



Security Council

Seventy-second year

Provisional

8142

nd meeting

Tuesday, 19 December 2017, 10.50 a.m.

New York

President: Mr. Bessho. (Japan)

Members:

Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
China	Mr. Shen Bo
Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
France	Mr. Delattre
Italy	Mr. Cardi
Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
Russian Federation.	Mr. Safronkov
Senegal	Mr. Seck
Sweden	Mr. Skoog
Ukraine	Mr. Vitrenko
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Rycroft
United States of America.	Ms. Sison
Uruguay.	Mr. Bermúdez Álvarez

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/1057)

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

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/1057)

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

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

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

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/1057, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016).

I now give the floor to Mr. De Mistura.

Mr. De Mistura: At the outset, let me say how much I and my entire team appreciate the support we have been receiving this year in particular. As this may be the last occasion this year for me to brief the Security Council — and the end of the Security Council cycle for some members — I would like to say thanks, because I have felt that Council members supported us and understood our challenges. I count on that for next year as well.

The eighth round of the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva concluded last Thursday. During my previous briefing (see S/PV.8113) I indicated why and how I was planning to try to facilitate some real negotiations and discussions, not just pre-negotiations. I did so because, first, we saw developments on the ground, including de-escalation and major strides being made against the territorial control of the Islamic State of Iraq and

Levant (ISIL)/Da'esh. That provided logical impetus for the political track. ISIL is almost gone from the territory, although Al-Nusra is still there. But now it is time to talk about a political future. Secondly, significant international diplomacy had taken place just before the talks — in Da Nang, where an important statement was made; in Riyadh, where a second process was established, which was considered almost unthinkable a year ago, so that now three different opposition groups, which had not really been talking to each other, are now united in one group and have one voice; and in Sochi, where an important meeting took place between Presidents Putin and Al-Assad. There have also been important meetings between Presidents Putin and Erdoğan. Thirdly, both the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition Syrian High Negotiations Commission had given some public signals that they were interested in committing to a real discussion in Geneva.

How would that take place? Through a clear and realistic work plan focused on the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) — which, as the only resolution that is guiding us on a political process and legitimizing that process, is all we have and all that we have been able to bring together — and with a particular focus on the so-called 12 principles, a constitutional process and United Nations-supervised elections, both presidential and parliamentary, which in our internal jargon we refer to as basket 2 and basket 3. The process would play out while also exploring the very important issues of governance and counter-terrorism — basket 1 and basket 4 — and while pushing for confidence-building measures, such as humanitarian access, which Mr. Lowcock will talk about, and the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons, with the active support of outside players.

How did the eighth round go? The agenda I just outlined, which I thought was quite ready to start moving forward, for the reasons I mentioned, did not in fact move forward. The opportunity to begin real discussion or negotiation was not taken. A golden opportunity was missed, for many reasons. One is psychological, because we are at the end of the year; another is political, because we are at the end, or want to believe we are, of a major military operation; and another is grounded in a human point of view, since most ordinary Syrians have been asking and waiting for this because they want to see the situation change for them.

Let me explain why. I will try to do it as objectively as possible, although I cannot help showing my feelings, even in my body language — I am Swedish and Italian, and am supposed to maintain my Swedish-style calm and not show my emotional Italian side — but while I am a United Nations diplomat with 47 years of experience, and trained to keep my emotions in check, I cannot hide my disappointment. So I will explain why by quoting from the perspective of each delegation.

The opposition delegation, which held 11 meetings with me, came to Geneva almost directly from the so-called Riyadh II conference, about which I think I briefed the Council the last time. They were therefore unable to prepare themselves, but in spite of that they were able to maintain one line and one voice. They publicly affirmed their position, as indicated in the Riyadh II statement, calling for direct negotiations with the Government, which they emphasized was a position, not a precondition. They also stated their willingness to engage in indirect negotiations through me and my team if direct negotiations were not possible.

The opposition received from us an updated version of the 12 living intra-Syrian essential principles, translated into English, which are the principles that we have been working on for more than a year now, and which we have discussed with everyone, including civil society, the Government and the opposition, as the potential basis for principles for a future constitution. The opposition gave concrete input in response to our presentation of the updated version of the essential principles. For the first time, frankly, they also engaged on all four baskets in very in-depth and relevant discussions, sometimes welcoming and sometimes disagreeing with ideas that the United Nations had developed or proposed, while also sharing their own ideas with us.

The Government delegation, which I met seven times and which was not in Geneva on some of the same days — or not for exactly the same length of time as the opposition — considered that the Riyadh II statement implied “a precondition in its call for President Al-Assad to depart at the start of any transition period”. In all fairness, the Council should know that both I and the Saudi authorities in Riyadh — and I think the Special Envoy of the Russian Federation and many others from various countries as well — advised the opposition not to emphasize that aspect, precisely because it would potentially be considered a precondition. They told us that it was important for them to do so because it has

been a party line since the beginning and that it was not a precondition but a position — an opinion.

The Government also regarded the language in the Riyadh 2 statement on the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran as unacceptable, and it further questioned whether the opposition delegation — although now unified — including the Moscow platform and the Cairo platform, as well as the old or renewed Riyadh platform, was not sufficiently representative.

It also stated, through a video on YouTube, that until full Syrian sovereignty was restored and terrorism defeated in all parts of the Syrian territory, it would not be possible to entertain real movement on a constitutional review process or elections. That, to me, was a new condition that I had never heard before. It made me very worried about any other initiative besides that of Geneva, because if we all have for the whole country to be in a different geographic and political environment, with no foreign or terrorist presence at all, it might mean that any intention of generally addressing a constitutional review or election would be set aside for a long period, if the Government’s position were confirmed. And it was confirmed to us; I have it on record.

Then they also started calling for the Riyadh 2 statement to be withdrawn as a precondition. The Government therefore declined to meet directly with the opposition or to negotiate indirectly with them through me until and unless the Riyadh 2 statement were withdrawn. The Government also further declined to explore any item of the agenda with the United Nations other than counter-terrorism, which we call basket 4 and which, frankly, is very important and affects us all, but is not the only important issue. They also received an updated version from us of the 12 living intra-Syrian essential principles, but did not comment on them or engage with them any further.

As a mediator, I naturally tried to help both sides to think creatively and overcome any perceived barriers to negotiation. For instance, I counselled the Government that the opposition had set out its own negotiating position in Riyadh and that, as we all know, any opposition in the world can and sometimes does call for a change of Government as an ultimate goal. I further explained that a negotiating position was not the same as a precondition. I said that the Government should also test the other side in negotiation, confront them and talk to them. The

Government found my position unconvincing, arguing that the mentality of the opposition, as expressed in the Riyadh 2 statement, revealed that the opposition was pursuing unattainable demands.

Meanwhile, I also counselled the opposition to depersonalize and broaden their thinking on governance, not to constantly refer to that type of personalization of the political solution, and indeed to publicly clarify that they had no preconditions. The opposition pointed out that the Government was setting a precondition to talking to them. Nevertheless, the opposition responded to my appeal about its public messaging by making clear that they are calling for the implementation of Security Council resolutions and “a tough negotiation with different goals” but not attempting to actually persuade the Government to engage with them or me on anything other than terrorism. The opposition regarded that as a sign that the Government was avoiding the negotiating table. In other words, the opposition was ready for negotiations.

I should add that for the whole time we were in Geneva, no progress was made on the most urgent humanitarian issues. I had hoped some progress could be reached during that period. It was the perfect moment to give some good news, and I must say I have to congratulate the entire Council — whatever each member’s position has been — for moving forward on an important resolution. At this time of year, that gives me a feeling that the Council can move forward when people are in need. There was no progress made on the most urgent humanitarian issues, but Under-Secretary-General Lowcock will brief the Council on that topic, so I will not even touch upon that subject.

There was also no progress on the critical issues of detainees, abductees and missing people, a topic that had been raised via the Astana process but had not yet been delivered, either in Astana nor in Geneva. In view of the fact that we now have a new Astana opportunity, I strongly urge Iran, the Russian Federation and Turkey, in their capacity as guarantor States, to address the issues of the detainees, the abductees and the missing persons during the next meeting in Astana and not to miss that opportunity at the end of the year. That will probably happen towards the end of this week.

Whatever the frustrations — and I recognize that there are many and on all sides — let us recall that only a United Nations-brokered process will be seen by the Syrians as impartial and attract the needed

regional and international legitimacy. That is why the Council has mandated the United Nations to facilitate the political process. I appreciate the support extended by permanent members of the Council when they assembled in Geneva at the opening and closing of this round of talks.

Let us also remind ourselves that despite the failure to negotiate in round 8, the front-loading of the living essential principles I mentioned for a future constitution, the identification of details of processes under the constitution/electoral basket — while working to build a safe, calm and neutral environment under the governance and security baskets, which are two important elements for a constitution/electoral basket — remain the most feasible approach to the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

The 12 living intra-Syrian essential principles, published in round 8, which seek to embody end-state commonalities and offer an enduring perspective on the vision of a future that can be shared by all Syrians, are consistent with and reflect many of the end-state principles contained in resolution 2254 (2015) and can serve to inform the parallel discussions of the four baskets, which remain on the agenda of the talks. Thus, the principles constitute an important assurance about the ultimate purpose of any political settlement process under resolution 2254 (2015).

Let me shift now from the slightly theoretical to the pragmatic and practical. Since we have been hearing and talking about the constitutional process and elections, and we were not able in the intra-Syrian talks to actually engage both sides on the matter, I will engage the Council.

I believe that the time has come for the United Nations to provide some specific elaborations on the constitution and electoral baskets 2 and 3, and how they relate to governance, counter-terrorism, security governance and confidence-building measures, and develop agreed and clear modalities for the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) and thus stimulate broader consultation.

Let me share our thinking at this stage on basket 3 — elections. In its paragraph 4, the resolution expresses the Council’s support for

“free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution ... administered under supervision of the United Nations and [held] to the highest

international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate”.

What do we mean when we say that we should be involved and that those elections should be internationally legitimate? The United Nations has provided electoral assistance to the majority of Member States, including around one-third of them in the past two years alone, so we do have experience, often in post-conflict situations and across the full spectrum of electoral assistance.

There is therefore clearly a need to fully respect Syria's sovereignty — no question of that — and its own national electoral process, while at the same time facilitating United Nations supervision that the Council has stated it supports. Bearing in mind resolution 2254 (2015) and insights obtained from parties — because we were able to talk to each side a little bit prior to this round about elections, as well as with civil society and the average Syrian people — in order to hold free and fair elections to the highest international standards, there must be a clear timeline and sequencing agreed, as per resolution 2254 (2015), for United Nations-supervised elections, both presidential and parliamentary.

Provisions would need to be made to ensure equal opportunity for all to participate in public life, not to be terrorized or scared to be involved in it. Principles would need to be agreed for a legal electoral framework that meets the highest international standards and ensures independent electoral management. Parametres would be required on voter eligibility so that all Syrians, irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or gender — including members of the diaspora — can vote with special procedures to ensure the participation of refugees, internally displaced persons and other Syrians impacted by the conflict.

Specific provisions would have to be made to promote women's participation, and United Nations supervision could include roles in support of the legal electoral framework, electoral institutions and operations, including diaspora voting. This would also involve reporting to the Security Council on the implementation of the electoral processes, as related to the highest international standards of inclusivity, transparency and accountability. Those are issues surrounding elections. If we want the United Nations to be involved, that is what United Nations involvement comes with. Ready to respect sovereignty and ready to

work hard — that is what United Nations-supervised elections mean.

Basket 2 concerns the constitution. Resolution 2254 (2015) calls for a United Nations-facilitated process to set the schedule and process for drafting a new constitution before United Nations-supervised elections are held. The United Nations has therefore sought at every turn in our meetings to understand the feelings of the various parties on that matter. Based on this, let me offer 11 observations to set some parametres and help produce further discussion, if we want a constitution process, as per resolution 2254 (2015), and thus the blessing of the United Nations.

First, it would appear that both parties have accepted that Syria requires a review of its constitutional order, culminating in the popular approval of a new constitution. We all agree and they all agree that it is for the people of Syria alone to determine the future constitution of Syria. It should not be written by any country or any of us; we can help, but it should be theirs.

Second, any constitutional review must be Syrian-owned, Syrian-led and conducted in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), which, as I have indicated, provides that the setting of a schedule and process for the drafting of such a new constitution must take place in the context of United Nations-convened and facilitated intra-Syrian talks.

Third, such a scheduling process should attempt to identify and contain guiding principles and a sequenced timetable, and identify all relevant institutions that need to be established, including their mandate and composition and the manner of establishment. To that end, we believe that such a constitutional review process could be guided by the principles contained in resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), and be informed by the 12 living essential intra-Syrian principles, which offer a perspective of a vision of a future Syria that can be shared by all.

Fourth, as I indicated earlier, those principles give important assurances to the people of Syria as to the purpose of any constitutional review, which must meet the legitimate aspirations of the people of Syria.

Fifth, such principles, while not supra-constitutional unless otherwise agreed by the Syrian people, could be developed and embodied by a constitutional drafting body. However, if such a constitutional drafting body

were to be credible, any drafting process would also likely need to address how power is to be shared, decentralized and exercised in Syria at the national, provincial and local levels.

Sixth, the two institutions that have so far emerged from discussions for the purposes of drafting and revising a new constitution and instituting a national dialogue process are a constitutional commission and a national conference. The constitutional commission could prepare and refer an initial draft of a new constitution to a national conference in Syria, which could oversee a national dialogue and review, revise and then refer any draft constitution for popular approval, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Seventh, both institutions should have their mandate, terms of reference, powers and rules of procedure agreed in United Nations-facilitated intra-Syrian talks in Geneva.

Eighth, the United Nations would ensure that any composition agreed would be consistent with resolution 2254 (2015) and based upon any inclusive and objective selection criteria determined and agreed in Geneva. At the very least, both institutions would have to consist of representatives of the Government, the opposition in the intra-Syrian talks, and additional components of Syrian society, including religious, political, intellectual, economic, union figures, Syrians from the diaspora and legal experts, with provisions made for including civil society, independent people and women.

Ninth, such a constitutional review would have to be inclusive and contain a national dialogue that is well-structured, conducted transparently and broadly-based, ensures opportunities for the dissemination of drafts, debate and revision, and has full contact and consultation with civil society, political parties, universities, academia and the public on the draft constitution.

Tenth, the United Nations stands ready, if authorized by the Security Council, to provide good-offices support to any constitutional commission and national conference as described, and as agreed by the parties in the intra-Syrian talks, as well as the provision of international expertise.

Eleventh, if a meaningful and inclusive constitution-making process is to take place in Syria, a secure, calm, neutral environment would need to be established to enable Syrians from all segments of society to participate safely and freely. That in

turn would require the sides in Geneva to identify relevant and appropriate counter-terrorist, security, governance and confidence-building measures, as well as credible, all inclusive, non-sectarian Government arrangements that would need to be agreed and put in place via negotiations.

A tough approach to governance would also help identify milestones and performance indicators. I need hardly repeat that the process of establishing a favourable environment would be greatly enhanced by tangible progress on unhindered humanitarian access and confidence-building measures, in particular action on detainees, abductees and missing persons in a nationwide sustainable ceasefire.

Forgive me for speaking at great length, but this is an important moment for actually setting some clear parameters before us when we talk about important next steps. These propositions are advanced in good faith by the United Nations in order to promote fresh thinking in all quarters, in particular in relation to the constitution and elections and their relations to governance and counter-terrorism. They come out of intense engagement with the parties and Syrians across the board, far beyond the people we have been meeting in the official meetings. What I have presented is designed to show how resolution 2254 (2015) could be implemented credibly and in full in a way that is genuinely responsive to the needs of Syrians and the realities of the moment. We intend to present some of the ideas and approaches I have outlined in a non-paper or a mediator statement early next year.

I will see the Secretary-General this afternoon, so I am not at present in a position to update the Security Council on further developments regarding proposals to hold an early national dialogue congress in a location outside Syria. According to the instructions I have received so far, the Secretary-General will continue to view this and all other initiatives in the context of a simple test. Do they support the mandated political process under United Nations auspices and the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015)? According to the Secretary-General, the bottom line is, if any entity relevant to constitutional review were to be established outside Syria and there were a desire for it to work under the aegis of the United Nations, either it would have to emerge directly from the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva or the United Nations would need to retain the prerogative to review such a body, in consultation with the Council. I would be guided by resolution 2254

(2015) in this regard and, obviously, the guidance of the Secretary-General.

Let me conclude by reminding the Council of something else — something I have always stressed and, as the year comes to a close, should perhaps do so again. These past three weeks, while the negotiations did not proceed, Syrians made their own voices heard and their views known to us. The Syrian Women's Advisory Board provided valuable insights and ideas on the 12 principles in baskets 2 and 3. We hosted 130 civil society representatives. These included experts on constitutional legal matters, human rights, grass-roots dialogue and social cohesion. We held a discussion via video-conference with Syrian refugees — because sometimes we forget that there are 5 million of them and they are there and they want to be part of the future, but they also want to be reassured that, if they decide to come, there is a future — in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as with civil society representatives in hard-to-reach areas across Syria and with those who are present also in Turkey. They had inputs and thoughts on every issue on the agenda, and my team and I have learned a lot from them.

However, most of all they called without any doubt for a political solution, for dignity, for the protection of civilians, for maintaining Syrian territorial integrity and for unconditional access to health care, support and education, which they reminded us are pillars of counter-terrorism. They demanded the release of detainees and abductees and that those who left and became refugees not be punished upon their return, because they are afraid of that. They also demanded information on the missing and for the United Nations and the international community to create conditions conducive to the voluntary return of refugees. They desperately wanted to see the United Nations-Geneva process move forward.

I think that nobody in this Chamber finds those requests or pleas unreasonable, but trust, confidence and political will are the hardest commodities to find when I hold my intra-Syrian talks. I hope that, by liberating ideas, the parties and all Syrians can see that resolution 2254 (2015) can actually be implemented, even in the context of the realpolitik of 2018, in the interests of all Syrians. The question is how much we all will do to help achieve this vision.

I can assure the Council that Secretary-General António Guterres and myself will spare no efforts. We

look forward to an active and, I hope, proactive start to 2018 in that regard.

I thank the Council for its patience. My statement was longer than average, but we are at the end of the year.

The President: I thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: Let me begin by welcoming the action that you, Mr. President, have taken today to adopt resolution 2393 (2017). I note your request that the Secretary-General conduct an independent review and for us to work even harder on monitoring, reporting and data gathering. We will, of course, do all that.

Cross-border deliveries will remain an essential part of our efforts to meet the needs of all those across Syria who require humanitarian assistance. This will hardly be news to the Council, but it is important for me to repeat that in besieged eastern Ghouta increased fighting and the lack of humanitarian access is rendering life unbearable for an estimated 393,000 people trapped inside the enclave. Thousands of civilians are caught in fighting that threatens their lives on a daily basis. Except for a pause of two days, intensive air and ground-based strikes have been reported every day since mid-November. There has been significant loss of civilian life and hundreds have been wounded, both in eastern Ghouta and in Damascus city, where shelling from the besieged enclave has continued.

Over the past weeks, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have been allowed to reach only 7 per cent of those in besieged towns and villages in eastern Ghouta. Tiny amounts of aid have been allowed in, enough for only a fraction of those in desperate need. Food shortages have led in many cases to severe acute malnutrition, and a nutrition sector survey conducted in November showed a rapid and significant deterioration in the nutritional status of children under the age of five. Nearly 12 per cent of children have been diagnosed with global acute malnutrition — a fivefold increase in the past 10 months. This is the highest level of acute malnutrition recorded so far in the country since the conflict began. These children, whose lives depend on timely and targeted intervention, need our immediate support.

In addition, more than 500 people in eastern Ghouta still require urgent medical evacuation. They include

137 children, 231 girls and women, and 61 people over the age of 65. There are 73 people with severe cancer. There are 25 patients with kidney failure. There are 97 people with heart disease. There are five acutely malnourished children. Infants — some of them just one or two months old — will die if evacuation permits are not granted immediately. There have already been 16 civilian deaths among those waiting for permission to leave eastern Ghouta for medical reasons, including three in the past few days. Among them are a 45-day-old infant, a nine-year-old girl and a quadriplegic. All that is needed is the green light from the Syrian authorities for these people to go to hospitals just a few miles outside of eastern Ghouta.

There has also been minimal progress in recent months in responding to the needs of those trapped and besieged in Fo'ah, Kefraya and Yarmouk. So far this year, only a trickle of assistance has been allowed in for those people. Humanitarian access continues to face restrictions in all the besieged and hard-to-reach locations. On average in 2017, only 27 per cent of people identified to receive assistance under the United Nations bi-monthly plans have in fact been reached through inter-agency cross-line convoys each month. Bureaucratic impediments, like the non-issuance of facilitation letters, continue to be a significant factor in these delays, despite the creation of the tripartite coordination mechanism intended to address such problems.

In November, only five cross-line convoys were able to deploy, reaching approximately 200,250 people in hard-to-reach locations and 28,700 people in besieged locations out of a total besieged population of more than 400,000 people. So far in December, none — not one — of our convoys has made it to any of the besieged locations. Only two convoys have received the necessary authorizations for deployment to hard-to-reach locations — one to Harbanifse in Hama governorate and the other to Al-Houle in Homs governorate, on 14 December, which delivered assistance to 60,000 people. Those deliveries were themselves delayed, following a reduction of one third in the agreed number of beneficiaries from what had initially been approved in the access plan.

In the past month, the United Nations and its partners have continued to reach millions of people in need through regular programming to parts of the country controlled by the Government of Syria and through cross-border operations. Regular programming

from within the country resulted in the delivery of humanitarian assistance to millions of people in need, including approximately 2.7 million people who received food assistance so far this month through more than 1,595 deliveries.

Cross-border assistance also remained a vital part of the humanitarian response, with the United Nations and its partners providing services for health, education, protection, water and sanitation, and humanitarian supplies. More than 650 trucks have this month delivered food assistance to more than 900,000 people through cross-border operations, as well as health assistance for nearly 1 million treatments.

The overall humanitarian and protection situation of civilians displaced from Raqqa city remains of high concern to me, particularly due to mines and explosive remnants of war. Civilian deaths and injuries due to mine explosions continue to be reported with alarming frequency. More than 125 civilians were killed and almost 200 trauma cases were reported since the end of military activities in Raqqa city.

Contamination from explosive hazards, including improvised explosive devices, presents a major threat and impediment to enabling safe returns. The full scale of the contamination is not yet fully known, given the lack of a systematic survey of the city. In addition to the threat posed by unexploded ordnance, up to 80 per cent of all buildings in Raqqa city are severely damaged and at risk of collapse. Those conditions mean that humanitarian organizations have only very limited access and presence on the ground.

In Deir ez-Zor governorate, military offensives to retake the remaining areas held by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continue to prompt significant population displacement. More than 250,000 displacements were registered in November. Government advances against ISIL along the Euphrates River have displaced thousands of people from the Abu Kamal sub-district, near the border with Iraq. Military operations and associated heavy aerial attacks have reportedly resulted in more than 150 civilian casualties. The majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are suffering in dire circumstances due to an extreme shortage of shelter, food and safe water. On 12 December, a Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy was finally able to deliver food, health and other relief items provided by the United Nations and other partners to about 15,000 children, women and men in Abu Kamal city.

People continue to suffer from the effects of conflict in other areas of the country that have received less attention. Increased fighting in the past two months in Hama, Idlib and Aleppo governorates resulted in more than 90,000 people being displaced. Most of those people moved further into Idlib governorate, which is already under strain from hosting extraordinary numbers of IDPs. The humanitarian response in that area has been difficult due to the ongoing violence, and the little humanitarian infrastructure that is in place continues to be impacted by the fighting.

October and November were the worst months this year for displacement, with 440,000 people forced to move in October and almost 375,000 in November. That brings the total number of people displaced this year alone to approximately 2.6 million, which equates to 7,700 displacements every day. Many have been displaced more than once.

The last time humanitarian assistance was delivered to the people in Rukban camp, which is located on the border with Jordan, was in June. I am still urging the Government of Syria to authorize, as a matter of urgency, the inter-agency deliveries of life-saving humanitarian assistance to those people from Damascus. In the meantime, let me say that I am very grateful for the ongoing efforts to permit an exceptional delivery of humanitarian assistance to that camp from Jordan and I hope that that can happen immediately.

The civilian population of Syria deserves to see a tangible improvement in their daily lives, because they have always borne the brunt of this unrelenting conflict. I urge all Council members to do everything possible to ensure that 2018 brings some relief to their suffering.

The President: I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

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

Mr. Bermúdez Álvarez (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for their comprehensive and very sincere briefings.

This is the last time that Uruguay will make a statement on the Syrian conflict as a member of the Security Council, a conflict that has left the world horrified and in constant suspense. The barbaric terrorism, the intransigence of the Government in Damascus and the geopolitical gains that several States of the region and elsewhere have tried obtain from this

conflict have prolonged and worsened the crisis in a manner that was completely unnecessary.

For the Council, and in particular for the 2016-2017 membership, the agenda item on Syria has undoubtedly generated the greatest amount of work, easily surpassing 100 meetings — including open briefings, consultations, meetings under the heading “Other matters” and emergency meetings — in addition to the multiple negotiations and contacts that have been held in attempting to contain the crisis. However, all of that has unfortunately been insufficient.

Despite the willingness of the United Nations and the Security Council to achieve a political and negotiated solution in Syria, it is two years since the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015) and we are unfortunately yet to see direct negotiations between the parties or a political transition process with a road map and clearly established deadlines, which we have been unable to implement.

In difficult times such as the present, we encourage Special Envoy De Mistura not to let up and to continue seeking new ideas to allow that process to get under way as soon as possible. It will require flexibility and original ideas to impose a new dynamism and, in particular, to create the conditions to generate a minimum level of trust between the Government and the opposition.

There is little left to say that we have not previously mentioned on Syria. Uruguay has attributed maximum priority to the peaceful resolution of the crisis and has always focused on the protection of its civilian population and on the humanitarian tragedy of the millions of Syrians who have been affected since 2011. As we have done each month, we recognize the sacrifice, selflessness and bravery of the workers of United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and its associated agencies and organizations in Syria and bordering countries, who risk their lives on a daily basis in attempting to alleviate the living conditions of millions of Syrian civilians. In the fulfilment of their tasks, we must always ensure their protection and security.

We are pleased that a few moments ago, by adopting resolution 2393 (2017) (see S/PV.8141), we were able to renew the mechanism for cross-border aid, which makes it possible to aid almost 3 million people. The serious difficulties that have hindered humanitarian

assistance in Syrian territories have made it essential that that mechanism be renewed.

Last month, a few hours prior to the previous meeting on this agenda item (see S/PV.8117), we received news of relief aid being delivered to eastern Ghouta, which unfortunately never arrived. To date, 400,000 civilians remain besieged in a situation of great need, the famine is affecting the most vulnerable, the bombings continue and medical evacuations are not being carried out, with 500 civilians in urgent need thereof. And all of that is happening despite being one of the de-escalation zones according to the Astana process. Worst of all is that it has not been possible for the humanitarian convoys, which are constantly on standby to deliver aid, to reach that region. We urge the Government to put an end to those blockades, to lift all sieges and to allow aid to reach all those who need it without exception.

In another area, and in an emblematic example, not even the hospital at Khan Shaykhun was spared from repeated bombings, a locale that became notorious in April as a result of a merciless chemical attack. Nothing is left of the hospital. All those events were in flagrant violation of resolution 2286 (2016), which we adopted last year.

I would like to reiterate one final time several points that are very important for Uruguay.

Over the past two years we have constantly argued that there should not be any impediment to access and the distribution of aid throughout Syria, including besieged and hard-to-reach areas. We are concerned that humanitarian access continues to face serious difficulties every month. We need immediate, secure and unhindered access in order to reach all of the people in need in Syria. We would urge countries that have influence over Syrian officials to see to it that this is done through ongoing cooperation and coordination with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The Syrian Government has the primary responsibility to ensure that it provides food, water and medicines and other vital goods to its population in order to ensure their survival, and it must lift all sieges that it currently maintains.

Humanitarian principles, human rights and international humanitarian law must be respected in all conflicts. When they are violated, as has happened blatantly and repeatedly in Syria, where very serious crimes have been committed that constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, the only option

is to find a way to hold those responsible for such acts accountable in a court of law. In that regard, we once again support the request of Secretary-General Guterres for specific cases relating to Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court. We also hope that there will be full cooperation with the International Impartial Independent Mechanism Investigating Serious Crimes in Syria, established at the end of 2016 to investigate the serious crimes committed in the country.

With regard to the Astana process, we hope that the meeting to be held in a few days' time will help to provide details on the implementation of the violence de-escalation zones, which must be given transitional status so that in future the unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic can be maintained.

In conclusion, as we said in 2016 and 2017, we hope that in 2018 we will see a final end to the conflict in Syria and the beginning of a political transition process that is accepted by all the parties, which will make it possible for its entire population, after so much suffering, to be part of a better future. That is why we once again express our support for the role being played by Special Envoy De Mistura, and we express the hope that, with the goodwill of all involved, the ceasefire and direct negotiations can quickly become a reality.

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, we are grateful to Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and to Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for their respective briefings. We express our solidarity with them in the tasks entrusted to them.

The situation on the ground has changed. It has been possible to establish four de-escalation zones, and with it a reduction in violence that has made it possible to regain control of various cities and areas that were once hard to reach. We believe that the most recent meetings held in various formats help to continue the cessation of violence. However, we must make progress in taking specific decisions that will help to resolve the conflict in Syria and enable its population to regain peace and return to their homes. Among other efforts to that end, those made by the Government and the people of Syria in their fight against Da'esh are fundamental. It is also important to take all the necessary measures in order to avoid in the short-term the reconstitution or emergence of new terrorist groups, but that in the medium- and long-term also make it possible to rebuild Syria.

In that regard, we believe that any unilateral military action is totally illegal and contravenes the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. Fundamentally, however, such actions violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic and hinder the implementation of the road map set out in resolution 2254 (2015). We reiterate that it is imperative that we pool our efforts in order to bring about the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) in its four aspects.

We stress the need for greater reconciliation among the parties to the Geneva process, wherein the participation of the Cairo and Moscow platforms are essential to bring about a political solution. In that regard, we would highlight those agreements that make it possible to reduce violence, respect the ceasefire and create conditions that help guarantee the secure and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons. We also highlight the efforts made to bring about stability, promote trust between the parties involved and to improve the humanitarian situation in conflict zones. We welcome the efforts undertaken to date in the various rounds of the Astana process, which has now become an important forum for establishing the de-escalation zones and, therefore, as we reiterate, important in reducing violence and bringing about stability.

We once again express our great gratitude for the work of the staff of various humanitarian agencies, and we demand that international humanitarian law be respected as humanitarian workers carry out their very hazardous work on the ground. We therefore again remind the parties involved in the conflict that they must permit unconditional access for humanitarian assistance and guarantee and safeguard the security and physical well-being of humanitarian workers, particularly those in besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

Finally, we would reiterate that the only alternative to resolving this conflict is through an inclusive political process of dialogue and consultation, led by and for the Syrian people, which would make it possible to bring about a peaceful solution among the parties involved. We reiterate that such political transition process must always safeguard the sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and independence of Syria, through all peaceful means provided for under the Charter of the United Nations.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): My Government has taken note of the forty-sixth monthly report of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. We note that the report includes improvements, including its recognition of the fact that the United Nations has managed to get humanitarian aid to thousands of people in need in Syria, thanks to the assistance of the Syrian Government and Syrian agencies.

However, Syria believes that the current report requires yet further balance and objectivity. In both word and deed, the report should reiterate the commitment to the implementation of the United Nations resolutions, in particularly respect for Syrian sovereignty, and to providing humanitarian aid to those who are in need in Syria, without selectivity or politicization. Yesterday, we sent an official letter to the Secretary-General and to the President of the Security Council, setting out the position of the Syrian Government on the report of the Secretary-General (S/2017/1057) under consideration today. However, I would like to make the following main points.

The authors of these periodic reports are incapable of resolving a serious professional shortcoming, namely, the fact that they are relying on politicized and other open sources that lack credibility, while continuing to ignore the Syrian Government's reliable sources. The Syrian Government regrets that the authors of the report speak about what they administrative impediments and deliberate restrictions that they claim limit the delivery of humanitarian assistance to unstable areas.

In that regard, Syria reiterates that it provides every possible facilitation to ensure the delivery of that assistance when it is genuinely directed to those Syrian citizens who truly deserve it and when it is arranged in accordance with the agreed mechanisms that respect the applicable Syrian laws and regulations.

As Security Council members will recall, the Syrian Government has approved the proposal of the Resident Coordinator to set up a tripartite mechanism because it is open to any measure that would strengthen humanitarian work in Syria. The mechanism has met five times to date — contrary to the suggestion of the authors of the report that it is ineffective and that its meetings are few and far between.

With regard to cross-border deliveries of humanitarian assistance, I would like to make the following points.

First, Syria still believes that there is currently no practical justification for the cross-border delivery of such assistance, in particular given the options created by the agreements for the establishment of de-escalation zones in order to deliver humanitarian assistance to those in need from within the country.

Secondly, the parties in charge at the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs are still either unable or unwilling to offer the necessary guarantees that assistance reaches those who deserve it, and not armed terrorist groups, as has been the case so far. In that connection, my Government is bewildered by the vague ideas contained in paragraph 29 of the report regarding partners or independent third-party companies that were contracted to ascertain the delivery of assistance to the warehouses and to those who are eligible for such aid. I would add that, to date, no United Nations official has proposed such ideas to the Syrian Government even though the Syrian Government is the main party concerned. The Syrian Government therefore requests that the United Nations provide the names and reports of the United Nations partners who are allegedly able to verify this essential information.

Thirdly, the Syrian Government, in cooperation with its allies, has liberated most Syrian territories from Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front and other affiliated terrorist groups. Those groups have prevented humanitarian aid from reaching civilians in those areas. That requires us today to agree on mechanisms to deliver assistance from within Syria and in cooperation and coordination with the Syrian Government.

Fourthly, those who prepared the report did not mention the refusal of the United States and Jordan to allow aid to reach the Al-Rukban camp, or of Turkey to open the Nassibine crossing points, which is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and further evidence of the double standards and politicization of cross-border assistance.

My Government reiterates the need for United Nations personnel in Syria to refrain from dealing with any separatist entities, the illegal so-called local councils or unlicensed civil society organizations. We warn that most of those entities have close ties to or affiliations with armed terrorist groups.

My Government regrets the continuous use by the authors of the report of the term "besieged zones" when talking about the situation in eastern Ghouta, while they constantly and deliberately ignore the fact that citizens in eastern Ghouta are under internal siege by armed

terrorist organizations there. Those organizations use citizens as human shields and seize, monopolize and distribute humanitarian assistance to their supporters, but sell it at exorbitant prices to those in need, as was the case in eastern Aleppo. Independent media have aired audio and video footage of the suffering of besieged civilians and exposed the practices of terrorist groups that steal humanitarian aid and deprive it to those in need of that aid.

My country's Government continues to call on the authors of the report to be transparent and credible by clearly mentioning the deeply negative impacts of the unilateral economic coercive measures imposed on Syria by the United States of America, the European Union and other States. Those measures have an impact on all basic sectors of life and affect even the activities of the United Nations entities and foreign non-governmental organizations in Syria.

As Council members are aware, the eighth round of the Geneva talks took place immediately following the so-called Riyadh conference for the Syrian opposition, which was attended by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General after having been postponed for three months. Members are also well aware that the outcome of the Riyadh conference is a deliberate violation of the relevant United Nations resolutions on the Syrian crisis, in particular resolution 2254 (2015). The statement issued by that conference contained preconditions on key issues that eliminate any potential for a Syrian national dialogue led by the Syrians themselves, without foreign interference.

The Special Envoy, who was present at the Riyadh meetings, ignored the fact that the so-called Riyadh 2 document was a flagrant attempt to undermine the Geneva track and prevent a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Therefore, the Syrian Government position was clear and firm in rejecting the goals of the Riyadh 2 grouping, namely, to waste time and prolong the crisis in an act of submission to the injunctions of their employers in Saudi Arabia and Western States.

Resolution 2254 (2015) stipulates that all preconditions should be rejected and that the dialogue should be inter-Syrian and led by Syrians without foreign interference. However, the Special Envoy, who attended the Riyadh 2 meeting, decided to laud its outcome and adopt it in a provocative manner, in violation of the United Nations resolution. He adopted an unbalanced position and sided with the so-called opposition groups that are still imposing preconditions.

He also began to promote the dangerous outcome of the Riyadh 2 meeting and tried to justify it to the extent that he became party to the exacerbation of the crisis, rather than a facilitator.

The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic strictly respects the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international humanitarian law, which are the basis of the United Nations role and its credibility. We reject the misuse of United Nations mechanisms by certain influential States. We condemn the hostile and irresponsible statements of certain States that have employed terrorist armed groups in Syria. As usual, those States have exploited the position of the Special Envoy in the media so as to justify the preconditions imposed by the opposition groups in order to obstruct the Geneva process and thwart any possible solution to the crisis.

In conclusion, the Syrian Arab Republic has participated in 15 rounds of talks in Geneva and Astana and two rounds of talks in Moscow, and expects to participate effectively in the inter-Syrian national dialogue conference in Sochi. The position of my Government is clear. No one can alter or manipulate it, or weaken Syria's resolve to respond to any sincere effort to end the bloodbath in Syria and to meet the aspirations of the Syrian people. That is why we urge the Secretary-General to convince States that sponsor the opposition groups to invalidate the so-called Riyadh 2 statement and pave the way for serious progress in the talks on Syria.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at noon.