special Envoy's efforts in that connection. We call on the signatories to the September

2018 Sochi agreement, first and foremost Russia, to ensure a genuine cessation of hostilities in the north-west.

The fight against terrorism cannot justify the sacrifice of civilians and repeated violations of international humanitarian law. That will only bolster the terrorist threat and promote the radicalization of combatants, with a real risk of the spread of terrorists as a result of population movements. Finally, it runs counter to the efforts of the international community over the past five years to extinguish the hotbed of international terrorism that Syria has become.

All parties must respect international humanitarian law. The protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel and civilian infrastructure, must remain an absolute priority. It is unacceptable that health infrastructure, including health facilities that have been deconflicted, and schools continue to be the target of attacks, in defiance of international humanitarian law. Attacks on hospitals and health workers are war crimes, which must not go unpunished. In that regard, we reiterate our full support for the investigation launched by the Secretary-General.

Every effort must also be made to ensure full humanitarian access to all those in need of aid through cross-border assistance. In the face of the worsening humanitarian crisis, France has allocated nearly €19 million in response to the needs in north-western Syria in 2019.

The tragedy we are witnessing makes a political settlement more necessary than ever before. The offensive in the north-west and the regime's obstruction of the work of the Constitutional Committee are in fact two sides of the same coin. The strategy of the regime and its allies is to pursue a military solution to the conflict. As we all know, only an inclusive political solution can bring about lasting stability in Syria and enable the refugees to return to their country.

It is more urgent than ever to truly get the political process back on track for the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). For that, the cessation of hostilities in Idlib remains an essential precondition. Working in parallel on the conclusion of a ceasefire, the launching of the work of the Constitutional Committee and on the other provisions of resolution 2254 (2004) is the only possible solution. The Special Envoy has our full support in that regard.

Finally, France, together with its European partners, stands ready to finance reconstruction and lift sanctions as soon as a political settlement is firmly and irreversibly in place — not before. The key to breaking the current deadlock is therefore in the hands of the regime and its allies. In the face of the tragedy unfolding before our eyes in Idlib, it is essential today to work together to avert the humanitarian, political and security disaster under way.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Ambassador Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock for their briefings.

We continue to firmly support all genuine efforts to achieve sustainable peace in Syria for all Syrians. Based on that decision and our confidence in international law as the fundamental framework for achieving peace, we welcome this meeting. We welcome it because we see it as an opportunity to strengthen our moral responsibility towards the Syrian people by easing their suffering.

Wherever there are reports of children being killed or forced to leave their homes and abandon their education, we must be present. Wherever ceasefire agreements are violated — by either side — and result in the loss of civilian lives, we must be present. Wherever there are civilians in need of protection, we must be present. But we must also act. It is critical to protect the political process. Wherever situations of great violence develop that involve violations of international law, including international humanitarian law, it is impossible to move forward with a negotiated political solution. I would therefore like to put some questions to the Special Envoy.

First, in the light of recent developments on the ground, what concrete steps are being taken to achieve an immediate cessation of hostilities and avoid a full-scale confrontation between all parties operating in Idlib? Such a confrontation would put the civilian population at unimaginable risk and must be avoided at all costs. A failure to take preventive action — by any party — would be a black mark on the history of humankind.

My second question is with regard to the Constitutional Committee. It is unacceptable, I say unacceptable, that at this stage it has not been possible to move forward. We would therefore like to know the Special Envoy's own assessment of the current situation and the real prospects for progress. We reiterate that while the Constitutional Committee is not an end

in itself, it is certainly the key to a comprehensive political process.

Finally, we cannot fail to reiterate our position of condemnation of the indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population, which have forced so many people into displacement and created so many humanitarian needs.

We therefore call for an immediate cessation of hostilities and that we guarantee the protection of civilians and ensure access for humanitarian assistance to all those in need, who have paid the highest price in this horrific situation.

Mr. Jürgenson (Estonia): First, I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings from the United Nations side.

It is clear that the ceasefire agreements established by the Astana format have unfortunately failed. Instead of peaceful life, the de-escalation areas have turned into war zones, with daily bombardment from the Syrian regime and Russia.

In that light, we remain extremely concerned about the possible full-scale military confrontation of Turkish, Russian and Syrian regime forces on the ground. That is why we will be glad to hear today our Turkish colleague in the Chamber inform us about the recent developments in detail. Nevertheless, we already heard from the briefers that the large-scale offensive in Idlib province has resulted in both the loss of 1,300 lives and the displacement of more than 700,000 people in the past four months. Is that really a ceasefire? At least six Turkish soldiers were killed in an artillery attack by the Syrian army on Monday. Is that what can be called a de-escalation?

Estonia joins those countries here today that are demanding a nationwide humanitarian ceasefire to stop the unfolding catastrophe. The reason for that is not only the immense human suffering that the indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment of the Syrian army and Russian aeroplanes bring to the Syrian people. It is also because of the intricate link between peace and the political process, which resolution 2254 (2015) highlights. Stopping the violence is the simple precondition for a meaningful dialogue. However, the continued military operations by the Syrian regime and its allies harm that prospect and undermine the trust

of the Syrian people towards the Council, where we sit right now.

Indeed, no one is denying that there are radical elements in Idlib but that does not justify indiscriminate attacks against a civilian population. The deliberate targeting of schools, hospitals and other protected civilian infrastructure is a violation of international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Accountability mechanisms, such as the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, supported by the General Assembly, are crucial in that regard, as they help to collect evidence of such crimes.

Syria is not only the presidential palace in Damascus but also the thousands of tents of ordinary people in Idlib. So, besides the representatives of the Syrian regime, we also hope to hear the voices of other Syrian parties here in the Council more often. We will work closely with Council members to achieve that goal.

Let us not forget that the political process, and more precisely the Constitutional Committee, have in it an equal number of representatives from both the Syrian authorities and the legitimate opposition.

Finally, the solution to the Syrian crisis can only be political through a genuine political transition in line with resolution 2254 (2015). That must start with a nationwide ceasefire and guaranteeing unhindered access for humanitarian aid to all those in need. What is happening in Idlib right now completely contradicts those aims.

Mr. Pham (Viet Nam): I thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for their briefings on the situation in Syria.

First of all, Viet Nam would like to share its grave concern over the intensified hostilities in north-west Syria, particularly in Idlib. The substantial escalation in the past few days only compounds the plight of hundreds of thousands of civilians who are already in a dire situation, paying an inestimable price in this protracted crisis. The recent numbers given by our briefers today are heart-rending, especially with regard to children. The protection of civilians has to be among the top priorities for all parties. We would also like to emphasize the utmost importance of maintaining and ensuring the functioning of health facilities and humanitarian services on the ground.

Secondly, to prevent any further deterioration, we call on all parties concerned to put an end to hostilities, exercise maximum restraint and strictly observe international law, including international humanitarian law, and the relevant Security Council resolutions. We reiterate our consistent position that the conflict in Syria must be settled through a sustainable political solution, in accordance with international law and the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, including respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of Syria, as well as the aspirations of the Syrian people. We urge the Syrian Government and all parties concerned to redouble their efforts to de-escalate the situation, paving the way for a comprehensive, lasting solution. We call on international partners to further intensify diplomatic efforts, bilaterally and multilaterally, to help ensure conducive conditions for peace and stability in Syria.

Last but not least, we would like to reiterate our support for the work of Special Envoy Pederson, the United Nations system and its humanitarian partners working on the ground, assisting Syrians. The Syrian people have suffered too much for too long. Let us work together to help them to end this crisis in the interests of the peace, stability and development of Syria and the region.

Mr. Van Shalkwyk (South Africa): We would like to thank Mr. Geir Pedersen and Mr. Mark Lowcock for their briefings on the current situation in Syria.

South Africa notes with concern the reports of the escalation of violence in north-west Syria. All parties to the conflict must make every effort to reduce tensions and refrain from any actions that may further exacerbate the situation.

We reiterate that all States have the sovereign right to address the threat of terrorism in their countries. We emphasize that any action to counter terrorism must be in line with the obligations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

External support for armed groups must cease immediately. Syria and its people have long endured the deadly misfortune of being a theatre of conflict that has involved several external role players, who have used the conflict as a proxy for their own interests.

The escalation of tensions has reportedly led to the displacement, injury and death of civilians. Many

of those civilians have already been displaced multiple times, with violence and hostilities appearing to follow wherever they flee. All parties to the conflict must adhere to their obligations under international law and international humanitarian law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. In that regard, civilians must be afforded access to humanitarian corridors.

Civilians are facing impossible circumstances, with winter upon them. A full military confrontation between the parties must be avoided at all costs, as civilians in already severe security and humanitarian circumstances would be left to face the eventual dire consequences. We once again urge all parties to abide by their commitments under the various ceasefire agreements that have been previously agreed and call for a cessation of hostilities throughout Syria. A cessation of hostilities would also ensure that the necessary humanitarian aid is provided to all those who require it. We call on the relevant authorities to ensure the safe, unimpeded and impartial delivery of that assistance.

As we have consistently maintained, South Africa is firm in its belief that the political and humanitarian situations in Syria cannot be addressed independently of each other. An improvement in the humanitarian situation could improve trust and build confidence among the parties, which could in turn bolster progress and substantive dialogue on the political track. We call on all parties to make the necessary efforts to commit to continued dialogue under the auspices, and with the support of, Special Envoy Pedersen. That would include working to ensure that the Constitutional Committee's third round of talks — with an agenda agreed by both parties — is convened soon and that substantive and sincere discussions are held to ensure that the people of Syria have a safe, stable and prosperous environment in which to live.

South Africa remains committed to supporting the protection of the fundamental interests of the Syrian people, the maintenance of peace and stability in the Middle East region and the defence of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the basic norms governing international relations, including respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Syria.

In conclusion, we must all remember that the people of Syria have the most to lose should the violence

continue. We must do all we can to support efforts to prevent such suffering.

Ms. King (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings and their tireless efforts to restore peace in Syria.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines remains deeply troubled by the reports of violence and escalating tensions in north-west Syria. We are disheartened to hear that the situation has intensified, as have the humanitarian consequences. What was intended to be a de-escalation zone is now the potential epicentre for anguish. We therefore call for the immediate cessation of all hostilities to prevent further human suffering.

Continuing along the path of combat will serve only to impede humanitarian access to those in desperate need of it, trigger a further displacement of civilians and — if calmer heads do not prevail — continue to result in the loss of life. We strongly condemn attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, particularly health and education services, and we implore all parties to the conflict to recommit to a ceasefire.

At the same time, we appreciate the steps being taken by the Russian Federation and Turkey to enhance the coordination of their respective countries' actions in Syria. It is our hope that those efforts will promote a de-escalation and help to preserve life.

We also remind parties that military and counter-terrorism operations must comply with the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. Distinction, proportionality and precaution ought to guide all activities. We therefore reiterate that peace and justice are interdependent. Atrocities committed in violation of international law should not be ignored, and perpetrators must be held accountable.

As the conflict rages on and the humanitarian situation worsens, it is apparent now — more than ever — that there is a need for a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political solution. We reiterate our support for all efforts in that regard, as a political solution is the only path towards lasting peace and stability.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines reaffirms its respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. The actions of the international community must have regard for the perspectives of the Syrian Government, as it is up

to the Syrian people to determine the future of their country. Indeed, it is the Syrian people who are paying the highest price in the conflict with their suffering, as they have lost their safety, their stability and their calm. The Security Council must continue to speak up for them.

Mr. Soemirat (Indonesia): Indonesia would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock and Special Envoy Pedersen for their briefings. We commend their strong and tireless efforts in executing their respective mandates.

My delegation underlined our position on the humanitarian situation in north-west Syria and on the Constitutional Committee at the two meetings on Syrian humanitarian and political issues held last week on the same day (see S/PV.8707 and S/PV.8708).

Before I continue, I would like to underscore that, while we value every meeting of the Security Council, we would prefer all Council meetings to be conducted appropriately and as necessary, without creating further divergence among Council members. It is our strong belief that the most important approach and priority for the Council at this particular time is to be united in addressing the Syrian dossier. I wish to re-emphasize the importance of three main points.

First, there must be an immediate cessation of hostilities in north-west Syria. It is a matter of the utmost urgency that all parties on the ground respect their obligations to protect civilians under international humanitarian law. In that regard, we would like to highlight something important yet disturbing mentioned by Special Envoy Pedersen, namely, “[w]e appear to have lost sight of the principle of proportionality.” I think that is a very basic, yet extremely important, issue. In that context, let me reiterate our position that attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure are unacceptable.

Secondly, immediate humanitarian assistance is needed by civilians. As Under-Secretary-General Lowcock mentioned, about 580,000 people in north-west Syria have left their homes in the past two months in order to escape the hostilities and seek safety. Most of those individuals have been displaced multiple times. They are vulnerable and need urgent humanitarian support.

Thirdly, we would urge the Syrian parties to pursue concrete efforts in order to be able to advance the work of the Constitutional Committee.

We appreciate all the efforts of the various parties to de-escalate the conflict in the north-west, particularly those that have led to ceasefire agreements. However, such agreements need to be firmly respected and implemented. Indonesia supports the engagement of the United Nations with all the relevant parties to end the violence. Again, my delegation urges all parties on the ground to cease their military activities. We must avoid armed confrontations, which will only increase the number of displaced people and exacerbate the suffering of civilians.

Before I conclude, let me highlight the importance of thinking beyond the agenda of the Constitutional Committee. Indonesia sincerely hopes that an agreement on the agenda can soon be reached so that Committee members can begin their substantive work, which is the crucial part of the process. Trust and confidence among the Syrian parties are also key.

Mr. Heusgen (Germany): I deliver this statement on the humanitarian situation in north-west Syria on behalf of the co-penholders, namely, Belgium and Germany.

At the outset, let me thank our briefers, Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock, for their insight into unbelievable human suffering. Idlib is becoming more and more a symbol of carnage. Just a week ago, Mr. Lowcock described the humanitarian catastrophe (see S/PV.8707) in facts and figures. We do not see any improvement. Instead, numbers increase day by day, the suffering is compounding and we continue to stand idly by.

From 1 February to 4 February alone, 34 civilians were killed, including nine women and seven children. Eighty-three civilians were killed in air strikes and ground-based strikes between 20 January and 30 January. Among them were 20 women and 33 children. More than 580,000 people have been displaced by the recent offensive around Idlib. Six thousand five hundred children are forced to flee every single day, totalling 300,000 since the beginning of December 2019. In Idlib, at least 53 medical facilities are currently out of order.

Those are recent and truly shocking statistics from various United Nations official sources — not from the Internet or based on fake news. They are reliable and trustworthy sources. The President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, recently said that public interest in the war in Syria has

decreased significantly although violence, once more, is on the rise.

As co-penholders, we will do everything to shed light on the humanitarian consequences of the war in Syria. As the Security Council, we must fulfil our responsibility to protect human life. More engagement, not less, is needed. We remain deeply concerned about the safety of the 4 million civilians in north-west Syria. The ongoing military offensive causes immense human suffering, death, displacement and destruction in the midst of winter. Families are literally left out in the cold, without protection, proper health care or shelter. Children are forced to leave school and spend their precious childhood fleeing from one uncertainty to the next. People flee with nothing more than the clothes on their back. Where do they go? The density of the population at the Turkish border increases every day because people move north to escape the fighting. Humanitarian assistance — for example, temporary housing — is urgently needed.

Civilians have the right to be protected from the horror of war, and warring parties have the obligation to ensure their protection. Once again, we recall that there are humanitarian obligations that need to be observed. There are rules to warfare; we should not forget that. More than 80 per cent of the people in need in the north-west are women and children.

As the World Health Organization stated on Monday, at least 53 medical facilities are currently out of order. Providing help for the 2.9 million people in need of medical assistance becomes increasingly difficult every day. One of the main reasons for that is the ongoing bombardment of civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools. Those attacks are totally unacceptable. We, the co-penholders, condemn the violence and call for accountability for those responsible.

We also condemned the attacks perpetrated by Security Council-designated terrorist groups. However, counter-terrorism efforts can never absolve the parties from respecting their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Despite the dire situation in the north-west, we should not forget the north-east. A total of 2.5 million out of 4.1 million inhabitants rely on humanitarian assistance. Safe, durable and unhindered humanitarian access is essential. As we heard in the Council last week, words have to be followed by deeds.

We call on the Syrian regime and Russia to ensure the protection of civilians and to comply with international humanitarian law. We call for an immediate and fully observed ceasefire and full humanitarian access to all people in need. A sustainable solution can be achieved only by political progress, as agreed upon in resolution 2254 (2015). There is no sustainable military solution. The current offensive in Idlib must stop.

In my national capacity, let me say that I add my voice to those who are deeply concerned about the recent escalation and the attack by Syrian regime forces against a Turkish observation post, which led to the death of several members of Turkey's armed forces. I would like to underscore that such escalation is unacceptable.

Mr. Zenati (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for their briefings.

Since the two Security Council meetings on Syria held last week (see S/PV.8707 and S/PV.8708), violence and terrorist acts in Idlib have continued unabated despite the calls from many Security Council members for an end to the military escalation and a return to calm.

We are gravely concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation due to escalation in north-west Syria, as civilian casualties continue to mount in Idlib and its vicinity and more than half a million people are being displaced. There are also reports indicating a risk of the spread of diseases, while humanitarian and medical assistance and services cannot meet the increasing needs.

Tunisia reiterates its condemnation of the attacks against civilians, regardless of their origin, in particular attacks by Security Council-designated terrorist groups. We call upon all parties to fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian law and international law in order to ensure the protection of civilians at all times as well as to provide safe, sustained and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need of it.

The priority in Idlib now is to broker a ceasefire, compel all parties to exercise restraint and create an environment conducive to achieving calm pursuant to the understandings that are still valid.

We call upon the guarantor parties to work together in order to create an environment conducive to restoring

calm in the de-escalation zone and to preventing renewed clashes, so as to ensure the restoration of security and stability throughout Syria. We believe that understandings reached on the issue of achieving calm in Idlib, although important, are merely temporary solutions if they do not result in a joint practical solution that excludes the terrorist groups in Idlib and ensures the end of their presence in the region.

The political process cannot move forward without creating the proper conditions for calm and stability throughout Syria and for promoting confidence among the parties. We recall once again that resolution 2254 (2015) noted the close relation between a ceasefire and the political process in Syria. In that regard, we support the efforts of the Special Envoy for Syria and those of all other actors working to move forward the political process in Geneva.

My country's delegation stresses anew that there can be no military solution to the crisis in Syria. The only way to end the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people is to make progress towards a political settlement, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). The settlement must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, under the auspices of the United Nations, through an agreement among Syrian political and civilian parties on a new constitution that ensures free and fair elections under United Nations supervision. Those elections must meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people to a life of freedom and dignity and uphold Syria's unity, independence and territorial integrity, while also contributing to the promotion of security and stability in the region.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China thanks Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings and appreciates the Organization's efforts to advance the Syrian political process and improve the humanitarian situation in the country. A political settlement is the only way to end the conflict in Syria. The United Nations should continue to advance the Syrian political process in accordance with the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned principle and resolution 2254 (2015).

Last week, Special Envoy Pedersen visited Syria and held talks with the Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Al-Moualem. China supports the Special Envoy in his effort to strengthen communication with the Syrian Government and heed its legitimate calls. The independence of the work of

the Constitutional Committee should be maintained. It should not be subject to external interference, and neither should there be an artificially preset time frame. It should be left up to the Syrian people to find a way out of the crisis. The members of the Constitutional Committee should show political will and, in the spirit of compromise, take active part in dialogue in a concerted effort to uphold Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territory integrity.

The complex situation in north-west Syria is both a security issue and a humanitarian issue, which can be traced back to the time when terrorists controlled Idlib. Listed terrorist organizations must be resolutely eliminated, in accordance with Council resolutions and international law, using agreed standards. Weapons collected in the course of combating terrorist organizations should be scrutinized for their origin, and the channels used to supply terrorist organizations with weapons should be eradicated. A database should be established for foreign terrorist fighters in order to address that problem. Measures should also be taken to prevent them from fleeing to other countries and regions to continue their criminal activities.

China supports the United Nations in helping displaced civilians. We hope that the parties concerned will continue to seek a comprehensive and long-term solution to the Idlib issue through dialogue and negotiations. China is deeply concerned about the overall humanitarian situation in Syria due to years of war, broken infrastructure, economic sanctions and other reasons. The living conditions of the Syrian people are dire. The international community should provide the United Nations with adequate funding and resources to ensure the provision of humanitarian supplies to the people in need throughout Syria. At the same time, they should lend support to the Syrian Government for reconstruction efforts in areas with a relatively stable security situation, with a view to repairing housing and other civilian infrastructure, restoring medical and educational facilities and clearing explosive remnants of war. That is the only way for more Syrian people to step out of the shadow of war and gradually move towards leading a stable and orderly life.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock and Mr. Geir Pedersen for their briefings.

Today we are once again discussing the situation in Syria in the Security Council. We discussed it twice

in one day alone, on 29 January (see S/PV.8707 and S/PV.8708), we discussed it yesterday and there are two more meetings scheduled for 19 and 27 February. There are regular meetings, as well as unplanned meetings such as today. The unplanned meetings now have a common pattern. By some strange coincidence, they are organized when the terrorists in the Syrian Arab Republic are under threat, and the Syrian Government is regaining control over its national territory. Those terrorists, I recall, are recognized as such by the Security Council. We are talking about the sovereign territory of Syria and about terrorist fighters, and fighting them is the right and duty of the Government of any country to combat terrorists.

From December 2019 to January 2020, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists seized the Idlib de-escalation zone and intensified their raids. At the end of last year, more than 1,400 attacks were recorded, in which those fighters used tanks, machine guns, mortars and artillery fire. Over the past 24 hours, there have been 31 incidents of open fire in Latakia, Idlib and Hama governorates. All that data is available on the website of the Russian Ministry of Defence. We regularly disseminate relevant bulletins, but some colleagues do not seem to be interested. After all, we are talking about Syrians who are in Damascus-controlled territory. Some of our colleagues think that those are not the right Syrians. The information provided by the Permanent Mission of Syria to the United Nations, which regularly reports about civilian victims, is also not of interest.

However, I would like to take this opportunity to bridge the gaps in my colleagues' remarks, as well as in the United Nations reports. In December 2019 and early January 2020, 42 civilians were killed, among them were five children, and 92 people were injured, including 30 children. That mainly occurred in the Aleppo governorate. More than 1,000 attacks were reported in the first two weeks of January. The number of civilians and Syrian military personnel killed or injured has already climbed into the hundreds.

No attention is paid to recent instances of terrorist destruction of civilian infrastructure in the vicinity of Homs. Material damage was caused to Syria's oil and gas complex. Instead of bragging about the politicization of the post-conflict reconstruction of a country, it would be better to lift sanctions and return control of the oilfields to Syrians, not plunder the Syrian national treasure under the pretext of protecting it. That would

make a real contribution to improving the humanitarian situation of Syrians.

The United States Secretary of State, Mr. Pompeo, in his press statement of 4 February said:

(spoke in English)

“The United States once again condemns the continued, unjustifiable and ruthless assaults on the people of Idlib by the Assad regime, Russia, Iran and Hizbullah.”

(spoke in Russian)

He does not say “people in Idlib”, but “people of Idlib”. Idlib is not a country, but rather a Syrian governorate, which does not have citizens of Idlib but rather Syrian citizens who have been taken hostage by the terrorists running rampant. The Secretary of State also referred to barbaric attacks in Idlib, which is something we will return to later.

In the course of the counter-terrorist operation by the Syrian army, more than 4,000 fighters were killed, and 17 tanks, mortars and technicals were destroyed. In that regard, it is bewildering that some Western countries want to present terrorist groups in Idlib as the moderate opposition. Observations that perhaps Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham is not so bad, or does not really pose a threat, are something that we have been recently hearing with greater frequency, and these observations are made by official representatives of certain countries that called for today’s meeting.

We also have questions about calls for a national ceasefire, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), even though paragraph 8 of the resolution directly states that there is a need to combat terrorism, a point to which we will also return. Unfortunately, there has been a tragic recent loss of Russian and Turkish military personnel. Armed drone attacks on the Russian air base at Khmeimim continue. That once again speaks to the unacceptable rise of the fighters in the Idlib area, who enjoy complete impunity.

Given the escalation of the situation, we are continuing to cooperate with Turkey to achieve de-confliction and an easing of tensions. There are relevant exchanges between the Presidents, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and political and military agencies. We will continue such interaction and we will not allow anyone to sow discord. The same is true of cooperation within the Astana format, in which we are

working together with Turkey and Iran to promote the political process.

We would like to make it clear that that the Russian Federation is firmly committed to the norms of international humanitarian law. All the targets of the Russian military are selected after careful analysis, with airborne surveillance tools and available ground information. Military actions are proportional and discriminate in nature, which is clear given the small number of targets affected out of the total number of ground targets in the area of operation.

I would also like to notify the Council that terrorists deliberately turn to civilian objects, including hospitals and schools, using the guise of their protected status, into their combat positions, thereby violating the Geneva Conventions. The latest such example is the terrorist seizure of the Idlib central hospital on 29 January, which was announced by the press release issued by the non-governmental agency serving that hospital.

I would remind those who speak of barbarity about the results of their operations in Raqqa, Mosul, Hajin and Al-Baghuz Fawqani. Thankfully, relevant information has been published by the United Nations. As a reminder, before the operation, there were more than half a million people in Mosul, which was captured by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Between 7,000 and 10,000 of them were killed in air strikes. Dozens of thousands were injured. According to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements Programme, which assessed the housing conditions immediately after the operation, air strikes and artillery fire destroyed over 90 per cent of all residential buildings in eastern Mosul — 90 per cent. That is an example of the selectivity that is being preached to us today, or will colleagues try to prove that all of Mosul’s hospitals, clinics and educational facilities were in the remaining 10 per cent — and therefore untouched? How many public Council meetings on this topic or press conferences have been held on that, by the way? Do not bother to check — there were none, and there were no United Nations commissions of inquiry into that either.

Perhaps the operation in Raqqa was conducted differently, but the mortars were used only to target the “bad guys”, so the civilian infrastructure was left untouched? No, the city was razed to the ground. Let us ask the humanitarians who entered Raqqa immediately after the coalition forces how many working clinics remained in the city once the operation was over? The

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs answered that question in its reports — there were no such clinics. Medical facilities would have to be rebuilt from scratch. How many civilians died there or were left under the rubble? We were told back then that it had been necessary to combat terrorists. We do not recall any calls for a nationwide ceasefire or cessation of hostilities or truce.

On the topic of geography, I should like to teach the Council a geography lesson. Before the beginning of the operation in 2016, the population of Raqqa was 229,000, approximately half the population of Edinburgh. Following the conclusion of the operation, in October 2017, the population was 3,000 people, and, at the end of 2018, it was 165,000. Where did 55,000 inhabitants of Raqqa go? Does anyone believe they all ran away? I think they are wrong.

We could also take a closer look at the activities of the coalition forces in Afghanistan or in Somalia. In general, there would seem to be an unlimited number of opportunities for the Security Council to hold its meetings and for the humanitarian penholders to direct their energy. However, so long as no action is taken with respect to those numerous instances, and those who allowed them to occur live by the Orwellian precept that all are all equal under the law but some are more equal than others, any criticism directed against Syria and Russia is a mere farce. Moreover, this farce is based on nothing but dubious posts on social media, reports of unidentified observers on the ground and — the best in this category — some mysterious radio buffs who intercept encoded radio exchanges between pilots and air bases, apparently by means of kitchen radio receivers. This article has been refuted by the Russian Defence Ministry. We read it and we could not help being surprised by the ignorance of such reports.

There is, however, one more thing that grieves us the most. While pursuing the goal of stopping the offensive of the Government forces against the terrorists, the initiators of this cynical campaign forgot the most important thing — international humanitarian law was created by humankind as a means of peace, rather than a tool of war and military propaganda.

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

With regard to the humanitarian consequences of the Idlib offensive, the representative of Germany

spoke also on behalf of Belgium as the humanitarian co-penholder. I will therefore limit my statement to several remarks concerning the political dimension.

First, we are deeply alarmed by the military escalation under way. Let us be clear — we support the fight against terrorism, but efforts to combat terrorism can in no way ever release parties from their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, precaution and proportionality.

Secondly, unfortunately the situation demonstrates that delegating the work of achieving a ceasefire to the Astana format has not succeeded. Of the many ceasefires that have failed, the most recent one lasted only two days. The crisis and especially the risk of any potential miscalculation resulting from clashes among the various parties pose an enormous threat to international peace and security.

Moreover, we have seen this film many times and, regrettably, we know all too well how it ends. It is civilians who suffer the consequences. We therefore call on all parties to exercise maximum restraint. We expect the United Nations, in particular the Special Envoy, to spare no effort to restore calm. We call for a cessation of hostilities at the national level, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), and for a negotiated solution to sustainably address the complex challenges in the north-west of the country and Syria as a whole. The only path leading to stability is a credible and inclusive political solution facilitated by the United Nations, in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

Thirdly, beyond its devastating impact on civilians, bombing urban areas destroys homes, schools, hospitals and electricity and water distribution networks. How can the Syrian authorities bomb such infrastructure in urban areas and, at the same time, expect the international community to pay for reconstruction? I reaffirm that, in keeping with the policy of its European partners, Belgium will not participate in the reconstruction process without the solid foundation of a political solution.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Some colleagues raised important questions in their statements, and I am ready to answer them after I

read out my own statement, should the presidency allow me to do so.

For eight years, we have been telling the Security Council that there is a raging elephant distorting the political and humanitarian situation with a view to offend, defame and demonize my country's Government in anticipation of another future escalation. Today, I have received information from my capital that certain non-governmental humanitarian organizations operating on the ground in Syria, including the Danish Refugee Council and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, among others, are having trouble transferring money allocated for humanitarian activities in Syria. The problem began in July 2019. Those organizations are therefore trying to find alternative ways to transfer the funds. However, such transfers — whether in euros or dollars — are being blocked by intermediary banks in Europe and New York, which directly affects those humanitarian organizations and their ability to plan other humanitarian projects and programmes for the year. That is an example of the true situation in my country concerning actions taken against Western, international, European and American non-governmental organizations. No one, however, sees or wants to see this situation. It is as if they were addicted to a unilateral version of the situation that they want to see. But, in the Security Council, it is not advised to watch the overall version.

At the outset, I thank the delegations of the States that called for this emergency meeting for their strong commitment in their briefings today to the provisions of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, as demonstrated in their firm condemnation of the aggression, occupation, pillaging and theft being perpetrated by the Turkish regime against my country.

We also thank the same delegations for their initiatives and steps to uphold the values of the Charter and international law by compelling the Turkish regime to stop supporting terrorism. We thank them as well for compelling the Turkish regime to stop bringing its new janissary Ottoman militias, made up of Uighurs, Uzbeks, Turks, Chechens, Turkmens, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Arabs, to settle on Syrian territories adjacent to Turkey once the Syrian population is displaced, and to prevent the Turkish regime from carrying out a demographic change reminiscent of Israeli crimes against Palestinians. We sincerely thank those same delegations for standing up against the operations of the Turkish regime to transfer thousands

of “moderate terrorists”, who are genetically modified but also armed, and mercenaries to Libya and then to Europe, Africa and other places.

We also thank those delegations who called for holding this meeting for their eagerness to enable the Security Council to shoulder its responsibilities in a professional and credible manner by condemning the United States occupation of parts of my country's territory, including the area of Al-Tanf, where Rukban camp is located, and by condemning the United States occupation forces for sponsoring Maghawir Al-Thawra, a terrorist organization that is operating in that area whose crimes are not limited to the population of Rukban camp but have reached peaceful civilians in the governorate of As-Suwayda, as I explained to the Council in a previous statement.

We also thank the States that called for convening this meeting for condemning the illegitimate presence of their troops in parts of Syrian territory and for relentlessly demanding their tripartite occupation to withdraw its forces, for disbanding their agent militias and for compensating for the devastation they caused to the infrastructure, along with compensating for what they and their agent militias and terrorist groups have pillaged in oil, gas, wheat, artefacts and myriad possessions that belong to Syrians.

We thank the delegations that called for this meeting for exercising pressure and engage in active diplomacy in order to adopt a draft resolution under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations to condemn Israeli attacks against my country. The latest such attack was launched at dawn today from above the occupied Syrian Golan and coincided — as a result of Israeli-Turkish alliance and high-level coordination between them — with more Turkish troops and heavy military equipment entering into Idlib through the so-called humanitarian crossing of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The aim is to undermine the efforts of the Syrian State and its allies to end terrorist control over Idlib and normalize life there.

To the President and members of the Security Council, I would like to say that a few hours ago Jabhat Al-Nusra — a Security Council-designated terrorist group — and the Turkish troops occupying part of my country met at Taftanaz airport, near Aleppo. Together they took part in an offensive in the area of Al-Nayrab, in Aleppo. I disclose that information so that the Council can assess it.

We thank the delegations that called for this meeting for striving to unify the Council with a view to ensuring that its resolutions on combating terrorism — of which there are dozens — are implemented and to supporting the efforts of the Syrian State and its allies to combat terrorism and foreign terrorists fighters, cleanse our territory of their evil and compel the Member States concerned, especially those in Europe, to take back their nationals without delay.

We furthermore thank them for their unwavering commitment to international law and United Nations resolutions, as well as for their humanitarian concern for the Syrian people, as demonstrated by their rejection of the unilateral coercive measures that would constitute economic terrorism and collective punishment. Some colleagues boasted about that today. I also thank the Secretariat staff for their close review and follow-up of all 900 official letters that we addressed to them regarding the so-called crisis in Syria.

Forgive me for thinking that I was in the Security Council, which, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, we entrusted with maintaining international peace and security, rather than being in a council that the Governments of some permanent members have turned into a NATO forum with the aim of inciting against my country, discredit it and exercise all kinds of pressure on the Syrian State, including by hysterically calling for repeated meetings on the situation there and requesting the Secretariat to provide countless reports and briefings to serve their interventionist and aggressive goals. Everyone heard the intervention by my colleague the Permanent Representative of the United States, when she said that Turkey is a NATO ally. Hence we are not in the Security Council. Somebody is trying to use this Council as a NATO forum. It is an unacceptable threat to say in this Chamber that the United States of America protects Turkey from the repercussions of its violations of the Charter and principles of international law.

My delegation reiterates that attempts by certain countries to impose the NATO agenda on the Security Council will undermine its credibility and negate all the pretexts used by some to demonize the Syrian State and provide political and military cover for the crimes committed against my country by NATO members, including the Turkish regime.

Do those present not remember Erdoğan's announcement on 5 September 2012 that he, along with allegiant terrorist organizations, would soon

pray in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus? Was that announcement, eight years ago, not an indication of prior aggressive intention and a declaration of war against my country? If people said that they would occupy Turkey and pray in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, or that they would occupy one of the NATO capitals and pray in its most prominent places of worship, what would NATO's response be?

The story we have presented today on the positions of certain Council members might be fiction, but it is legitimate fiction because it is underpinned by our belief in the provisions of the Charter and international law, while their practices and realities lead to undermining the Charter and manipulating the principles of international law.

Western Governments were clear in their quest to destroy my country and spread creative chaos, pillage our wealth and settle their old accounts with us. They clearly pointed out the tools they would use to achieve that goal. The memoirs of the politicians of those States and the WikiLeaks scandals are brimming with arguments proving our point. Therefore, we reiterate that improving the living and humanitarian conditions in Syria and achieving a political solution require, first and foremost, aggressive Western States to reconsider their policies, adopt approaches based on international law and the provisions of the Charter, put an end to aggression, occupation, coercion and investment in terrorism and respect the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. It also requires that they support the efforts of the Syrian State and those of its allies in combating terrorism, which is a right and duty that we will spare no effort to fulfil in order to liberate Idlib and all other parts of Syria, just as we liberated Homs, eastern Aleppo and Ghouta. Idlib is Syrian territory, and any illegitimate military presence there is the responsibility of the State to which those troops belong.

Some have called for the need to declare an immediate cease fire. With whom does the Council want us to declare a ceasefire? With the entities that the Council agreed to designate as terrorist groups, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham? With whom does the Council want us to declare a ceasefire? With hundreds of cannibals that the Council has listed as terrorists? How can we declare ceasefire with entities that the Council agreed to name as terrorist —

The President: I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to conclude. The normal

speaking time is five minutes, and it has been almost 15 minutes now.

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

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Today we are discussing the question of the situation in Syria, as requested by the delegations of three countries. Today's discussion directly affects the Syrian Arab Republic. This is not an open debate today at which 120 Members of the United Nations take the floor. The five-minute rule is not even a rule; it is a recommendation. The speaker who holds the floor is the representative of the country whose situation is being discussed in the Security Council. It is therefore not right to stop his statement by invoking time limits or any other artificial reason. As President of the Security Council, Sir, I believe that you should show respect to the representative who is making a statement on behalf of the country currently being considered by the Security Council.

The President (*spoke in French*): I once again give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, but I invite him to conclude his statement as soon as possible.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): In recent years, the Syrian Government and its allies have declared 17 truces, which are something like ceasefires — 17 times and every time, just hours after the truce has been declared, it has been violated by the militants upon the instructions of their handlers, be they from Ankara, Doha or elsewhere. Therefore, I raised the question based on our experience following 17 truces — meaning ceasefires — all of which were violated by the cannibals from the other side, who were bombarding Aleppo on a daily basis, killing dozens of civilians. No one in the Security Council called for an emergency meeting to discuss the bombardment of Aleppo by terrorists. When terrorists bombard Aleppo, that is acceptable, but when the Syrian Army bombards Idlib to eliminate the terrorists who are bombarding Aleppo, it is impermissible.

In any case, we opened three humanitarian corridors over two months ago to allow our civilian nationals to leave Idlib for safe areas under the control of the Syrian Government. The Syrian Red Crescent and our Russian allies are on the ground at these three humanitarian corridors to observe what is taking place. But terrorists and terrorist groups in Idlib have not allowed civilians

to leave and have killed anyone who tried to do so. They have killed dozens of our people trying to leave Idlib.

At your request, Mr. President, I do not want to prolong this discussion. As I said, however, if you and others want to hear answers to the questions raised, I am ready to do so.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. Sinirlioglu (Turkey): I thank you, Mr. President, for convening today's important meeting. I would also like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for their briefings on the current alarming situation in Idlib.

Syria has been the subject of discussion in the Council for almost a decade now. The Council has discussed the use of chemical weapons and the crimes committed by a tyrannical regime against its own people. It has been discussed as a civil war and a humanitarian crisis caused by the terrorist regime of a failed State. It has been discussed as a serious threat to international peace and security. But nothing has changed. To the contrary, the danger of further escalation is growing.

On 3 February, the regime, run by a clique in Damascus controlling some parts of Syrian territory, deliberately targeted Turkish forces, resulting in the deaths of seven Turkish soldiers and one civilian personnel. Acting in self-defence, the Turkish armed forces immediately retaliated. Those Turkish servicemen are in Idlib as part of the memorandum signed by Turkey and Russia in September 2018 to stabilize the situation in Idlib and preserve the status of Idlib as a de-escalation area.

All deployments of the Turkish armed forces, including the most recent, have been coordinated with Russian authorities. But despite our notifications, the regime opened fire on Turkish positions on 3 February. As a result, we were forced to deploy additional troops to protect our military observation posts and to prevent the escalation of hostilities in Idlib, in line with the responsibilities bestowed on Turkey as a guarantor. As of today, some of our observation posts remain encircled by the fighters of the regime. Even today, there have been bombardments by the regime's air force.

Since 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed by the regime. Countless more have been injured, tortured, detained or disappeared. Millions have been besieged and denied humanitarian and medical aid. My country hosts nearly 4 million Syrians.

That is almost one-fifth of the entire population of Syria before the start of the conflict. All of this is because the tyrant in Damascus has refused to meet the legitimate demands of Syrian people.

Terrorist groups established their own states in Syrian territory because the tyrant in Damascus would not allow the Syrian people to enjoy their basic rights. And now, he wants to pull my country into his dirty war by deliberately targeting Turkish forces. I cannot overemphasize the point that Turkey believes in a political solution in Syria and is working with the United Nations for a settlement in line with resolution 2254 (2015). However, Turkey will never tolerate belligerent acts. Any military aggression targeting Turkey's security interests and Turkish soldiers will be severely punished.

We will never hesitate to use our right to self-defence. I am not drawing a red line here. This is a warning. As announced by President Erdoğan, the regime should withdraw from its current positions until the end of the month. We expect the regime and its supporters to take the necessary steps in that direction, and we expect all our friends and all responsible members of the international community to respect our legitimate security concerns.

With the Sochi memorandum, we agreed with Russia to stabilize the situation in Idlib and preserve the status of Idlib as a de-escalation area. We also agreed that Turkish observation posts would be fortified and continue to function. As the guarantor of the regime, Russia committed to taking all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be avoided and that the existing status quo will be maintained. However, since May 2019, as a result of at least 2,000 ceasefire violations by regime forces, more than 1,500 civilians have been killed and approximately 800,000 displaced. A new ceasefire was introduced very recently, on 12 January, following President Putin's visit to Turkey. Since that date, the regime has violated the ceasefire more than 6,500 times, in total disregard of all agreements on Idlib.

As I have informed the Council on previous occasions, Turkey has taken a large number of measures to ensure the full implementation of the Sochi memorandum, in line with the responsibilities outlined therein. In the meantime the regime and its supporters continue to use the pretext of combatting terrorism to attack Idlib. We all know that the

deliberate targeting of civilians only fuels further radicalization. With over 3 million civilians squeezed into close quarters, the fight against terrorism cannot be carried out as it is in clear violation of international humanitarian law. Implying that millions of civilians in Idlib are Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists is a joke. We all know that the Syrian regime's real intention is not to end terrorism. It is to punish its own people and silence the Syrian opposition, not only in Idlib but also in other parts that are controlled by the regime. Some 1,600 people have been killed since April 2019.

Our contacts with the Russian authorities continue at every level, including at the military level, with our de-conflicting contacts. Our expectation of that communication is the renewal of our commitment to the Sochi understanding on Idlib and a return to the status quo in Idlib. Let me underline that Turkey will not withdraw its forces and will not abandon any observation post.

I recently met with a Syrian doctor. His depiction of the situation still resonates with me. He said,

“I have seen the world's worst humanitarian crises, but the suffering I have seen in Syria is unprecedented. Idlib has been transformed into a huge concentration camp.”

What the regime has been pursuing in Idlib over recent months is the last phase of its campaign to exterminate its own people. Hospitals and schools have been indiscriminately bombed and civilians, including babies, have been killed. Freezing temperatures and fuel shortages exacerbate the needs of vulnerable children and families. The capacity of the health system has been severely damaged at a time when health-care needs are increasing owing to displacement and bombardment. Donors, however, have responded in an inadequate manner. We need an urgent response. If this does not qualify as an emergency situation worthy of additional funding, then what does?

Even before the recent escalation, the residents of Idlib were the most vulnerable people in Syria. They had already been displaced countless times, seeking refuge from the regime's barrel bombs, airstrikes and heavy shelling for many years now. In the past two months, the regime's brutal violence has resulted in the displacement of almost 600,000 people, 85 per cent of whom are women and children. As bombs fall, civilians continue to move towards our border. The escalation has triggered a mass influx, leading to a chain reaction

that affects not only Turkey but also beyond. Is the world ready to face a repetition of the 2015 refugee crisis, when over a million people from Syria arrived in Europe?

The children of Idlib continue to bear the brunt of this massacre. More children were killed in July 2019 alone than in all of 2018. A dead Syrian child is referred to in the news only as a casualty, but back in Idlib, she or he has a name, and the body is buried with the dreams of a peaceful Syria. It is even more tragic when the body of a child cannot even be found under the debris of a bombed school.

It is time for the international community, and particularly the members of the Security Council, to heed the voices of those Syrian children. Raising concerns and convening meetings is not enough. Unfortunately, this humanitarian disaster is not given due attention by Governments and media around the world. The United Nations and the international community need to pay attention to the desperate calls of the Syrian people and humanitarian organizations. We need immediate, concrete action. We cannot leave the fate of Syrians to the mercy of a regime that has been systematically killing, torturing and starving its own people.

There is a clear path forward — a genuine political solution that will ensure the implementation of all aspects of resolution 2254 (2015). Let me recall the formula in the resolution: a negotiated political settlement, elections under United Nations supervision, with the participation of all Syrians inside and outside the country, and a new Constitution. For that to happen, the first step is immediate de-escalation in Idlib. Any step in the opposite direction will inevitably derail the political process. Let us all work together to end this tragedy once and for all.

Let me also reply to previous speakers. I will not honour the representative of the Syrian regime with a response as I do not consider him to be a legitimate representative of Syria. A regime that has massacred and tortured the Syrian people for over eight years lost its legitimacy long ago and its representative should not have the right to sit behind the nameplate of the Syrian Arab Republic in this Chamber. His mere presence is an assault on the millions of Syrians who have suffered countless crimes at the hands of that tyrannical regime,

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Takht Ravanchi (Islamic Republic of Iran): I thank you, Sir, for organizing this meeting.

The situation in Idlib is critical and every effort must be made to prevent it from getting out of control. While we must continue to combat terrorists, it should be done with the utmost care for the lives of civilians, as we have always stressed and as is also underlined in all the final documents of the Astana format. We stress the need for the implementation of the Sochi agreement on Idlib, the importance of which is also highlighted in the Astana format meetings. We need to ensure that the crisis will be settled through political means. Nevertheless, terrorists must not be allowed to exploit the situation, consolidate their positions, turn Idlib into their safe haven, kill more civilians or continue taking a large number of civilians hostage. We should be vigilant enough not to confuse the protection of civilians with the protection of terrorists.

As one of the guarantors of the Astana format, the Islamic Republic of Iran stands ready to use its good offices to contribute to the political settlement of the current differences between Turkey and Syria regarding the situation in Idlib. The upcoming summit of the guarantors of the Astana format, which is due to take place in the near future in Tehran, will provide an essential opportunity for the comprehensive examination of the situation in Syria. We will also host Special Envoy Pedersen this coming Saturday to discuss various issues related to Syria, including the work of the Constitutional Committee.

Finally, I would like to stress the following. First, the fight against terrorism must continue unabated and the terrorists must not be allowed to benefit from the existing differences. Secondly, every effort must be made by all to protect civilians. Thirdly, the current situation in Idlib can be resolved only through political means. Fourthly, the full respect of all for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Syria is a must. We stand ready to do whatever is in our power to contribute to the political settlement of the current situation.

The meeting rose at 5.10 p.m.