



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

Statement to the Security Council on Syria

New York, 27 August 2015

As Delivered

Madam President,

Since the conflict began, over a quarter of a million people have been killed in Syria and more than a million people injured. Some 7.6 million people have been displaced inside the country. Over one million people have had to leave their homes this year alone.

Over four million people have fled across borders in a desperate search for survival and a future, placing host countries and communities under pressure which is now stretched to breaking point. We may all be living on borrowed time.

In the name of both security as well as humanity, we do need to find a better, more sustainable way forward for the wider international community to share the burden in hosting Syrian refugees.

Over the past month, violence has continued to escalate across the country. Indiscriminate and targeted attacks by all parties to the conflict have resulted in loss of life, destruction of infrastructure; and access to basic services such as water, has been denied to hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

On 12 and 16 August, Government airstrikes hit a market place in Douma killing over hundred people and injuring many more. This attack took place just a few days after the indiscriminate shelling of Damascus by non-State armed groups.

Despite the outrage and condemnations, there has since been at least one further, similar attack. According to reports, since mid-August approximately 200 people have been killed and 400 injured in eastern Ghouta. Shelling of Damascus has also continued, reportedly killing over 30 people on 23th and 24th August. This tit-for-tat approach by the warring parties is causing devastation to the ordinary women, men and children of Syria and it must stop.

The parties' callous disregard for human life and basic survival seemingly knows no bounds. In early July, barrel bombs reportedly hit a shelter in el Hawash village in Hama killing five civilians. In Aleppo Governorate, an alliance of armed groups, including the designated

terrorist group, the Nusra Front, launched attacks on Government-controlled areas of Aleppo city, reportedly killing more than 30 civilians.

Attacks on civilians are unlawful, unacceptable and must stop. I appeal to every party engaged in violence and fighting to protect civilians. All parties involved in violations of international humanitarian law must be held to account.

The destruction of civilian infrastructure continued over the reporting period. Non-State Armed Groups and designated terrorist groups deliberately cut access to essential services such as water and electricity. Such acts violate International Humanitarian Law and must be stopped immediately.

In Aleppo City, water supply was cut from 2 to 18 July and again in early August – during the hottest months of the year – affecting an estimated 1.7 million people. Similarly, in Dar'a City and the surrounding villages, active fighting disrupted the supply of water and electricity for more than ten days, affecting some 300,000 people. The city of Damascus was also affected by water cuts as non-State armed groups cut off the supply from the Wadi Barada Springs which provide water to Damascus. It is unconscionable for anyone to live under these conditions.

Madam President,

Despite the increasingly challenging environment, millions of people continue to receive lifesaving assistance using all available modalities, including across borders pursuant to resolution 2165. During the first half of 2015, UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations provided food assistance for 5.9 million people on average per month, medicine and supplies for 9 million people; water and sanitation support for over five million people; and basic relief items for more than four million people.

While these numbers are significant, I regret to say that many more could be reached should unimpeded access be allowed. I am particularly concerned about the severely limited access to the 4.6 million people living in hard-to-reach and besieged areas. During the first half of 2015, the UN only reached 12 percent of people in hard-to-reach areas with food each month and 3.4 percent with health supplies, indicating major access challenges which limit the humanitarian community's ability to reach the most vulnerable and affected people in Syria.

Similarly, parties to the conflict continue to heavily restrict access to besieged areas. The United Nations has managed to reach less than 1 percent with food and non-food items each month and 2 percent with health supplies each month during the first half of this year. In July, no food or other type of humanitarian assistance by the United Nations reached any besieged areas through official routes where some 422,000 people are located.

UNRWA was able to access Yalda on 18 August, and again on 19 and 24 August as well as today, to provide life-saving healthcare consultations for 1,000 people and 200,000 water purification tablets. However, much more is needed and I remain extremely concerned over the situation of Palestine refugees in Syria.

Madam President,

During my visit to Syria, I discussed with senior Government representatives the need to strengthen protection of civilians and the overall humanitarian response. I urged the Government

to grant full and unhindered access to all people in need, wherever they may be located. It is my sincere hope that the necessary steps will be taken towards improving access, including approving requests for inter-agency and agency convoys.

I welcome the recent granting of visas for UN OCHA staff that have been pending for months. And in relation to visas, I have also just received news from the Syrian mission that the 47 pending visas for United Nations staff have been approved. I will seek confirmation later on today. I also welcome initial reports on the reduction in time to obtain approvals to import humanitarian supplies.

I also visited the Old city of Homs. I was utterly shocked to see the destruction that four years of fighting had brought. Almost every home had been completely destroyed. I met with affected families and was able to hear their stories. I spoke with a man called Ahmed who told me his harrowing story. Above all, he said that he wanted peace in his country. Despite the destruction and daily challenges, he and his family are glad to have been able to return to their home at last – amongst the first to do so.

I will be traveling to Turkey and Jordan in September where I will be able to see for myself the ongoing response efforts to meet the needs of the refugees and the communities hosting them.

Madam President,

It is difficult to find words that would justly describe the depth of suffering that the Syrians face on a daily basis. Having just returned from the country, I have seen a glimpse of this grim reality myself. I left the country deeply saddened and outraged. The needless and immense suffering of ordinary Syrians and the abhorrent destruction this conflict has wrought on the country. I am angry, because we as the international community are not allowed and are not able to do more to protect Syrians who more than ever need our unfaltering support.

But I come away determined not to give up, not to be exasperated by the relentless repetitiveness of the challenges we as humanitarians face, and the need to explore every avenue to do everything possible to provide life-saving aid and protection to the people in need.

I urge the Council members to do everything in their power to end this crisis. With all the will in the world, humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political action. The Council must exert leadership to push for a political solution.

Thank you.