

17 January 2016

Dear members of Syrian civil society,

Thank you for your letter, which left me both deeply saddened and concerned. I was deeply saddened because your letter describes the tragic reality of the children, women and men who live under siege conditions across Syria, with no or limited access to the basic necessities of life. This is unacceptable, unconscionable and unlawful.

The United Nations, including myself, have repeatedly and unequivocally called for an end to siege as a weapon of war against civilians and for full, unhindered, unconditional and sustained access to all people in need in besieged and hard-to-reach areas in Syria. We have also demanded that civilians be protected from violence and abuse, including targeted and indiscriminate attacks, and for respect for their freedom of movement.

On the ground, aid convoys recently brought much needed assistance, including food and medicine, across conflict lines to over 100,000 Syrians in Madaya, Biqin, Foah, Kafraya and Al Waer. I myself went across the line in Al Waer on the day we were delivering much needed life-saving aid and supplies. I listened to people who had been subject to the restrictions on the flow of aid. I visited patients and a hospital that had been shelled and was lacking the most basic medicines and equipment. And a school that was sheltering families who had nothing but what they could carry. Similar efforts continue across Syria on a daily basis, bringing life-saving assistance to millions of people in need.

Sadly, this is not enough and we have been unable, despite tireless efforts, to reach many people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

I am angry and frustrated about the situation in besieged areas in Syria and the terrifying toll it is having on its children, women and men. Humanitarian staff work tirelessly every day to bring life-saving assistance to people affected by the conflict, often at great cost: more than 80 humanitarian workers have been killed and many others remain missing. The Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, his team, the United Nations and its partners have taken serious and repeated risks to reach people in need, in some cases coming under direct fire from parties to the conflict or suffering the ultimate price, selflessly serving others. This has not and will not, however, deter them from their mission.

I support all initiatives that can bring the violence to an end and help the UN and its partners on the ground reach people in need. The Regional Humanitarian Coordinator and his Deputy are ready to continue the dialogue with you on how best to reach people in need.

I can assure you that the UN is neither too close to any party nor acting in such a way to encourage the use of siege tactics. It is our duty to act impartially, neutrally and independently, and to have contact with all parties to negotiate unimpeded and safe access to those who are vulnerable and in need, regardless of how or why their need arises.

But let me be clear, only a political solution for peace and the respect for international humanitarian law by all parties will make the biggest difference for Syrians seeking assistance and for humanitarian organisations the ability to provide it.

Stephen O'Brien

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator