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Seventy-fifth year

Provisional

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th meeting

Wednesday, 19 February 2020, 10 a.m.

New York

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. Djani
Niger	Mr. Abarry
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Ms. King
South Africa	Ms. Goolab
Tunisia	Mr. Ladeb
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

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.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 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 is joining today's meeting via video-conference 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: Since my briefing two weeks ago (see S/PV.8715), I cannot report any progress in ending the current violence in north-west Syria or in reconvening the political process.

Yesterday, the Secretary-General called for an immediate ceasefire in north-west Syria and for international humanitarian law to be upheld. I repeat that call today. However, I regret to report to the Council that hostilities, including heavy strikes from both the air and the ground, continue. As the Secretary-General has stressed and as Mr. Lowcock will shortly brief Council members in more detail, we are alarmed by the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in north-west Syria and the tragic suffering of civilians. The ongoing offensive has displaced nearly 900,000 civilians since 1 December 2019, often multiple times. Hundreds have been killed during the same period.

The hostilities are now approaching densely populated areas, such as Idlib city and the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing, which has among the highest concentration of displaced civilians in north-west Syria and serves as a humanitarian lifeline. People are on the move in freezing temperatures in search of safety, which has become increasingly difficult. More than four of

every five of the newly displaced civilians are women or children, who face specific vulnerabilities and threats to their security. Young children are dying from the cold. The potential for further mass displacement and even more catastrophic human suffering is apparent as an increasing number of people are hemmed into an ever-shrinking space.

Syrian Government forces and their allies have now regained control of the entire eastern side of the M5 highway and several territories west of the highway, including western rural Aleppo. Residential areas of Aleppo that previously had been subject to attacks from the de-escalation area appear no longer to be in firing range.

The Turkish Ministry of Defence has announced that further reinforcements were deployed inside Syrian territory in the Idlib de-escalation zone. Those forces have reportedly deployed close to the front lines in armoured vehicles and tanks. We have witnessed repeated violent confrontations between Turkish and Syrian Government forces. For its part, the Russian Federation is actively engaged in support of the Syrian Government's military operations.

Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other proscribed terrorist groups remain a major presence inside Idlib. Resolutions 2253 (2015) and 2254 (2015) call for Member States to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed by such groups and to eradicate the safe havens that they have established. However, military operations of all parties, including actions against and by designated terrorist groups, must respect the rules and obligations of international humanitarian law, which include the protection of civilians and civilian objects. The principle of proportionality must be respected.

I stressed that in high-level contacts with senior Russian and Turkish officials at the Munich Security Conference last weekend, as well as with senior Iranian officials in Tehran. As sponsors of the Idlib de-escalation arrangements, Turkey and Russia can and must play a key role in finding a way to de-escalate the situation now. Russian and Turkish delegations have met intensively in recent days in Ankara, Munich and Moscow, and there have also been presidential contacts. However, no understanding has yet emerged. To the contrary, public statements from different quarters, Syrian and international, suggest an imminent danger of further escalation.

As I stated in my latest briefing, I believe that through serious international cooperation, building on and enhancing previous agreements and in the spirit of Security Council resolutions and respect for international law and Syria's sovereignty, it would be possible to find a solution for Idlib that addresses the serious ongoing threat posed by internationally proscribed terrorist groups without causing unacceptable humanitarian suffering. For that to be possible, the combined resources of the international community need to come together.

There are worrying developments elsewhere on the ground as well. The situation in southern Syria remains of concern. Northern rural Aleppo has seen renewed hostilities, in particular in and around Afrin, Tell Rifaat, Nubul and Al-Zahraa, with reports of civilian casualties. The resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is very worrying, with frequent attacks registered in the north-east, the desert region and around Homs and other areas. According to a statement issued last week by the Syrian military, Syrian Government air defences responded to enemy missiles coming from the occupied Syrian Golan.

In the north-east, there are unresolved tensions and the presence of multiple actors. A United States-led coalition spokesperson stated that a United States patrol came under small-arms fire from local militia members and killed a combatant. Syrian State media says the person was a Syrian civilian. That episode stands as a stark reminder of the need for a sustainable arrangement for the north-east that is inclusive of all actors and respects and ultimately restores Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

The devastating scale of humanitarian suffering is primarily caused by violent conflict. More broadly, the Syrian economy continues to face serious challenges as a result of a variety of actors, developments and measures. All of these developments across the country remind us that Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence remain seriously compromised by the continuing conflict, and that we are a long way from finding a way to ensure that the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people for peace, security and a better future are realized. That, in turn, is a reminder that there is no military solution to the conflict and that a political process is required to move towards a political solution.

I had hoped that the launch of the Constitutional Committee on the basis of the composition and the terms of reference and core rules of procedure formally agreed with the Syrian Government and the Syrian opposition could open the door to building some trust and confidence and to a wider positive dynamic for such a process. So far, that has not been the case, but as I continue to press all with influence to work for immediate calm I also remain fully engaged in efforts to try to unlock progress on the political track.

I have continued to engage the Syrian parties to narrow differences on the agenda for a third session of the Constitutional Committee, based on the strict observance of the agreed terms of reference and rules of procedure — something that Foreign Minister Al-Moualem and I confirmed was vital when we met in Damascus late last month. I have continued to communicate with the co-Chairs nominated by the Government of Syria and the Syrian Negotiations Commission, who have been submitting and reacting to proposals from the other on a possible agenda. The co-Chair nominated by the opposition was in Geneva for further consultations, and Deputy Special Envoy Matar met with the Government-nominated co-Chair in Damascus last week. Differences remain, but I hope that we will soon be in a position to reconvene the Constitutional Committee in Geneva.

My team hosted the working group on the release of detainees/abductees, the handover of bodies and the identification of missing person in Geneva as part of a rotation between locations chosen by its members — Iran, Russia, Turkey and the United Nations. The International Committee of the Red Cross also participates as an observer. That file is immensely important on humanitarian grounds. Progress would also be essential to building trust and confidence. The discussions were constructive, particularly on processes related to the core issue of missing persons. However, efforts on that file have not yet produced meaningful progress in scale or pace with regard to releasing detainees and clarifying the fate of tens of thousands of Syrians unaccounted for. I reiterate my plea for unilateral releases, particularly of women and children. I also urge the parties to improve access to information for families about their detained or missing relatives.

Ultimately, a lasting political settlement, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), needs a broader process. It will need to build trust and confidence, and one way of doing so is through a step-by-step process. Given

the current level of violence on the ground, the human suffering and heightened international tensions with regard to Syria, one immediate priority is to reverse a set of dynamics that could further undermine trust, entrench divisions and render any political process even more difficult. But beyond that, we must explore a way forward based on reciprocal and mutually reinforcing actions undertaken by Syrians and international partners. I intend to continue to pursue this discussion with the Syrian Government and the Syrian opposition and all international stakeholders, and I believe that the profound instability and suffering that the Syrians are experiencing today remind us that such a political approach is the only sustainable way forward.

Much more needs to be done to advance such a process, in furtherance of resolution 2254 (2015), but today my primary concern is for the Syrian civilians caught in the fighting, who continue to relay the urgency of their situation and their desperate need for safety. They feel that they are not being heard. I appeal once again for full respect for international humanitarian law and for an immediate ceasefire in Idlib and ultimately, nationwide. I urge key international players to maintain and intensify their links with their contacts in order to restore calm. I urge all members of the Council to put their weight firmly behind the search for a political way forward. As the Secretary-General reminded us yesterday, only in this way can we truly serve the interests of the Syrian people.

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

I now give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: I would like to start by paying tribute to two of our humanitarian colleagues — staff members of OXFAM, who were killed this afternoon while on mission in Dar'a governorate in southern Syria.

Yesterday, I met Dr. Amani Ballour, a Syrian paediatrician who worked for five years in a hospital built underground in order to protect it against air strikes throughout the five-year siege of eastern Ghouta. She is the subject of a documentary film, *The Cave*, which was nominated at last week's Oscars. I recommend that everyone see that film. Dr. Ballour is a humanitarian heroine. She told me that

“the same children I treated in eastern Ghouta are displaced again in Idlib. They are still under

the bombs, still afraid, still without shelter, still without education. It is not life”.

She described the situation of the newly displaced sleeping in the streets, in the fields, out in the cold, with nowhere to go. “Children are afraid, they want safety”, she said.

I last briefed the Council on the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in north-western Syria on 6 February (see S/PV.8715). Since then, the horror has multiplied. At least 100 civilians were killed between 1 and 16 February by air and ground-based strikes in the north-west, according of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Thirty-five of those killed were children. More than 90 per cent of those deaths occurred in areas not controlled by the Government. As UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore has said, “such abject disregard for the safety and well-being of children and families is beyond the pale”. Blatant disregard for the life and safety of civilians runs contrary to the obligations that all parties must uphold under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

As Geir has just told the Council, front lines in Idlib and western Aleppo have moved swiftly. Advancing front lines have driven huge population movements in a matter of days as families try to escape the relentless aerial and ground bombardment. Over this last weekend, from 13 to 16 February, 160,000 people were recorded fleeing, mostly from Atarib and Daret Azza subdistricts, away from advancing front lines. And again, as Geir has said, we now believe that nearly 900,000 people have been displaced since 1 December, most of them — more than 500,000 — children.

People are fleeing under horrendous conditions. Many are on foot or on the backs of trucks in below-freezing temperatures in the rain and in the snow. They are moving into increasingly crowded areas that they think will be safer. But in Idlib nowhere is safe. Almost 50,000 are sheltering under trees or in other open spaces. I am getting daily reports of babies and other young children dying in the cold. Imagine the grief of a parent who escaped a war zone with their child only to watch that child freeze to death.

As the Secretary-General warned yesterday, hostilities are now all around areas densely populated with the terrified people who fled. Those areas include Dana and Sarmada, in the direction of the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing. With the huge number of new arrivals

of internally displaced persons (IDPs), Dana now has a greater population density than the capital cities of many of our countries, and the number of new arrivals is growing by the day. If hostilities reach these areas packed with civilians, the human cost will be instant and huge.

On 10 February a child was killed and two others were injured in an air strike on an IDP camp in Idlib's Kafr Aruq, and on 14 and 15 February ground-based strikes hit two makeshift IDP camps in the Sarmada area of northern rural Idlib, killing a civilian and injuring nine others. As High Commissioner Bachelet said yesterday, no shelter is now safe. The bombing of women and children living under scraps of plastic sheeting and in freezing conditions is cruel beyond belief. We are still trying to count the number of civilians killed yesterday.

We have today given new maps to all the relevant parties showing all the very large number of locations where we think displaced people who have fled now are. It is incumbent on all parties to protect those people. The mass movement of people into ever-smaller areas of Idlib and Aleppo is placing immense additional strain on local communities. Most markets have closed, available basic goods are prohibitively expensive, and the price of basic goods has increased by 70 per cent over the last six months. Since December, 72 hospitals, primary health-care centres, specialized care centres and mobile clinics have ceased activities, collectively suspending the services of nearly 200 doctors, more than 300 nurses and more than 50 midwives.

The maternity and child-care hospitals in Atarib and Idlib city, which provide life-saving maternal and child-care treatments, have stopped functioning. As Dr. Ballour told me, with the closure of hospitals and medical facilities, many doctors have nowhere to work, even as needs grow ever greater. Humanitarian operations continue cross-border from Turkey to provide assistance, but, as I said before, the aid effort is overwhelmed.

On 6 February I briefed the Council (see S/PV.8715) on our appeal for an additional \$336 million to help 800,000 newly or potentially displaced people over the next six months. Because of what has happened since then, it is now clear that that will be inadequate. In the next few days we expect to publish a revised plan for some \$500 million to assist at least 1.1 million people.

We are considering all options to increase support into the north-west. We are working with the Government of Turkey to expand the opening of the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing to seven days a week in order to increase the number of aid trucks coming in. We are asking the Government of Syria for permission for a mission from Damascus to areas they have recently taken control of in order to see who is there and to assess their needs.

Two years ago, almost to the day, the Security Council voted in favour of a 30-day ceasefire in Syria (see S/PV.8188). The Council's vote was unanimous, and resolution 2401 (2018) expressed "outrage at the unacceptable levels of violence". Is the violence we are seeing now not an outrage? I repeat again the Secretary-General's renewed call yesterday for an immediate ceasefire and for international humanitarian law to be upheld.

Let me finish with a message from Dr. Ballour:

"We cannot wait. Every minute people are dying. The Security Council can help. The Security Council knows what is happening. They are watching. Yet they do nothing".

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

I now give the floor to those Council members wishing to make statements.

Mrs. Craft (United States of America): "It's like the end of the world" — *The New York Times*; "'Breaking point'; babies freezing to death amid Idlib push" — Al Jazeera; "These people are begging the world to listen to their plight" — CNN; "Turkey-Russia standoff in Syria leaves millions of refugees caught in chaos" — *Wall Street Journal*.

Nearly 1 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes in the past 90 days — 1 million people in 90 days. And so I ask, how much longer will we tolerate these headlines? The unyielding military campaign of the regime, Russia, Iran and Hizbullah amounts to a wholesale rejection of United Nations and Security Council efforts to facilitate a political process in Syria. Speaking candidly, it is a marvel to me that our Russian colleagues can speak of ceasefires and political solutions in this Chamber with a straight face when their own warplanes have struck hospitals and the homes of children.

Indeed, every passing day without a real ceasefire further dims the prospect of a United Nations-facilitated political solution. The Al-Assad regime is already declaring a military victory and has promised to continue its assault in north-western Syria, this while children are freezing to death in the fields in Idlib.

The Council cannot allow Syria, Russia and Iran to continue pursuing the subjugation of Syrian civilians, as failure to end the Al-Assad regime's assault through a United Nations-brokered ceasefire risks the lives of millions of internally displaced persons, most of them women and children. Further military actions aim to sideline the Security Council and prevent it from implementing resolution 2254 (2015), a resolution aimed at just and lasting peace and endorsed by the Russian Federation.

President Trump and the United States of America strongly desire to see Russia end its support for the Al-Assad regime's atrocities in Syria and instead commit to a political resolution of the conflict. The outcome of the conflict will have a significant bearing on the credibility and moral authority of the Council. If we do not abide by the unanimously adopted commitments set out in resolution 2254 (2015), and if we do not restore the former Idlib de-escalation zone, then what can we be trusted with? What kind of precedent are we setting? It is at best a deeply troubling one.

The United States supports the legitimate interest of our NATO ally, Turkey, which has done more than any other country to assist Syrian refugees. We understand its concern about additional refugee flows as a result of ongoing hostilities.

We unequivocally reject statements by Russian officials in Moscow that falsely blame Turkey for the escalation of violence in north-western Syria, and there is no doubt that the Al-Assad regime and Russia — not Turkey — are responsible for orchestrating and executing this military offensive. As our Special Representative for Syria Engagement, Jim Jeffrey, stated last week in Ankara, the United States will continue to coordinate with Turkey on diplomatic approaches to restore a ceasefire to the Idlib de-escalation zone and achieve a pullback of Al-Assad regime forces to the 2018 Sochi ceasefire lines.

On that note, for too long, we have outsourced the work of establishing ceasefires to Russia and its Astana format. It was not clear before but it is certainly no longer appropriate to trust the Astana group to end the

violence. The clearest path we see to an immediate end to violence in north-west Syria is for the United Nations to take full charge of a new ceasefire initiative. This should be the most urgent priority of the Secretary-General and of United Nations Special Envoy Pedersen.

Let me close by taking a moment to address the men, women and children in the Idlib province. Today, they will likely hear the Russian Federation and those officials who claimed to represent them dismiss their suffering as insignificant and even imagined, or perhaps the Russian Federation and the officials who say they represent Idlib province will acknowledge the suffering of the people of Idlib but claim that it is unrelated to the campaign of the terror they have waged against these innocent people. This is falsification in pure form, and it is a disgrace.

The people of Idlib deserve far better from those who claimed authority over them, but I want to ask them not to give up hope — not yet. In the days ahead, the United States will not spare any effort, including working with allies, to isolate the Al-Assad regime diplomatically and economically and to deliver the relief, the resources and ultimately the peace that has been kept from the people of Idlib province for far too long.

The questions I ask before the Council today, then, are: what will tomorrow's headline be, and what are we going to do about it?

Mr. Heusgen (Germany): There is not very much I can add to what my American colleague just said and what was said by the two briefers at the very beginning of today's meeting — this is a nightmare we are confronting.

Let me add a couple of quotations to those already cited. In his statement of 17 February, Mark Lowcock himself said that if things continue as they do we are faced with the biggest humanitarian horror story of the twenty-first century. Looking at the pattern on the ground where it appears that the Syrian regime supported by Russia and other allies are primarily targeting areas where a high number of displaced persons have sought shelter, to quote Michelle Bachelet, it is cruel beyond belief that civilians living in freezing conditions are being bombed.

With the situation is as bad as it is, all we can do is support the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who has called for an immediate ceasefire. I would also

echo actually what the representative of the United States has just said: basically, the Astana formula does not work anymore, and the United Nations has to step in. There is no recourse but to support what Geir Pedersen has said and what he is doing, but I also think that it is now time for the Secretary-General also to step up to the plate. It is an immense responsibility that we face here as the United Nations and as the Security Council, namely, to stop what is what is happening. We must spare no effort.

We are also concerned about the escalation around the Turkish observation force, and we demand that the Syrian regime stop its attacks against Turkish forces. We call for an immediate return to de-escalation.

We always say that, when it comes to problems, there is no military solution to a problem if sustainable stability is to be achieved. I think we are confronted in this regard with a situation where Syria, Russia and their allies are trying to prove the opposite, that there is a military solution and that control of the territory of one's country can be recovered by driving out a million people from the area. Overall, there are probably 3 million people in the area, and the attacks are continuing. This has to be stopped if we do not want to end up with the biggest humanitarian horror story of the twenty-first century.

There may be a situation if this continues that we will soon have more Syrians living outside of the country than inside of it, and those who remain are left in a country that is totally destroyed morally and physically. For a peaceful Syria, there is therefore no alternative but to go to a political process, to have the Constitutional Committee work, to have reconciliation in the country, to have, also, accountability for the crimes that have been committed.

By the way, in this afternoon's Arria formula meeting, we will hear from the Commission of Inquiry, which will focus on violations of children's rights during the Syrian conflict and offer recommendations to all parties to the conflict on the way forward. This is the way we forward.

Let us go back to where all of this started. It was first and foremost the Syrian regime's policy of brutal violence, repression and prosecution that caused this conflict and is still keeping Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees from returning home. We all know about the arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence and forced disappearance, extradition, killings of detainees

and other grave human rights violations, which are at the origins of this conflict. I would therefore conclude with a plea to our Russian colleague to stop the support of Syria. If he tells the Syrians that there is no longer military support for the Syrian regime, it will have to stop the onslaught against its own population.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): At the outset, we would like to express our condolences to the families and friends of those Oxfam workers mentioned by Mr. Lowcock who were killed.

I thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock for their briefings.

I agree very much with my German and my American colleagues. I am not going to rehearse the figures that Mr. Lowcock has so starkly set out, but I would like to echo High Commissioner Bachelet who asked how can anyone justify carrying out such indiscriminate and inhumane attacks. She also said that 93 per cent of the deaths since 1 January were caused by the Syrian Government and its allies.

I would therefore like to put the High Commissioner's question back to the Russians and the Syrians — specifically to their representatives in this Chamber today. How can they justify carrying out such indiscriminate and inhumane attacks? What are they doing to uphold international humanitarian law? What are they doing to protect the people who were fleeing? Where do they expect those people to flee to? What are they doing to protect medical facilities and ensure that the people that Mr. Lowcock so vividly described get the help that they need? And when does this start to end?

We have now heard that the Syrian Government has said that it will continue its offensive. How can the regime do that in the face of the accounts that we have heard today, when the entire international community — barring about three countries — is condemning it for what it is doing to the people of Idlib?

I agree with the German and American representatives: Astana is not working. We have all given it a chance and we have waited in effect too long. We need to come off Astana and we need to work with the United Nations to get the political process under way and uphold resolution 2254 (2015).

There is one area where I disagree with Mr. Lowcock, if I may. It is not that the Security Council is doing nothing; 13, possibly 14, members of the

Security Council are ready to act, but what the Syrian Government is doing on the ground is protected by a Russian veto. This was not the purpose of establishing the Security Council and it was not the purpose of giving the five permanent members a veto — so that these innocent people on the ground could suffer not just once but multiple times under the cruelty and barbarity at the Syrian regime.

I would also like to echo what my German and American colleagues said about Turkey. We need the attacks on Turkey to stop. Turkey has made efforts to seek a peaceful solution in Idlib and we are concerned about the impact of the escalation on Turkey, which has already borne the burden of hosting over 3.5 million refugees forced to flee Syria. I therefore look forward to hearing what the Turkish representative has to say later.

I join the others in calling on Russia to end its support for this murderous campaign and the barbaric Syrian Government. I join the Secretary-General in calling for an immediate, genuine and lasting ceasefire in Idlib and for a lasting solution to the situation there. We once more call on Syria, Russia and Iran to observe their obligations under international humanitarian law and to give us an answer on what they are doing to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Turning to what Mr. Pedersen said about the Constitutional Committee and the political process, we remain deeply disappointed at the stalling of the Constitutional Committee. It is hard to believe that not only do we have a barbaric situation on the ground, but that the Syrian authorities are actually hindering the political process. They should come to the table. I want to place on record once more the United Kingdom's support for the United Nations Special Envoy in his efforts to restart the Committee, and I want also to assure the United Nations that the United Kingdom stands ready to support any United Nations-backed agreement and that we continue to support the Special Envoy's work under resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, we wish to express our deepest condolences at the deaths today of two humanitarian workers, which provide yet further impetus for collective action on our part to stop the violence in north-western Syria.

We thank Ambassador Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock for their briefings. We take this opportunity to reiterate our support for them and our determination to continue

forging ahead in consolidating the peace process in Syria.

The Dominican Republic reiterates once again its deep concern about the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic in general and in the north-west of the country in particular. We reiterate that, as long as such violence prevails, characterized by violations of international law, including international humanitarian law, progress towards a negotiated political solution will remain impossible. This has meant, notwithstanding other possible factors, that it has not yet been possible to resume the Constitutional Committee. We believe that it is both regrettable and unacceptable that, after so much effort, time and energy was invested in establishing the Committee, there seems only a remote possibility that it will fulfil its mandate. That is to say, a military solution, incorporating counter-terrorism measures, and a political process are simply mutually exclusive.

There must be a way to find a third way allowing us to both address the alarming situation of the civilian population in the north-west and to protect the political process. There are 900,000 reasons to seek such a middle way and to do so urgently; 900,000 is the number of Syrians who have been displaced, half of them children, and they need solutions. They are dying of cold and hunger. They deserve protection and have the right to a decent life. However, Syrian refugees also have the right to return in a safe, dignified and voluntary way to their places of origin or some other place of their choosing, provided they receive lasting guarantees for their well-being and development. The same goes for the Syrian civilians who were left behind — those who, in the absence of economic means to move north away from the violence, had no option but to remain, perhaps facing death, in the places they once knew as safe.

I would like to highlight some very specific aspects of this difficult and delicate situation. A complete and immediate ceasefire in the north-west must be the absolute priority to avoid large-scale escalation. The United Nations must be at the heart of such efforts, as the supporter and facilitator of a lasting solution. In that spirit, we call on the parties to come to the negotiating table and renew their commitment to abiding by the ceasefire agreements and to restore calm.

The fight against terrorism cannot be conducted as business as usual in Idlib. Given the presence of 3 million Syrian civilians, counter-terrorism actions must respect international law, including international

humanitarian law, so as to ensure the protection of the civilian population. Humanitarian access must be guaranteed and facilitated to meet the pressing needs of a population crushed, shaken and traumatized by too many years of Syrian-on-Syrian violence.

Finally, we regret that the door the Constitutional Committee could have opened to a broad political process does not seem to have materialized. The prevailing lack of trust and apparent apathy will require greater efforts from all of us in the Council, as guarantors resolution 2254 (2015), to break the cycle and move ahead without further delay or excuse. I remind the members of the Council and the representatives of the United Nations that history will judge us for our lack of action.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): At the outset, I should like to join others in thanking Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings.

As mentioned earlier by the Special Envoy, regrettably there is no progress on the political track and differences remain with regard to the Constitutional Committee. However, my delegation believes that the Syrian parties fully realize the importance of this process for moving forward, and that they will honour their responsibilities eventually to agree on constitutional principles. As much as we want the Syrian parties to build trust and confidence among themselves, the international community must also have trust in them and fully support the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, in accordance with the relevant provisions of resolution 2254 (2015).

The situation in north-western Syria is extremely disturbing. As we heard from Special Envoy Pedersen, since 1 December, 900,000 people, the majority of them women and children, have been displaced. That is quite a large number. We have been hearing reports of babies and children dying because of the freezing temperatures. Families have fled their homes, looking for safety. However, they have ended up sleeping outside because the camps for internally displaced persons are overcrowded.

The humanitarian response is overstretched. Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock, in his latest statement, said that humanitarian workers themselves were being displaced and killed. This is a nightmare for the Council and the entire international community. However, this is not a nightmare for all those displaced people. This is not a nightmare for mothers who are trying to protect their dying babies from the cold.

This is, rather, the reality that they have to suffer — a catastrophic reality.

Indonesia wishes to emphasize three points. First is the need for an immediate de-escalation. My delegation urges an immediate de-escalation and appeals to all key relevant parties on the ground to immediately restore calm and not to prolong the suffering of civilians. The escalation and violence must stop. The ceasefire must be fully respected. All parties involved in the conflict must respect their obligations to protect civilians, as well as public infrastructure, under international humanitarian law. As mentioned by Mr. Pedersen, the principle of proportionality should always be respected. All parties must respect international law and the Security Council resolutions.

Secondly, there must be the creation of an enabling environment for dialogue. The establishment of a positive environment on the ground is key to advancing the work of the Constitutional Committee and to allowing any constitutional reform in Syria. In the meantime, we hope that the Syrian parties will always make themselves available for genuine dialogue and to continue the United Nations-facilitated talks in good faith.

Thirdly, it is important to avoid any provocative rhetoric or actions. The complex situation in Syria should not be exacerbated by unnecessary actions or rhetoric that would further provoke and complicate the current circumstances. Now is the time for all of us to exercise restraint and find concrete solutions. We must focus on saving people's lives. That is what is expected of us.

In conclusion, once again we stand by the Special Envoy in trying to find a solution to this long-standing issue in Syria. The efforts of the Special Envoy and his team, such as the return of detainees and missing persons, small as they may seem, should be continued in order to build trust. We affirm once again the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. We stress that there is no military solution, that a lasting political solution is needed and that our objective should be easing the humanitarian suffering of the people of Syria. Concrete actions are needed to end the suffering of the Syrian people. That can start from the Council. Let us be united in saving people's lives. As Mr. Lowcock mentioned just now, people are watching us all.

Ms. Goolab (South Africa): Let me begin by thanking Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-

Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for their briefings on the situation in Syria. I would also like to express South Africa's full support for Special Envoy Pedersen and commend his efforts to resolve the current impasse.

While we recognize the right of the Syrian Arab Republic to restore its control over the whole of its territory, South Africa is concerned about the conflict in north-western Syria, particular its impact on the humanitarian situation. We urge all parties to seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Such a peaceful resolution requires a cessation of hostilities and a solution that upholds Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In that regard, external support for armed groups must cease immediately. We cannot allow external role players to use the devastating conflict in Syria as a proxy for their own interests.

The increase in violence has a direct impact on the humanitarian situation in Syria, with thousands of civilians fleeing the hostilities to already overcrowded refugee and internally displaced persons camps. South Africa reiterates its call for all parties to respect their obligations under international law and international humanitarian law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. In addition, we call on the relevant authorities to ensure the safe, unimpeded and impartial delivery of humanitarian aid and assistance to all who require it. The severe winter conditions have given further impetus to the need to provide essential humanitarian aid, including winterization and shelter packages. Civilians must also be assured access to humanitarian corridors.

With regard to the political process, the only sustainable option is the attainment, through an inclusive Syrian-led dialogue, of a political solution that is reflective of the will of the Syrian people. In that regard, we welcome and encourage the active participation of women and religious groups in such peace talks, as all groups have unique perspectives to offer.

South Africa welcomes the formation of the Constitutional Committee, as well as the drafting committee, as a representation of all Syrian people — the Government, the opposition and civil society — in carrying out their mandate to draft a new constitution for Syria. South Africa urges all members of the Constitutional Committee to make a concerted effort towards agreeing an agenda for genuine discussions on the drafting of a constitution that would form an

essential component of a sustainable solution to the conflict in Syria.

The work of the Constitutional Committee is but one aspect of the larger political process in Syria, as set out in resolution 2254 (2015), which must be fully implemented and respected by all parties. For it to be sustainable, the political process must be Syrian-owned and Syrian-led. External interference in that process is detrimental to its success.

In order for such peace negotiations to make credible progress, the parties must have confidence in each other. In that regard, South Africa encourages all side to undertake trust and confidence-building measures. Those could include progress in the release of detained civilians, particularly vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly and those with disabilities. My delegation has noted the recent meeting of the Working Group on Detainees and Missing Persons in Geneva and looks forward to its outcome. We urge the Working Group to make every effort to achieve real progress on the matter. As part of such confidence-building measures to promote progress, the easing of economic measures imposed on Syria should be considered if there is progress on the political front.

In conclusion, South Africa firmly believes that the humanitarian and political situations in Syria are interlinked, with credible progress in one area leading to credible progress in the other. We must do all we can to promote progress on those two tracks in order to achieve a comprehensive and peaceful settlement to the conflict. The Syrian people deserve nothing less.

Ms. King (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines): I thank Geir Pedersen and Mark Lowcock for their very comprehensive briefings. We join others in expressing our sympathy to the families, relatives and friends of the two Oxfam humanitarian workers who lost their lives earlier today.

Only two weeks ago, we sat in this Council to voice our shared concern about the situation in north-west Syria (see S/PV.8715). We are here again today because the situation has continued to worsen. We echo our previous calls for an immediate and sustained cessation of all hostilities, as this is the only way to put an end to the suffering, which has sadly become a feature of everyday life for many Syrian people.

Continuing along the current military path will not end the current conflict. It will not accomplish the

objectives of resolution 2254 (2015). It will not end the humanitarian crisis or bring stability to Syria. What it will bring about are the further displacement of civilians into dire conditions where they must fight to survive, the interruption of vital humanitarian aid and the loss of many more lives. For that reason, we once again express our support for the work of Special Envoy Pedersen. We recognize and applaud his recent efforts towards attaining a political solution by engaging in dialogue with the parties. As a staunch advocate for dialogue, we hope that it will lead to a de-escalation and the prevention of a full-scale military confrontation.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines welcomes all efforts to broker and uphold a ceasefire in Idlib, including through the Astana format and the United Nations. Indeed, any solution should include all the parties concerned and the United Nations. In that vein, we welcome Special Envoy Pedersen's engagement with the Astana guarantors. We applaud the earnest efforts of the Astana guarantors and support the involvement of the United Nations.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines once again emphasizes the need for a credible, balanced and inclusive political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. That is the only viable route to lasting peace and stability.

The presence of United Nations-designated terrorist entities in the country presents legitimate local and regional security concerns that have necessitated military operations. However, we must remind parties that those operations do not absolve them of their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Measures aimed at building confidence are also key elements of the success of the political process. As such, the issue of missing and detained persons should be addressed to foster good will. Further, conditions must be created for the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons. Syria and its people deserve security in order to live in a state of calm. This conflict has taken too much from them and will continue to take from them if we fail in our responsibility to see to it that the suffering ends here.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings. China appreciates the good offices of the Special Envoy and supports his ongoing efforts to enhance communication with all parties

in Syria and the Astana guarantors, to listen to the reasonable requests of the Syrian Government and to continue to advance the political process in accordance with the principle of Syrian leadership and ownership and resolution 2254 (2015).

Due to the interconnectedness of the grave political, security and humanitarian issues in Syria, we must take certain measures to advance the political process in the country.

First, we must stay the course towards a political settlement and make good use of the Constitutional Committee as a platform. A political solution is the only way to end the Syrian crisis and must be based on maintaining Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. The establishment of the Constitutional Committee was a good start for the Syrian political process. Its role should be fully leveraged on the basis of the existing outcomes. Differences among Syrian parties in the work of the Constitutional Committee, while unavoidable, should be resolved through dialogue. We should pay particular attention to maintaining the independence of the Committee's work and creating the conditions necessary to enable all parties in Syria to narrow their differences and build consensus. We hope that the members of the Committee will demonstrate their political will, uphold the spirit of compromise and play a constructive role in reaching consensus among all parties in Syria.

Secondly, terrorism in Syria must be eradicated in order to create a favourable security environment for advancing the political process. Rampant terrorism has significantly undermined prospects for a serious political process and a better future for the country. As such, it must be taken seriously and be addressed by all parties. Idlib has become a breeding ground for terrorism, and the acute problem of foreign terrorist fighters has had substantial knock-on effects. Countries should eliminate the safe havens established by terrorist groups in Syria, in accordance with international law and all relevant Council resolutions, including resolution 2254 (2015). China supports all the parties in their continuing efforts to seek comprehensive, long-term solutions to the Idlib problem through dialogue and negotiations.

Thirdly, efforts should be made to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria, which would help to advance the political settlement process. The international community must step up humanitarian

aid to Syria and support the United Nations in providing help to the displaced persons. Humanitarian aid should be dispensed with no political strings attached. In the long run, we should support the Syrian Government in rebuilding where the security situation is relatively stable. The international community has a moral responsibility to help Syria restore economic development and calm. In order to effectively carry out humanitarian relief operations in Syria, we should enhance communication and coordination with the Government and respect Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Mr. Abarry (Niger) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I extend my condolences to Oxfam and the humanitarian family following the deaths of two of their own today in Syria. I thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock for their briefings today. I welcome Mr. Pedersen's diligent efforts to create conditions conducive to a political settlement to the Syrian crisis.

While the establishment of the Constitutional Committee offered a glimmer of hope, unfortunately it did not translate into substantial progress as the parties have remained intransigent. I encourage Mr. Pedersen to pursue his efforts to allay suspicion and build trust between the parties, and thereby defuse tensions in the negotiating environment.

It is regrettable that since 1 December, the rise in violence has pushed hundreds of thousands of Syrians — primarily women and children — to abandon their homes at this frigid season. While we must all combat terrorism wherever necessary, we must do so in full compliance with international humanitarian law and specifically ensure the protection of innocent civilians and secure their access to humanitarian assistance.

My delegation calls on belligerent elements on both sides to exercise maximum restraint and to work towards de-escalation. We remind the parties concerned to respect their commitments in the framework of the agreements reached in order to achieve a ceasefire. The Niger remains convinced that the political and humanitarian situations in Syria cannot be tackled independently because ongoing hostilities adversely affect the humanitarian situation, which in turn affects the political situation.

My delegation believes that a settlement to the Syrian crisis must be political rather than military, in a process led by the Syrian people, including all elements of their society. That is why we must urgently get the

political process back on track, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

In conclusion, we once again call on all parties to the conflict to ensure respect for the ceasefire and to facilitate the access of humanitarian organizations to civilian populations that greatly need humanitarian assistance, especially in this period of bitter cold. We cannot remain indifferent to the harrowing briefings of Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock. It is time to act. It is time to contribute practically to putting an end to despair in Syria. It is time for the Council to take up its responsibilities, as its credibility depends on it.

Mr. Pham (Viet Nam): First, we would express our thanks to Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for their briefings today to the Council after their briefings two weeks ago (see S/PV.8715).

Viet Nam's position on this issue remains unchanged. We continue to support the ongoing efforts of the United Nations, the Secretary-General and the Special Envoy towards a peaceful settlement of this protracted crisis. We support the work of the United Nations-facilitated Constitutional Committee, which serves as a platform for genuine dialogue among Syrian parties. Some have called it a door-opener for the peace process in Syria. If the door is to remain open and accessible, we must build enough trust and confidence to pave the way to a tangible outcome. All parties must continue to step up confidence-building measures.

Secondly, we firmly believe that the only way to bring peace to the people of Syria is through a comprehensive and credible political solution in accordance with international law, the Charter of the United Nations and, most importantly, the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution 2254 (2015). That solution demands good and strong political will from all relevant parties in the process of dialogue and negotiation. We welcome the ongoing discussions among the parties concerned to address the situation. However, it is sad to see no progress made, month after month.

Thirdly, we remain deeply concerned about the escalation of the situation in north-west Syria and its grave impact on the well-being of 4 million people in the area. The longer the conflict and escalation continue without a political solution, the more intense the suffering of innocent civilians becomes. We are especially concerned over reports of the continued

increase in displacement and redisplacement, affecting some 100,000 people during the past two weeks, almost 60 per cent of whom are children. In addition, reports indicate that a high number of civilians have been killed, including in camps for internally displaced persons.

The temperature there is like in New York now. It is hard to imagine the situation of people without adequate shelter and the necessary supplies, especially women and children. In this regard, we once again call upon all parties to exercise maximum restraint so as to avoid any further deterioration of the situation. The fight against terrorism is a must, but the protection of innocent civilians and the avoidance of civilian suffering must always be an imperative for all. We therefore support the call of the Secretary-General for an immediate ceasefire.

Last but not least, the Security Council, together with the international community, should continue to urge for and support further efforts, including international diplomatic efforts, to achieve a political settlement for the situation in Syria, with full respect for international law as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. This is the most viable path to peace, stability and development in Syria and the region.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We are grateful to Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his briefing. We also listened carefully to the briefing of Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock. The actions of the Security Council's penholders, who asked to invite Mark Lowcock at the last minute, surprised us, but for us the motivations are clear, as we have talked about this more than once. This month we have already discussed humanitarian issues in some way twice, and the programme of work of the the Security Council also includes a monthly briefing on the humanitarian aspects of the situation in Syria on 27 February. Maybe next time we can invite Ms. Nakamitsu, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and discuss all the various aspects of the Syrian crisis that are considered by the Security Council.

But today we would like to focus on the discussion that was planned for today, on the political track. We are trying to promote the peace settlement process. With a key role played by Russia, together with Turkey and Iran, the Constitutional Committee was established, and there is simply no other mechanism for

a political dialogue. There have been two sessions of that Committee to date.

Now the Special Envoy and his team are working on convening a third meeting and are in constant contact with the Syrian sides. To that end, the Special Envoy and then his Deputy recently visited Damascus. We believe that this approach is the right one — the parties should first agree on an agenda for a meeting so as to ensure that discussions take place on concrete issues. Of course, we would all like to see progress on the political track, but to push through or impose ready-made solutions would violate the principle on which we all agreed: that the future of Syria should be decided on by the Syrian people. We will also seek to encourage all Syrians to work constructively.

Russia has been given advice on what to do and how to do it. We too can make a few recommendations.

First, what needs to stop is the protection of fighters, including those from organizations by the Security Council, such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. Recently we once again heard a statement from James Jeffrey that it might be possible to reach an agreement with Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. To provide political cover to terrorists by portraying them as revolutionaries and to force the Syrian Government to engage in negotiations with them will not be possible.

The Ministry of Defence of Russia reports that there are samples of modern Western munitions in weapons depots captured from the terrorists, many of which were organized in schools and hospitals converted into combat positions. It is important to stop supplying terrorist fighters with weapons. By the way, when armed regiments were marching on Damascus, with the approval of some Western States, I do not recall that the Security Council meetings were held so often at that time to discuss this matter, although the casualties among civilians and in the Syrian army were enormous. Yet we have already learned that some of our colleagues make a strict distinction between the right Syrians and those who support the legitimate authorities.

We have already heard all today's rhetoric more than once also this month. Some are playing the card of civilian suffering and long-term truce every time the terrorists they cherish are in danger. How can we respond to their accusations about exterminating civilians? Whatever we say in attempt to persuade them, they do not listen and stubbornly keep speaking

about the deliberate bombings of schools, hospitals and refugee camps.

Of course, anyone who is human and who has a heart will of course react to such statements. It is a ploy that is 100 per cent guaranteed. Who is going to try to understand whether it is true or not? Last time we spoke in detail about the efforts of our military to protect civilians and to respect international humanitarian law. Maybe our British colleague missed this, but I just wanted to remind her of something else that we discussed. It is not good to boast of destruction, but objectively speaking, the level of destruction of civilian targets as a result of anti-terrorist activity by Syrian forces in Idlib is many, many times less than what we saw during the actions of the so-called international coalition in Raqqa and other cities, which were the targets of merciless bombing as part of the fight against terrorists at that time.

We deplore the deaths of Oxfam personnel in the south of Syria in Dar'a governorate, which we heard about today. They were attacked by an armed group, which simply confirms the need to fight armed groups and restore Government control over the entire territory of the country.

We appeal to all those who have influence on the factions in Idlib to work to stop the shelling of the civilian population, drone attacks on the Russian Khmeimim air base, and provocations against the Syrian forces. For the information of Council members, over the past day there were 29 such attacks, in Latakia, Idlib, Hama and Aleppo. It will be impossible to achieve a sustainable ceasefire if we do not stop this. As was recently pointed out to us, humanitarian law applies to all types of conflicts. We therefore ask for pressure to be put on the terrorists in Idlib to stop using civilians as human shields and allow them to leave through humanitarian corridors, and to stop executing and torturing those who demonstrate or protest against the invasion of terrorists. By the way, for those who doubt that humanitarian corridors are functioning, on 18 February alone 177 people crossed the Bjarez checkpoint, 171 in Maaret al-Numan and 35 in Habit.

Thirdly, it is also important to begin work right now on the post-conflict reconstruction of the country. Our colleagues who are holding the Arria Formula meetings are simply strengthening the sanctions regime, which, on 17 February, was expanded to target Syrian

companies taking part in post-conflict reconstruction. How is that related to their concern for Syrians?

Like other members of the Council, the Russian Federation expresses its concern with regard to the situation of tens of thousands of internally displaced persons who found themselves locked outside of camps. Resolving their problems should be the top priority of the humanitarian community, especially given the winter period and the high number of vulnerable individuals among that group of people.

As far as we understand, humanitarian agencies have the resources to do so, as donors have so far spared no effort in providing financing to regions that are not under Government control. Furthermore, we cannot but note that these kinds of problems have to be anticipated and provided for in order to make sure that people do not find themselves without shelter in winter.

Once again, people are trying to hype this. We know these techniques very well. In order to understand how they work, let us recall the same sensation from last month — the cross-border assistance mechanism (see S/PV.8707). Council members will remember how everyone criticized us for the closure of the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing. We were asked to work with the Syrian side to find alternative ways of delivering humanitarian assistance as soon as possible. We were told that the situation was extremely urgent and that supplies of medicine in Al-Hasakah were going to run out. For some reason, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) did not inform the Council or the public at large about the subsequent developments on the issue. We will tell Council members now.

The Syrian side responded to the United Nations request for an alternate itinerary one day after it received the request — I say this in response to those who say that Damascus does not respond quickly — and it covered routes both through Iraq and through Syria, according to a specific note dated 29 January. Today is 19 February, and the convoy has not yet been sent, either from Iraq or from Damascus. United Nations colleagues have simply remained silent for three weeks now. What happened to the urgency? Maybe because it was no longer in the headlines, so the needs of Al-Hasakah were no longer important. We hope that this will be reflected in OCHA's report on alternate itineraries through Al-Yarubiyah.

If the oil fields were returned to Government control, it would also significantly improve the humanitarian situation in Syria. If some of our colleagues are indeed so worried about protecting oil fields from terrorist fighters, they could recommend that these fighters reach an agreement with Damascus. Otherwise their presence in Syria is illegal, as it is in other areas, like in Al-Tanf, where the situation with the Rukban camp has not yet been resolved, or in the area beyond the Euphrates, where refugees still suffer in the Al-Hol camp. This includes visits by officials to territories that are not under control of the Syrian Government. How can they visit those territories if terrorists are operating in those regions?

I would also like to note that on the eastern side of the Euphrates River there is a growing danger of fighters, including foreign terrorist fighters, who have fled prisons. Some of them keep a low profile and stay in refugee camps; others spread out all over the region. We express our extreme concern about such developments.

On our part, we will continue efforts to normalize the situation in Syria. We believe that it is important to restore normal relations among the various population groups of the Syrian Arab Republic, which have been hurt tremendously by attempts to tear the country apart. Achieving stability in Syria is possible only by respecting its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

To our German colleague, who asked a direct question: we will not stop supporting the legitimate Government of Syria, which is conducting a legitimate fight against international terrorists.

Mr. Jürgenson (Estonia): First, let me thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary Lowcock for their briefings and their efforts in working for the sake of the Syrian people.

The main takeaway of the briefings is simple. As it is now, the Constitutional Committee is dysfunctional. The Astana format is dysfunctional. Since our last regular meeting (see S/PV.8715), little progress has been made towards convening a third session of the Committee. At the same time, war in Syria continues with full force.

Instead of dedicating itself to a political process pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015), the Syrian regime continues to block any steps towards de-escalation. Let

us not forget that it is not only a rhetorical stalemate. The empty promises are followed by attacks against fleeing civilians in Idlib, who now number more than 900,000. That is why Estonia joins today those countries that are calling for an immediate nationwide ceasefire and unimpeded humanitarian access to those in need across the country.

Unfortunately, the Syrian regime and Russia have chosen a military solution over a political one. It is a grave mistake. The so-called liberation of demolished cities is one thing, but actually rebuilding a country is a completely different thing. Our Syrian colleagues in the Chamber need to understand that Russian and Iranian bullets will not feed their nation. That is also a reason that almost no people are willing to return to regime-held areas. Estonia and the members of the European Union remain fully committed to finding a lasting and credible political solution to the conflict in Syria, as defined in the resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). That includes an actually working Constitutional Committee, political transition with free and fair elections, the release of arbitrarily detained people and accountability for those who have violated human rights and committed crimes against humanity.

Accountability mechanisms, such as the General Assembly's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, the Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry and the Fact-Finding Missions of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, all play a central role in collecting evidence and uncovering crimes against Syrians from both sides. We fully support those efforts and hope to bring them closer to the Security Council and its agenda.

However, if the Government in Damascus decides to ignore the demands of resolution 2254 (2015) and continues carrying out attacks, then, instead of recognition, the Syrian Government will face growing international isolation. The Caesar Act of the United States, the recently expanded European Union (EU) sanctions and other similar means underscore the pariah status of the Syrian regime. The EU already has on its sanctions lists 277 persons and 71 entities. Those numbers are destined to grow. The European Union has made it clear that support for the reconstruction of Syria

can come only when a comprehensive and inclusive political transition is under way, based on the resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué.

Mr. Ladeb (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to 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 invaluable briefings. We would also like to express our condolences to the families of the two Oxfam workers who were killed in Syria.

We follow with concern the military escalation that is taking place in the north-west of Syria. We regret that developments are not leading to a path that would enable a resumption of the political process on a solid basis and in an environment of calm, stability and mutual trust. We also express our deep concern over the humanitarian situation in Idlib and its vicinity as a result of the recent security developments that have led to growing casualties among civilians, the displacement of large numbers of residents and the lack of shelter for thousands of displaced people after housing capacity was exhausted under severe weather conditions, leading to the deaths of a large number of children. We also call upon all parties to respect their obligations pursuant to international humanitarian law and international law in order to guarantee the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Priority must urgently be given to de-escalation through a cease-fire, and parties on the ground must exhibit maximum self-restraint and avoid any further escalation in the region. We hope that the ongoing contacts between Russia and Turkey will contribute towards that end. We also support the United Nations involvement in supporting efforts to achieve a full and lasting cease-fire.

The de-escalation agreements in Idlib, while important, will remain only temporary unless they effectively include practical and comprehensive solution that excludes terrorist organizations, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its allies, guarantees an end to their presence both within and beyond Syria and maintains the security, independence and sovereignty of Syria and throughout its territory.

We hope that the Constitutional Committee will resume a new round of negotiations this month or next month, as the Special Envoy has previously stated. We urge the relevant Syrian parties to exercise flexibility,

seek common ground and engage constructively in the efforts of the Committee without preconditions in such a way as to lay the groundwork for progress in the political process.

We also reaffirm the importance of the political process under way to be accompanied by confidence-building measures and progress in releasing detainees and hostages so as to uphold political and social harmony.

The brotherly Syrian people, including the generation of the current conflict, that continue to suffer the burden of war and deterioration at all levels have the right to aspire to a life of security, peace and tranquillity.

In conclusion, my delegation would like to renew its support for the Special Envoy and his team. We would also like to confirm once again that there can be no military solution to the crisis in Syria. The only solution is through a cease-fire, progress on the political track, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), under Syrian leadership and ownership along with United Nations sponsorship. That would happen through an agreement among Syrian political and civil parties on a new constitution that guarantees free and fair elections, under United Nations supervision, to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity. Such a constitution would preserve the unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, and ensure security and stability in the region.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I wish to thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock for their briefings. The continued mobilization of the United Nations as a whole, under the leadership of the Secretary-General, is crucial.

France calls for a collective surge to bring to an end the unprecedented humanitarian disaster we are witnessing in Idlib. The appalling figures Mr. Lowcock recalled moments ago speak for themselves. What is unfolding as we speak is by far the most serious humanitarian crisis since the Syrian conflict began. Since 1 December, the new offensive by pro-regime forces has killed nearly 400 civilian victims and displaced nearly 900,000 people. Babies and children are dying of cold in internally displaced person camps on the Turkish border. The threat of bombs from the regime and its allies is constant. Hospitals, schools and internally displaced person camps have now become the target of attack. After the sieges of Aleppo and Ghouta,

there no longer seems to be any limit to the suffering the regime is ready to inflict on its own people.

France therefore reiterates its condemnation of the bombing by the regime and its allies against civilians. Even war has rules. Those rules are based on essential principles of humanity: international humanitarian law and respect for such law are not optional but universal obligations. That also means guaranteeing safe and unhindered access for cross-border aid to all people in need.

The risk of a generalized escalation should not be taken lightly. Everything must be done to avoid it. Any further escalation would have disastrous humanitarian consequences and help strengthen terrorist groups at the expense of our security.

At this pivotal moment, it is our collective responsibility to marshal our efforts to achieve a lasting ceasefire in Idlib. Given the inability of Astana guarantors to silence the guns, we must succeed in taking collective action. To do so is the duty of the Secretary-General and of the Security Council. I call on the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to work to establish a lasting ceasefire in Idlib, in keeping with the mandate entrusted to him in resolution 2254 (2015). We call on him to present the Council with specific proposals in that regard. The members of the Council with direct influence on the Syrian regime must do everything they can to immediately put an end to the massacre under way in Idlib. The fight against terrorism in no way justifies what is taking place.

Secondly, I wish to register France's profound concern at the total deadlock in the political process. More than four months on since the inception of the Constitutional Committee, the process is at a total standstill. It is more urgent than ever that the United Nations tackle the other subjects at the heart of resolution 2254 (2015), since the adoption of a new constitution alone will not put an end to the conflict in Syria.

France condemns the systematic obstruction perpetrated by the Syrian regime. The offensive in Idlib leaves no doubt about its intentions: to take back control of Syria by force, whatever the cost, with no negotiation. That is lamentably the blind strategy the regime has pursued since 2011, resulting in 6 million refugees and 4 million internally displaced people.

France remains determined to support the Special Envoy in his efforts and urges him to make it clear to the Security Council should he find himself no longer able to advance the work of the Constitutional Committee. The United Nations must also take full responsibility for the discussion on detainees, following the extension of the working group meetings on the subject in Geneva on 17 and 18 February.

The parameters for a political settlement are well known, having been defined in resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). It is a question of putting in place a safe and neutral environment, including through confidence-building measures, including the release of detainees. It is also a matter of preparing for the holding of free and transparent elections, under United Nations supervision, in which all Syrians can take part, both in Syria and abroad.

Without a credible political settlement, France's position on reconstruction and sanctions will remain unchanged. That is also the position of the European Union. Russia and Iran alone will cover the costs of rebuilding Syria.

France will also continue to mobilize in favour of the fight against impunity by supporting the United Nations investigative mechanisms, which is essential for breaking the cycle of violence and creating the conditions for a just and lasting peace.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate France's call on all those having influence over the authorities in Damascus — Russia in particular — to work in favour of a lasting political solution, in conjunction with the members of the Security Council. The Council must emerge from its paralysis: this is the essential condition for effectively combating terrorism, facilitating the return of refugees and achieving lasting peace in Syria.

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

First of all, I too would like to offer my condolences to the families of the humanitarian workers killed in Syria and pay tribute to their work and their courage.

The situation in Syria, particularly in Idlib, demands the full attention of this Council. It is deteriorating by the day and is becoming absolutely critical, as we heard from both Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock. Let us be clear. The humanitarian crisis that is unfolding before

our eyes and of which Mr. Lowcock has warned us for months is above all the result of the political and military choices of the Syrian Government and its allies. I would reiterate once again: under no circumstances can counter-terrorism efforts exempt parties from their obligations under international humanitarian law. The protection of civilians is a fundamental obligation of all parties to the conflict.

The international dimension of the conflict is of great concern. The risk of miscalculation resulting from clashes among the various parties to the conflict has increased in recent weeks. That poses a serious threat to international peace and security. We call on all parties to exercise maximum restraint and for an immediate de-escalation.

As others before me have said, the current situation on the ground unfortunately demonstrates that the Astana format is not working. We therefore call on the United Nations, in particular the Special Envoy, to spare no effort to achieve an immediate and lasting ceasefire. Ensuring the protection of civilians in Idlib is a priority. Without a ceasefire, efforts to further involve the Constitutional Committee are unlikely to succeed. How can confidence be built when part of the population is being indiscriminately bombed?

Without the political commitment of the Syrian authorities, the cycle of violence will continue and instability will continue to prevail in the region. The only path to stability is a credible and inclusive political solution, facilitated by the United Nations, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I was mentioned in the Russian intervention so I would like to respond. I listen very carefully to what the Russian military say, including in briefings to the Council. I am waiting for a Russian military official to answer the question of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: how can anyone justify carrying out such indiscriminate and inhumane attacks?

But I also want to again record something that I have said here before. The Russian and Syrian military who violate international humanitarian law and bomb, or allow the bombing of, hospitals, medical

facilities and civilians will one day be held personally accountable before the law for those actions. That is a very important point. They will not just be held collectively responsible. One day they will be held personally responsible.

The other thing that I wanted to say concerning reconstruction is to support what the French representative said. As the United Kingdom, we have given some \$2 billion to Syria in aid since the conflict began. The reconstruction of Syria will be made infinitely harder by the wanton destruction that the Syrian and Russian Governments are carrying out now. So it will be for Russian taxpayers, possibly assisted by Chinese taxpayers, but it will be for Russian taxpayers to put Syria back together again.

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

Mr. Falouh (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): For the sixth time in 20 days, the Security Council is meeting to consider the situation in my country, the Syrian Arab Republic. For the third time in 20 days, the Council is listening to briefings by Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and his deputy.

Some well-meaning individuals may believe that these repeated meetings reflect a commitment to the interests of Syria and the security and well-being of its citizens. However, that is not at all the case. While Member States of the Council are committed to the principle of international law and to the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, which they uphold, Governments of other Member States unfortunately seek to repeatedly exploit this platform to offend my Government and its allies, to make unfounded allegations and to obstruct the measures taken by the Syrian Government to fulfil its constitutional responsibility towards protecting its citizens from armed terrorist organizations. Some Member States even seek to turn the Council into a platform for NATO, thereby covering up acts of aggression that violate the Charter and threaten international peace and security, which it is incumbent on the Council to maintain.

My delegation followed very carefully the briefing by Mr. Pedersen. We stress once again that the political process must be led and owned by the Syrians themselves and should be facilitated by the United Nations without any external interference. We also stress that all Member States inside and outside

the Council must respect the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic, its unity and its territorial integrity.

It is strange that when the Constitutional Committee has been established and started work, Western Governments have significantly intensified their hostile actions and coercive economic measures against my country. That defies common sense and logic. It proves what we have often warned against. Indeed, those Governments are seeking to prolong the crisis in Syria, prevent its resolution and hinder the efforts of the Syrian Government and its allies to combat terrorism.

The Governments of such countries have supported interference in the region through their agent, namely, Erdoğan's regime, which violates international legitimacy, and encouraged it to undermine the sovereignty of my country and to launch direct military aggression against it in an attempt by that regime to save its armed terrorist groups. That regime and its operators have worked for years to recruit, finance, arm and move those terrorist groups from all over the world to my country through Turkish territory.

Those in the Council who defend the aggression of the Turkish regime should remember that Idlib province is a part of the Syrian Arab Republic controlled by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, which is an organization on the Security Council list of terrorist groups, as well as by other terrorist entities affiliated with it. They should also remember that the Astana agreements and the Sochi de-escalation agreement on Idlib excluded terrorist organizations from any ceasefire. In those agreements, the Turkish guarantor undertook to withdraw terrorist organizations, disarm them and prevent them from shelling and waging aggression against neighbouring regions. The agreements in no way allow terrorist organizations to transform Idlib and the surrounding areas into their stronghold, or to continue to take our citizens living there as hostages and use them as human shields.

The agreements stressed the right of the Syrian Government and its allies to continue their fight against terrorism. We will not hesitate to do so until we liberate every inch of the territories of the Syrian Arab Republic. What is most important is that Syria is fighting terrorism and those who sponsor terrorism on our territory, rather than on the territory of other States. As the whole world has seen, the suffering of the Syrian civilians in Idlib is caused by the Turkish

regime, which in recent days has supplied huge amounts of weapons and munitions to terrorists through the so-called humanitarian crossings. The Turkish regime has also targeted populated areas and certain military positions. It has provided military support to terrorists who use Syrian civilians as human shields in order to create a situation that enables them to continue to carry out their terrorist schemes.

We have liberated parts of Aleppo and its rural areas in the north and south from the terrorists, who had been occupying them for many years. Just this morning, the first civilian aircraft took off from Damascus airport to Aleppo airport, with several journalists on board. Millions of Syrians took to the streets, particularly in Aleppo city, to express their joy at being liberated from the armed terrorists groups that had shelled and bombed them every single day, resulting in thousands of martyrs and wounded people. It is strange that some States in the Council ignore the crimes committed by terrorists, others sometimes defend them as being angels. I ask those members to take the angels back to their own countries.

The Syrian State, the one most concerned about its own citizens, needs help rather than being besieged and having its image tarnished. Furthermore, thousands of Syrians have started to return to their homes in liberated areas of Aleppo, Idlib and Hama. We call on all Syrians who had to leave their villages because of the war against terrorism to return to their homes. The Syrian State will guarantee their security and protection and will ensure all the necessary conditions for a normal life.

Those running terrorist organizations in Turkey and in certain countries in Western Europe should compel their terrorists to allow our citizens to go back to their homes. Syria once again calls upon United Nations agencies to ensure humanitarian assistance to our citizens, rather than publishing communiqués and providing briefings that do not reflect reality. We also stress that those terrorist organizations are responsible for all the destruction and the suffering of Syrians in Idlib and elsewhere.

We once again express our disappointment about certain United Nations agencies, particularly the World Health Organization, that do not deliver medical assistance through the Boukamal crossing point to Syria. My delegation condemns the fact that the United States occupation forces and their armed militias have

prevented staff of the Ministry of Health from delivering medication to patients who suffer from leishmaniasis along the eastern banks of the Euphrates River.

In conclusion, my delegation reiterates its call for ending the practice of using the Security Council to further particular agendas, which is contrary to the Council's role and its relevant resolutions, which all stress the need for respecting the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and its people. We also reiterate that achieving a solution to the Syrian crisis requires us to abolish terrorism and put an end to the practice of Governments supporting terrorism and stop their flagrant interference and aggression against my country.

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

Mr. Sinirlioglu (Turkey): At the outset, let me extend our condolences to the families of the OXFAM humanitarian workers who lost their lives today.

I would also like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings.

Two weeks ago the Security Council discussed the growing risk of further escalation and the gravity of the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Syria (see S/PV.8715). Since then, the crisis has only gotten worse. As the Secretary-General emphasized yesterday, the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation and the tragic suffering of civilians have reached alarming levels. Under the pretext of combating terrorism, a relentless campaign of air strikes and ground attacks continues.

The Syrian regime continues to violate international humanitarian law and to indiscriminately target civilians and civilian infrastructure, emptying out entire cities and villages. Almost 1 million people have been displaced over the past two months. Women and children represent 80 per cent of the newly displaced people. This is the biggest mass displacement since the war in Syria began nine years ago.

Yesterday UNICEF reported that the last two hospitals operating in the western part of Aleppo were hit. One of them was a maternity hospital and the other a children's hospital. Four more hospitals were attacked in the past 24 hours. This is unacceptable. The mass-murderer in Damascus has killed more than 2,000

civilians in Idlib since December 2019. Those actions constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

People in Idlib are caught between violence, winter conditions and food scarcity. The lack of adequate shelter has resulted in hundreds of thousands of people living in the open air in freezing temperatures and sleeping on the streets with no cover. Existing camps and settlements are insufficient. Shelter is critically needed, along with new camps to address new waves of displacement. We are working with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to increase the capacity of the cross-border mechanism. We are also working with Germany to alleviate the need for shelter in Idlib and to support the most vulnerable.

This is a major humanitarian tragedy, with serious repercussions beyond Syria. The people of Syria feel abandoned by the world. They expect the international community to help them. They expect the Security Council to raise its voice. The message that must come out of this meeting is clear: the Syrian regime must stop killing its own people. This is a test for the Security Council. This is a test of our humanity. We cannot fail.

The regime also resumed its deliberate attacks on Turkish forces. Five additional Turkish soldiers were deliberately targeted last week and lost their lives. The Turkish armed forces immediately retaliated in self-defence. We will continue to respond by all necessary means. As President Erdoğan announced, Turkey will hit all targets that pose an immediate threat. We will not withdraw our forces, and we will not abandon our observation posts. It is the regime that should withdraw from its current positions by the end of this month. I would like to underline once again that Turkish forces are in Idlib to stabilize the situation and preserve the de-escalation zone status of the province. Our military presence and reinforcements are fully in line with the Sochi memorandum of September 2018.

The only way out of the biggest humanitarian horror story of the twenty-first century is a lasting ceasefire. We need, first, an immediate cessation of hostilities; secondly, the full implementation of Sochi memorandum on Idlib; and, thirdly, a return to the status quo ante. That is the main message we have been conveying to Russia at all levels, including, most recently, in a series of inter-agency meetings in Ankara and Moscow.

In our talks, Turkey reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring the regime's withdrawal to the Sochi

memorandum line. We emphasized our preparedness to enforce that withdrawal through military means if necessary. We stressed the need to de-escalate violence, prevent violations and avoid further worsening of the grave humanitarian situation. We will continue our contacts with Russia, as guarantor of the regime, to make sure that regime acts in compliance with existing frameworks on Idlib.

Today's meeting is meant to be about the political situation in Syria. The fate of Idlib will also determine the prospects for a real political solution. It has been over four years since the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2254 (2015), which sets out a clear road map for a political solution to the Syrian conflict. The establishment of the Constitutional Committee has been the most concrete step taken so far towards implementation of that road map. It took us over two years to establish the Committee because the regime was not interested in a political solution. Now the regime is reverting to its usual tactics for stalling the Committee's work.

The tyrant in Damascus is aspiring to achieve a Syria without people, a Syria without Syrians. He wants to hold on to power with total disregard for human life. We will not let that happen. Today Turkey provides care and protection to more than 9 million Syrians, both in Turkey and Syria. Let me underline — that is more than the population of the so-called regime-controlled areas.

And here we are, in this Chamber again, listening to the previous speaker's delusional accusations. I will again repeat that I will not honour him with a response, since I do not consider him as my legitimate counterpart. His regime has the blood of innocent people on its hands and lost its legitimacy a long time ago. His mere presence in the Council Chamber is an assault on the millions of Syrians who have suffered countless crimes at the hands of the regime.

This tragedy will not end before the people of Syria have a legitimate Government that comes to power through elections to be held in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and which truly represents their will and enjoys their full consent. Until then, Turkey will continue to stand by the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people and safeguard the protection of civilians in Idlib and beyond.

Every passing day, we put vulnerable Syrian people at the mercy of this murderous regime. Now is

the time to act. The international community has the responsibility to protect.

The President (*spoke in French*): The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has asked for the floor to make a further statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Falouh (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I begin by recalling a legal rule: someone who has nothing to give cannot give it. How, then, can the representative of the terrorist Erdoğan regime — a murderous, criminal, aggressive and looting regime — claim that they care about the interests of the Syrian people?

The Erdoğan regime is a terrorist one, recognized by the United Nations as such. Tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters have entered Syria through Turkish territories from more than 101 States. The United Nations has said that tens of thousands of them came from more than 100 States Members. This is a murderous regime that, along with its agents in Syria, namely, terrorist groups and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham — Jabhat Al-Nusra — has committed the most heinous crimes against Syrians. It is an aggressive regime that has attacked and invaded Syrian territories. It is a regime that steals, having looted factories in Aleppo with the help of its terrorist groups and pillaged the natural resources of Syria.

I would like to conclude by an Arab proverb, which says that he who is not ashamed can do whatever he wants. This applies to the Erdoğan regime and its representative — this terrorist, murderous, aggressive and looting regime.

The President (*spoke in French*): The representative of Turkey has asked for the floor to make a further statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Sinirlioğlu (Turkey): I will be very short. Again, I will emphasize that the previous speaker does not represent Syrians. He represents only a very bloody regime that is waging a war against its own people. They do not deserve to be seated behind the Syrian name plate in this Chamber. Their continued presence behind the name plate is just a political aberration. It does not make them the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. As I said, more Syrians are under our care than under theirs.

The President (*spoke in French*): The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has asked for the floor to make a further statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Falouh (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I take the floor to say that the delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic does not acquire its legitimacy from a terrorist, murderous, criminal and aggressive regime.

The President (*spoke in French*): The representative of Turkey has asked for the floor to make a further statement. I would like this exchange to end after this statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Sinirlioğlu (Turkey): Yes, Mr. President, but I did not start this exchange, so I will end when they end.

I will just say that I still regret that the previous speaker can exploit his presence in the Chamber by taking the floor and repeating all the delusions he has been repeating for the past nine years in the Security Council. I will not respond to him.

The President (*spoke in French*): There are no further speakers inscribed on the list. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.