



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

Provisional

8454th meeting

Wednesday, 30 January 2019, 10.30 a.m.

New York

President: Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic)

Members:

Belgium	Mrs. Van Vlierberge
China	Mr. Ma Zhaoxu
Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Esono Mbengono
France	Mr. Delattre
Germany	Mr. Heusgen
Indonesia	Mr. Djani
Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
Poland	Ms. Wronecka
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
South Africa	Mr. Matjila
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Allen
United States of America	Mr. Cohen

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): 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 Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

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

I give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: The people of Syria are suffering a cold, hard winter, with freezing temperatures, snowfall and heavy rain resulting in flooding, which is destroying shelters and forcing tens of thousands more people to move. Millions are living under tents or tarpaulins or in damaged buildings, with no power or heating. There are severe shortages of all the basics — from blankets to baby milk to bandages.

Since late last year, the United Nations and its partners have been raising funds to support Syrians across the country with vital winter items, including plastic sheeting to reinforce shelters, stoves and heating fuel, blankets, jackets and winter clothes. We have raised \$81 million, which has allowed us to help 1.2 million people. Continued support is critical to ensuring that all those in need can be reached.

The weather has been difficult for people in Idlib, where the risk of military escalation continues to loom. Over the second half of last year, I frequently highlighted our growing concerns about the plight of 3 million people in Idlib and neighbouring areas in north-west Syria, where civilians simply have nowhere else to flee should there be a full-scale military incursion into the area. The September agreement between Russia and Turkey was followed by a significant decrease in ground fighting and air strikes. However, January saw an increase in fighting among non-State armed groups, placing civilians at risk and resulting in injury and

death. Today I reiterate the importance of sustaining the Russia-Turkey agreement, and I remind the Council that a large-scale military operation in Idlib would have catastrophic humanitarian implications.

Last month the Council extended the authorization for the cross-border relief operation into Idlib. Hundreds of thousands of people are reached each month with lifesaving assistance through our cross-border operations. We must continue to be able to provide food, medicine, tents, critical winter supplies and other help.

Forty-two thousand people remain stranded in Rukban, along the Syria-Jordan border. Conditions in that informal settlement have continued to deteriorate since the most recent humanitarian convoy to the area, from 3 to 8 November. Eight infants have reportedly died since last month. Again, the cold is making the situation even worse. It is therefore critical that the parties support a second convoy to Rukban. The United Nations has been engaged on multiple fronts to ensure it can happen, including by addressing concerns expressed by the Russian Federation and the Government of Syria about the security of the convoy and monitoring arrangements for aid distributions. The convoy will include more than 100 trucks of relief supplies, focusing on food, winterization support and health, nutrition, household and water and sanitation items. The vaccination campaign from the first convoy will be continued, and the team will conduct an intention survey to help identify a durable solution for those people in the informal settlement.

Monitoring will be further enhanced, from the offloading site up to the distribution points where beneficiaries collect their assistance, with about 250 United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent personnel accompanying the convoy. The team plans to stay in Rukban for at least a week to ensure sufficient time to monitor distributions, carry out the intention survey and vaccinate as many children as possible. In terms of security, to avoid any interference, we have agreed that, from the entry to the 55-kilometre exclusion zone up to the offloading site, there will be a 5-kilometre buffer zone between the armed groups present in the area and the convoy. However, protection for the accompanying personnel must be provided at the offloading point and the accommodation site, and security is needed inside the informal settlement, where distributions will take place, where vaccination points will be established and where enumerators will conduct the survey.

We received verbal approval on 27 January from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Damascus for the convoy to proceed. Security guarantees have also been received from the Russian Federation and international coalition forces. Planning is now under way for the loading of the trucks to begin before the end of the week, and for them to set off by 5 February. We call on all parties to ensure that goes ahead without any further delay.

Turning to the north-east of the country, we are concerned about the humanitarian impact of ongoing military operations in south-east Deir ez-Zor, where thousands have been displaced and an unknown number of people remain trapped under the control of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Continuing and intense air strikes and ground fighting have caused scores of civilian casualties and damaged critical infrastructure.

About 20,000 people, most of them women and children, have been displaced since December from the Hajin area to Al-Hol camp in Hasakah governorate. They have been exposed to hostilities, explosive hazards, intense cold and prolonged security screenings, throughout which they have received minimal assistance. We have received reports of 25 children having died, either in transit or shortly after reaching the camp. We are scaling up our efforts to respond in Al-Hol, but people continue to arrive in critical condition, with many reporting that they were relocated involuntarily, that their documentation has been confiscated, that their movement continues to be restricted and that they would prefer to seek shelter with family members or acquaintances in Deir ez-Zor. I call on all parties once more to do their utmost to protect civilians and allow them freedom of movement to seek safety and basic services in a location of their choosing.

We have frequently reported to the Council about the unacceptable risk that mines, unexploded ordnance and other explosive hazards continue to pose across Syria. I am therefore pleased to be able to confirm that the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) yesterday launched its first project out of Damascus, following the opening of its office last year. About 25 young Syrian men and women are being trained in explosive hazard risk education. UNMAS remains ready to deploy and assist with humanitarian mine action in Raqqa, should such a deployment be authorized by the authorities.

Humanitarian organizations are fully mobilized throughout Syria to meet the needs of the people. In consultation with the Government and guided by humanitarian principles, we are now finalizing our 2019 humanitarian needs overview. We are working to ensure that our humanitarian response plan is completed in advance of the upcoming Brussels conference. Those documents are based on a thorough assessment of needs undertaken over the course of the past year, including in areas that have recently seen changes in control, such as eastern Ghouta, south-west Idlib and the south of the country.

Monitoring and evaluation remain central to our efforts. In the past three months of 2018, for example, the United Nations, with the agreement of the Government, undertook nearly 1,000 missions across Syria, 75 per cent of which were for monitoring and evaluation purposes, thereby allowing us to understand in greater detail and report credibly to donors on how their money is being used.

I would like to conclude by reiterating some current priorities for which we seek the Council's help.

First, support from all Member States is needed to ensure that the parties respect and protect civilians, with particular attention to the north-west and north-east of the country. Once again, a full military offensive in Idlib and the surrounding areas must be avoided at all costs.

Secondly, the humanitarian convoy to Rukban must be allowed to proceed as planned.

Thirdly, all parties must facilitate safe, regular and sustained humanitarian access so that we can carry out additional needs assessments, deliver to all areas where needs are most severe and monitor the impact of our interventions.

Fourthly, to go back to where I started, financing for the immediate lifesaving needs in Syria is needed to help people through this bitter winter, but also to ensure the humanitarian programmes in our 2019 humanitarian response plan are well funded. The conference in Brussels on 13 and 14 March will be a critical marker in that regard.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): 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. Alotaibi (Kuwait): At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for his valuable briefing. I would also like to pay tribute to all humanitarian and medical personnel for their efforts in the field to alleviate the human suffering in Syria under very difficult and often dangerous conditions, as the high number of aid workers injured or killed shows. I will present this statement on behalf of the co-penholders of the Syrian humanitarian file — Belgium, Germany and Kuwait.

We meet today at the first Security Council meeting in 2019 on the humanitarian situation in Syria, moving on from 2018, which sadly witnessed a continuation of the dire humanitarian situation in Syria. It is appropriate here to take a moment to review the situation. According to United Nations statistics, there are almost 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, more than 5 million of whom are children. There are more than 5.6 million registered refugees in the neighbouring countries, including 2.5 million children. More than 1 million people live in hard-to-reach areas. Behind those alarming numbers are countless stories of the continued human suffering of Syrian civilians — children, women and the elderly — who have become victims of one of the most egregious conflicts of our times. As that human suffering persists, the international community and, in particular, the parties involved in the conflict must work together to improve the humanitarian situation and access in Syria in order to make a tangible difference for civilians on the ground.

As we enter the new year, serious humanitarian challenges on the ground remain. There are still challenges, obstacles and constraints, either bureaucratic, security or other, that limit sustainable humanitarian access to those in need. We call on all parties to continue to facilitate safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access to all parts of Syria. We emphasize the need for such assistance to reach those in need in an impartial, non-discriminatory manner, in accordance with humanitarian principles and based on needs. Syria and the neighbouring countries are witnessing a cold winter. That has exacerbated the dire living conditions of many of those in need, which has led to the deaths of a number of civilians, including children, over the past few weeks. On 15 January, UNICEF issued a statement that must move our conscience and humanity:

“The lives of babies continue to be cut short by health conditions that are preventable or treatable. There are no excuses for this in the twenty-first century. This tragic man-made loss of life must end now. ... History will judge us for these entirely avoidable deaths.”

It is necessary to address the continued tragic suffering of 42,000 people in Rukban camp whose survival depends on the arrival of humanitarian assistance. That is especially true for children and women, who make up approximately 80 per cent of the camp population. We had hoped that the most recent convoy that arrived at the camp last November would pave the way for sustainable humanitarian access to the camp, but that has not yet materialized. Such lack of access is unacceptable. As we have just heard from Mr. Lowcock, things are moving forward on the latest convoy, and we urge all parties concerned to cooperate in order to enable immediate, sustainable, unimpeded and safe access to Rukban and for the required approvals to be granted swiftly.

The protection of civilians from conflict, death and human rights violations has remained one of the greatest challenges in the Syrian crisis since its outbreak in 2011. We are following the developments in northern Syria closely and reiterate that the Russian-Turkish memorandum of understanding on a ceasefire in Idlib, home to nearly 3 million people, half of whom are internally displaced persons, needs to be sustained. A ceasefire not only in Idlib but nation-wide would enable the flow of humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of the wounded and sick, in accordance with international law and as provided for in resolution 2401 (2018). The situation in Idlib is fragile, and we all recall the warning by Under-Secretary-General Lowcock that a military operation in Idlib could lead to the worst humanitarian disaster of the twenty-first century.

In recent weeks, fighting in different areas of Syria, including Deir ez-Zor, has led to dozens of civilian casualties. Persons displaced because of armed clashes face serious dangers, such as being killed or hurt by explosives and being without shelter, food or water for prolonged periods in cold weather. The escalation in violence has also destroyed civilian infrastructure. We reaffirm that all parties must take all measures to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. We also call on the parties to the conflict to respect

Security Council resolutions pertaining to civilian structures, in particular resolution 2286 (2016) on the protection of hospitals and health facilities in conflict.

We strongly condemn the arbitrary detention and torture of individuals in Syria, notably in prisons and detention facilities, as well as the frequent kidnappings, abductions, hostage-taking and forced disappearances, and demand an immediate end to those practices and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons, starting with women and children, as well as the sick, the wounded, persons with disabilities, elderly persons, humanitarian personnel and journalists. The abduction and killing of a humanitarian worker in Idlib earlier this year was a shameful act, and we condemn it in the strongest terms. That is a reminder to us all of the daily risks that humanitarian workers face as they help others. Parties to the conflict have an obligation not only to protect the lives of humanitarian workers but also to ensure that they can work unhindered and free of fear.

There should be accountability for those who have committed violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. We stand firm in our commitment to fighting impunity. In that context, we renew our support for the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria.

With regard to refugees, we would like to reiterate that any return of Syrian refugees to their homes must be a safe, voluntary and dignified return. There are clearly defined conditions for this that must be met, as set out in the thresholds for return established by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Measures such as arbitrary detention and expropriation, to name but a few, contravene any efforts that would allow Syrians to return. We also reject attempts to make demographic changes in Syria.

We express our full support to the Special Envoy, Mr. Geir Pedersen. We must work with him to advance the political process, which is the only way to reach a sustainable solution to the crisis and to avoid further human suffering in Syria, through a political settlement in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué of 2012 (S/2012/522, annex).

In conclusion, Belgium, Germany and Kuwait, as co-penholders and significant donors to the humanitarian response in Syria, will continue to spare no effort to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people and to ensure that the Security Council upholds its responsibilities in accordance with the Charter

of the United Nations and the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing and for the important work that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and its partners are doing to support the Syrian people.

Last month, the Security Council renewed key provisions of resolution 2165 (2014) (see S/PV.8423). A fundamental principle of those provisions was ensuring the safe, immediate and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need in the most direct and efficient manner possible. That includes the approval and facilitation of aid deliveries from Damascus to the Rukban internally displaced persons camp. We are aware of reports that the Syrian regime has finally issued verbal approval for the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian aid to Rukban, as Under-Secretary-General Lowcock reported. The preliminary approval of that convoy is a very welcome development. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that what is truly needed is unimpeded, sustained humanitarian access, both in Rukban and throughout Syria.

A second convoy will permit aid workers from the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to deliver food, medicine and winterization supplies, and that delivery will save lives. We call on Damascus to issue all outstanding written approvals and allow that convoy to move forward without any further delay. It is critical that the convoy include all the required assistance, as determined by the United Nations. As part of that delivery, the United Nations should also be able to conduct a survey of the Rukban residents' intentions. The intentions survey will help facilitate the safe, voluntary, dignified and informed departures from Rukban of those internally displaced persons (IDPs) who wish to leave the encampment. We reiterate that any departures of IDPs from Rukban must be safe, dignified and voluntary. Residents must not be coerced by the regime or its allies in any way. It is also imperative that IDPs be permitted to relocate at the time of their choosing and to a place of their choosing.

The Syrian regime's continued disregard of the Security Council resolutions authorizing the delivery of humanitarian aid is a reminder that we must remain vigilant and that the Security Council must hold Damascus accountable. The United States remains committed to cooperating with both the United Nations

and Russia to alleviate humanitarian concerns in Rukban and throughout Syria.

The United States and the global coalition to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS) have provided the necessary security assurances to allow the convoy to move forward, just as we did advance of the November convoy. The United States is able to support that effort thanks to the coalition's liberation of more than 99 per cent of the territory once held by ISIS in Syria. Let me be clear. This does not mean the end of the campaign to defeat ISIS, nor does it lessen the United States commitment to the enduring defeat of ISIS. We appreciate the contributions and continued commitment of our international partners in the global coalition. Stabilization assistance is critical to ensuring the lasting defeat of ISIS. We also value and thank our partners who have worked with us on the ground, and will continue to work with them on stabilization efforts in north-east Syria. There is much work that needs to be done to help those liberated from ISIS to recover and prevent the latter's return.

The United States continues to closely monitor humanitarian conditions in Idlib province. United Nations access to Idlib from Damascus remains virtually impossible. Cross-border humanitarian assistance is therefore an essential lifeline, and its delivery to the intended beneficiaries must be allowed and facilitated. To that end, it is important that the Council spare no effort to ensure that the Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement in Idlib holds. The United States position on Idlib is clear. Any military escalation by the regime and its allies in Idlib would, as Under-Secretary-General Lowcock said, be catastrophic for the millions of people there and for the stability of Syria's neighbours. We must work together to safeguard the Idlib ceasefire currently protecting 3 million Syrian civilians.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): Let me join others in thanking Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his briefing on the latest developments in the humanitarian situation in Syria. We commend him and his team for their very important work.

We are deeply troubled by the recent violent attacks in several parts of Syria, which pose a serious threat to civilians in the areas concerned. Those attacks are undermining the current efforts to achieve a comprehensive nationwide ceasefire in Syria. My delegation therefore calls on all parties to the conflict to

exercise maximum restraint and refrain from any action that might increase the risk of humanitarian incidents.

Indonesia would like to highlight three points arising from the briefing: first, the urgent need to alleviate the humanitarian suffering; secondly, achieving a political settlement; and, thirdly, avoiding escalation.

First, Indonesia stresses the urgent need to lessen the ongoing suffering of millions of people in Syria who are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance. My delegation believes that humanitarian needs in Syria must be addressed as a matter of priority. That is crucial, as approximately 11.7 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance, and some 5 million of them are children. Moreover, more than 1 million people are living in hard-to-reach areas, and the winter season has particularly worsened the situation, especially for children.

Nonetheless, we were pleased by the humanitarian aid delivery to Rukban in November 2018. We are also encouraged to hear from the Under-Secretary-General that the second convoy is expected to deploy early next week to deliver assistance to thousands of people in need in Rukban, including women and children. We urge all parties to ensure that the humanitarian effort goes forward unimpeded, in the spirit of resolution 2449 (2018), which in its paragraph 1 stresses the need for "principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2019". It is therefore critical for all parties to ensure rapid, safe and unhindered access to all affected areas and civilians in need. Civilian lives are at stake, and the international community needs to provide humanitarian assistance.

Secondly, concerning a political settlement, it is evident, as many have repeatedly stressed, that the absence of a political solution will worsen the humanitarian situation in Syria. To that end, Indonesia continues to support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, facilitated by the United Nations, with full respect for the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. Indonesia welcomes the series of meetings conducted by Special Envoy Geir Pedersen with the relevant parties in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. We stand ready to support the implementation of his mandate to help end the conflict. My delegation also appreciates the ongoing efforts and support of various countries in advancing the peace process, in coordination with the United Nations.

Thirdly, with regard to avoiding escalation, which is very critical, it is of great importance to ensure that the conflict is not escalated in any way, as we cannot afford any setback and ensuing humanitarian consequences. We therefore reiterate our call on all parties to stop all attacks and violence against civilians, including civilian infrastructure, and to refrain from any steps that might jeopardize the ongoing ceasefire agreement. My delegation stresses that all parties must work to guarantee the success of all humanitarian efforts by observing all principles of international humanitarian law.

There has been too much suffering for far too long. Let us give peace a chance and turn the cycle of escalating violence into one of dialogue and reconciliation. Finally, as clearly stated by the Indonesian Foreign Minister last week in this Chamber,

“all parties [must] ensure the success of that Syrian-led, Syrian-owned United Nations-facilitated process, which would lead to a concrete pathway to peace” (*S/PV.8449, p. 11*).

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mark Lowcock for his briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

We share concerns about the situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone — a territory that is under the de facto control of fighters from the Al-Nusra Front alliance with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham owing to the fact that the moderate armed opposition was forced out. Violations of the ceasefire regime continue to increase. Since the Russian-Turkish memorandum was signed on 17 September 2018, over 1,000 violations of the ceasefire agreement have been reported, leading to the deaths of 65 people and the injury of more than 200 wounded. From the very beginning, we have said that the freezing of a situation in the area where terrorists are present would not last long. Such an approach cannot be viewed as a long-term and sustainable option for protecting the local population.

Unfortunately, developments concerning the situation confirm that our views were right. In that regard, following the talks between the Russian and Turkish leaders in Moscow on 23 January, work was stepped up to develop effective, feasible and agreed measures with regard to the Idlib de-escalation zone. In addition, at the Russian-Turkish summit, discussions were conducted on cooperation in north-east Syria, including by harnessing the potential of the existing

bilateral legal basis of Turkish-Syrian counter-terrorist efforts.

Our position remains unchanged. The best way to stabilize the situation in north-west and north-east Syria is to transfer those territories to the control of the legitimate authority of the Syrian Arab Republic. This will not only benefit Syria but will also ease the concerns of neighbouring countries in terms of protecting their national security. Stabilization is a necessary precondition for making serious progress on the humanitarian front. It will allow the Syrians themselves to return to a normal life and will help to prevent a situation from arising whereby ordinary people start to feel kinship with terrorists. Joint efforts must therefore be made to improve the difficult social and economic situation in the country, to rebuild what has been destroyed by terrorists and to guarantee the inalienable right of refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes.

We deem it unethical — to say the least — to take a selective approach to providing assistance to the Syrian population. The politicization of humanitarian assistance is unacceptable. One cannot just blame the Syrian Government while choosing to ignore, for example, what happened in Raqqqa or what is currently happening in Rukban.

Russia, despite the numerous concerns about how humanitarian assistance is being handled in Syria, always welcomes initiatives that will help the population, as was the case with the extension of the cross-border assistance mechanism and the organization of humanitarian convoys in Rukban, as well as with the second Rukban humanitarian convoy.

Despite the fact that the humanitarian situation in Syria remains difficult, we cannot deny that there have been some positive trends, as confirmed by recent statistics from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. In areas that have been stabilized and liberated from terrorists, normal life is returning. Syrian refugees understand this and are deciding to voluntarily return home, in the context of an increasingly sustainable process. With the assistance of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, tens of crossing points have become functional, including one aerial one, at Duvali, and a maritime one at Baniyas, through which many thousands of people have returned to Syria.

Russia will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people on a non-politicized basis. Since the beginning of the settlement process, the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic has carried out 2,052 humanitarian actions, providing 3,238.5 tons of humanitarian goods. Assistance is being stepped up to rebuild infrastructure and to create conditions conducive to the return of refugees. As of 27 January, 31,117 homes, 726 schools and 134 medical facilities had been built, and 986 kilometres of roads had been repaired.

We trust that those who are truly concerned about the fate of ordinary Syrians will soon be able to set aside their biased agendas and policies of unilateral sanctions and commit to rebuilding what has been destroyed and to restoring normality for the population.

In addition to the humanitarian and de-escalation efforts undertaken, and jointly with our Turkish and Iranian partners and in coordination with the United Nations, we are continuing our painstaking work on the political track and efforts to help launch the constitutional committee in Geneva.

The visit by the Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen, to Moscow on 21 January and his negotiations with Foreign Minister Lavrov and Defence Minister Shoygu confirmed the commitment to pursuing the political process in Syria, with the assistance of the United Nations.

We are convinced that the next meeting of the Astana guarantors, in mid-February, will give further impetus to the process of the settlement of the Syrian question. We urge all those who really want to see peace return to Syria to involve themselves constructively in our efforts. The only path is that of honest cooperation, and any attempt to impose opinions on the Special Envoy or dissuade Arab countries from normalizing relations with Damascus would be counterproductive indeed.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I should like to begin by thanking Mr. Mark Lowcock for his briefing, which, as always, was very useful, and to reiterate to him our admiration for his work as well as that of his team in responding to the humanitarian emergency in Syria. I wish also to commend Germany and Belgium, which, along with Kuwait, will be assuming the key function of co-penholders on Syria. I also thank Sweden and Kuwait for their outstanding work, particularly with regard to resolution 2449

(2018), adopted last December, which renewed cross-border assistance.

It would be irresponsible if we were to downplay the situation in Syria as the country enters its ninth year of conflict, with the threat of further escalation still very real. That is why we must remain fully mobilized around three key priorities: maintaining the ceasefire in Idlib and the protection of civilians; guaranteeing humanitarian access; and ensuring a lasting political solution in Syria.

Concerning the first priority, maintaining the ceasefire in Idlib in the long run, the Russian-Turkish agreement on Idlib made it possible to prevent a further offensive, which would have had disastrous humanitarian, migratory and security-related consequences throughout the region and would have further diminished prospects for a political solution. We supported the ceasefire that it made possible, which is vital to stability in the region. The situation in Idlib remains extremely tense, with terrorist groups ramping up their efforts to control that zone. We cannot rule out a worst-case scenario and therefore must do everything possible to maintain the ceasefire over the long term, in keeping with the commitments made at the four-party summit held in Istanbul. This must be an absolute priority for all stakeholders, as it is the only way to protect the 3 million civilians who live in Idlib, including medical and humanitarian personnel. Everyone knows that since the beginning of the conflict, hundreds of humanitarian workers have been killed or wounded. We therefore need to hammer home the fact that all parties need to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law.

The second priority is ensuring humanitarian access to the entire Syrian territory. The Syrian regime is relentlessly pursuing its strategy of aid politicization by constantly creating obstacles to the delivery of aid. Indeed, the most minor of activities or displacements on the part of humanitarian organizations are subject to authorizations, which are handed out in dribs and drabs.

I would recall here also that the regime has not hesitated to criminalize humanitarian organizations for political reasons. It is particularly difficult to understand that the regime can for more than two months have been able to delay the convoy headed for Rukban camp, where more than 40,000 people are living under inhuman conditions. It is imperative that a new convoy be deployed immediately. Once again

we call on all actors with influence on the regime to guarantee full, safe, unhindered and sustained humanitarian access throughout Syrian territory, in keeping with the relevant Security Council resolutions and international humanitarian law. This imperative of access for humanitarian assistance should be respected at all stages, from independent needs assessments to the implementation and follow-up of humanitarian projects, in order to ensure that aid reaches the most vulnerable segments of the population.

In the areas that are not under the regime's control, it is vital that the entire international community continue its efforts to help those who are in situations of increasing uncertainty. Here I am thinking especially of the north-eastern and north-western parts of the country. In the north-east, our mobilization to respond to the needs of the people must remain full-fledged, as this is a humanitarian imperative and will also help to prevent any resurgence of Da'esh in the region. In the north-west, all actors must maintain the greatest vigilance, given that Security Council-listed terrorist groups — and here I am thinking in particular of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham — have consolidated their civilian and military control.

Finally, and lastly, I would reiterate that there can be no sustainable humanitarian solution in the absence of a credible political process. Syria is today at a crossroads. While risks remain tremendous in Idlib and elsewhere, we remain convinced that today, perhaps for the first time in eight years, there is a very small window of opportunity to find a way to resolve the Syrian conflict. But that window of opportunity might soon close. It is more important and urgent than ever that everyone assume their responsibilities to establish a credible political process, under the supervision of the United Nations and in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). That is the task of the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Mr. Geir Pedersen, to whom we reiterate our full support.

I would like to reiterate the distinction between humanitarian aid and reconstruction. Humanitarian aid is an immediate need, subject to the principles of strict neutrality, impartiality and independence. It is to be distinguished from reconstruction, which will be possible only once an irreversible, inclusive and credible political transition has begun. Moreover, let us not forget that it is not the absence of reconstruction that prevents the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees; it is the absence of guarantees for their

safety, in particular against arbitrary arrests, forced conscription, forced expropriations and the loss of identity documents. The continuation of those practices by the Syrian regime in the areas over which it recently regained control are completely unacceptable and should be denounced as such. It is therefore not surprising that very few refugees have chosen to return to Syria, as demonstrated by the statistics from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Against that backdrop, where the realm of the possible is especially broad, I especially want to call on all the members of the Security Council to rally together to break the cycle of the Syrian tragedy and create positive momentum with the view to reaching an inclusive political settlement in Syria. Only credible progress in the political process will make it possible to achieve a lasting improvement in the humanitarian situation and, in the long-term, make possible the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees. As the Council knows, France stands fully committed to that end.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We appreciate the convening of this meeting and the comprehensive briefing delivered by Mr. Mark Lowcock on the drastic humanitarian situation in Syria, which has been exacerbated by severe weather conditions.

Peru follows with deep concern the development of events in Syria and their impact on the civilian population. The change in the balance of forces seen in recent months has not been reflected to date in a sustained cessation of hostilities, while much-needed humanitarian assistance is still being provided in a restricted manner. There are 11.7 million Syrians that need it. We note with alarm that the control gained by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in recent weeks over areas in north-west Syria could lead to further escalations of violence and suffering for civilians, given the group's obvious disregard for international law and international humanitarian law.

We believe that, given that sensitive scenario, it is crucial to prevent Idlib from becoming the scene of a new humanitarian tragedy and a major factor of instability. In that regard, Peru reaffirms its strong condemnation of terrorism and the importance of bringing to justice the perpetrators of such acts, while also emphasizing that the fight against that scourge cannot be used as a means to justify endangering the lives of more than 3 million people, most of whom are women and children.

We also want to focus attention on the desperate situation that 42,000 displaced people are facing in Rukban, where food, clean water and medical supplies are in short supply. Eight children lost their lives in Rukban in the past month alone. Given those grave circumstances, we urge the Syrian authorities to expeditiously grant the respective authorizations to the United Nations so that it can provide humanitarian assistance in Rukban in a sustained manner. We also underscore the main role of the State actors present in the area to support those efforts.

In addition, we would like to highlight the professionalism and sense of duty of United Nations humanitarian personnel and humanitarian agencies such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent, among others, deployed in Syria. We believe that the international community, and in particular the countries with the greatest resources and those committed to peace and stability, should support those efforts. In the immediate term that means guaranteeing stable and predictable funding for the 2019 humanitarian response plan for Syria.

Lastly, in view of the uncertain scenario looming over the Syrian people, we must recall the urgency of making progress towards a political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). All Syrian parties, especially the Government, must engage constructively to that end, together with the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Mr. Geir Pedersen, to whom we reiterate our full support.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing. China attaches great importance to the humanitarian situation in Syria. We commend the United Nations and all other actors for their efforts to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Today, out of the nearly 20 million people living in Syria, up to 12 million still require humanitarian assistance. The north-west and north-east of the country remain fragile. The conditions in the refugee camps in Rukban are worrisome. The humanitarian situation, particularly grave now that it is winter, faces a risk of further deterioration. As large numbers of displaced persons have returned home to Syria, repairing and rebuilding housing, the water supply, the electricity system and other infrastructure, as well as removing

land mines and other explosive remnants of war, have become a pressing priority.

At the same time, as the overall situation in Syria, particularly the security situation, continues to stabilize, a more favourable environment exists for improving the humanitarian situation on the ground. United Nations agencies and other actors will require security guarantees to continue assessing the humanitarian situation on the ground, deliver humanitarian supplies and carry out other activities.

The Syrian parties should proceed by taking into account the future of the country and the well-being of their people, continue to abide by Council resolutions, implement the previously reached agreements, safeguard the increasingly improving security situation and create conditions for further alleviating the humanitarian situation. The international community should further increase funding and material assistance to the Syrian people. In the light of changes in the severity of humanitarian needs, humanitarian aid operations should be dynamically adapted and improved.

It is imperative to observe the United Nations guiding principles on humanitarian relief and the relevant provisions of international law, as well as to ensure that the people in need of humanitarian relief across all areas in Syria have timely access to it. Operations in that respect should be placed under the oversight of the United Nations throughout the process, with greater transparency and due attention accorded to stronger coordination with the Syrian Government. Support for Syrian refugees and their host countries should be scaled up to facilitate the return of refugees and the reconstruction of infrastructure.

It has been China's consistent position that political negotiations are the only way to resolve the Syrian issue. The fundamental easing of the humanitarian situation on the ground will require further progress in the establishment of a serious political process. The international community should take advantage of the current window of opportunity, firmly support the role of the United Nations as the primary mediator, lend its support for the work of the newly appointed Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, respect Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, push the Syrian parties to uphold the Syrian-owned and Syrian-led principle, abide by resolution 2254 (2015) and seek a solution through negotiations — one that enjoys the consensus of all parties. Council members

should engage in thorough consultations and create conditions conducive to a political settlement of the Syrian issue.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation welcomes this informative meeting on the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and congratulates Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, on his excellent briefing.

Côte d'Ivoire is particularly concerned about the resurgence of fighting in north-west Syria, where peace seemed to be returning gradually following the signing by the Russian Federation and Turkey, on 17 September, of the agreement establishing the demilitarized zone. Following allegations of the use of chemical weapons by armed groups in Aleppo and the total control of Idlib province by the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, the situation is a serious obstacle to the ongoing peace process. It also poses a real threat to the living conditions of millions of civilians living in the area, which is already facing a humanitarian crisis, with more than 2 million people deprived of food, water and health care.

In addition to Idlib province, other areas are also in great need of humanitarian assistance. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, at least eight children were killed in Rukban, a camp for displaced people in southern Syria, while seven others died as their families fled a jihadist stronghold in eastern Syria. My country condemns the continued attacks and threats against civilians, as well as the restrictions imposed on their freedom of movement throughout Syria.

Côte d'Ivoire reiterates the need to ensure safe, prompt, unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access in order to provide the necessary assistance to populations in distress in Syria. In that regard, we welcome the Security Council's one-year renewal, on 13 December, of the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism for the Syrian Arab Republic.

My delegation also commends the efforts of the European Union that led to the adoption of a €1.6 billion humanitarian aid budget in 2019, part of which will be used to mitigate the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic and to assist Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. In that connection, Côte d'Ivoire reminds all parties to the conflict of their obligations to respect human rights and international humanitarian law, including with regard to the protection of civilians.

Côte d'Ivoire believes that humanitarian aid to Syria, which is of crucial importance for populations in distress, would be more effectively delivered if a lasting political solution were found to the crisis in the country. We therefore call on all parties to the conflict to cease hostilities and resolutely commit to implementing the provisions of the agreement establishing the demilitarized zone in Idlib province.

Convinced that the Syrian conflict cannot be resolved militarily, my country urges the belligerents to choose the path of negotiation under the auspices of the United Nations and rely on the Astana and Sochi processes.

In conclusion, my delegation also calls on the parties to the conflict to agree on the effective establishment of the constitutional committee responsible for drafting a new constitution.

Mr. Matjila (South Africa): Let me join others in thanking the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for the valuable and detailed briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria and, through him, thanking all United Nations personnel for their great job to help the Syrian people who are most in need. We also thank Syria's neighbouring countries for their assistance, as well as the co-penholders on this issue for their work. I think it sets a very good example that the 10 elected members agreed to share the pen on this issue. I hope that the five permanent members will take away the lesson that they can work with the elected 10 on penholding on other issues, like peacekeeping and sanctions.

The conflict in Syria has been raging unabated for more than eight years, during which more than 500,000 Syrians have died — approximately 3 per cent of the population in just eight years. In addition, 6.2 million people — 34 per cent of the population — have been internally displaced, and 11.7 million Syrians — 61 per cent — are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. If we add the destruction of physical and school infrastructure — schools, hospitals and factories — and the millions disabled as a result of the war and the millions of refugees in foreign lands, we can ask ourselves if this was worth it. Was this worth it? If we look at the destruction in just one region — in Iraq, Yemen and Libya — we can ask ourselves whether the Security Council can find a better way of resolving those conflicts. After all, they all must end through

political negotiations, with people sitting around a table. So, why destroy such a huge region on the scale of destruction that we saw during the Second World War in Europe and Asia? We hope to never again see any region suffer this amount of destruction. We hope that this is the last lesson for the Security Council. We do not need the destruction of other regions. I hope that it does not happen in Africa, or anywhere else. I think that the Middle East is a good lesson that we need to find better ways of resolving conflicts.

As this is my delegation's first intervention on this matter, I wish to commend the United Nations and its agencies for all they have done to bring relief to the people of Syria, particularly with regard to the coordination of cross-border deliveries of essential goods, such as food and medical aid. My delegation would like to reiterate the Secretary-General's statement, in his December report (S/2018/1104), that without cross-border deliveries, the United Nations would be unable to reach people in need who are inaccessible through other means. In that regard, we call on Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), under the leadership of Mr. Lowcock, to continue its good work in coordinating the humanitarian assistance programme in Syria, and in particular in helping women, the frail and children.

We also request that OCHA continue to work with the Government of Syria on multiple levels in order to facilitate the early provision of authorization and facilitation letters with all the necessary guarantees for the convoys to reach areas where humanitarian assistance is needed most, without any obstruction, as outlined in resolution 2449 (2018), adopted by the Council in December. In that context, we would like to thank Russia and Turkey for their cooperation, and the coalition partners for offering the protection that Mr. Lowcock mentioned early in his briefing today. We also welcome the financial contributions made to the current humanitarian response plan.

In South Africa's view, the humanitarian crisis in Syria is greatly influenced by the political situation in the country and that the dire humanitarian situation cannot be improved without progress being made on the political front. In that context, let me reiterate our support for the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) and the road map for the political future of Syria. We would like to welcome the appointment of Mr. Geir Pedersen as the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General. We are pleased to note that he has already begun his work in earnest by engaging with all relevant

role-players. We look forward to hearing from him in February on the political process.

South Africa would like to urge all parties, together with the Security Council, to work towards the speedy establishment and convening of an inclusive and balanced constitutional committee. That would represent progress in the political dialogue and be a step in the right direction for a sustainable, negotiated political settlement to the situation in Syria. We underscore our view that the only sustainable solution to the situation in Syria is a negotiated political solution through an inclusive Syrian-led dialogue aimed at achieving a transition reflecting the will of the Syrian people and with a guarantee of protection for all Syrians.

Lastly, South Africa rejects in all respects any call for regime change and external military interference or any action contrary to the Charter of the United Nations. South Africa continues to maintain that democracy is an unassailable right of the Syrian people and therefore remains convinced that, in a complex and diverse society such as Syria's, there can be no military solution to the conflict. Political negotiations are the only way.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank Under Secretary-General Lowcock for his comprehensive briefing. We commend his efforts and fully support him.

Conflict in Syria has brought enormous suffering to the civilian population. Today, we also have to underline the very difficult winter conditions, in which millions of people are in need of basic assistance. We are deeply troubled by the recent negative impact of armed conflict on civilians in many parts of Syria, especially in the north-west and north-east of the country. Any military operations, including those aimed at combatting terrorists, should be fully in line with international humanitarian and human rights law so as to prevent harm to thousands of civilians. The protection of civilians is not a choice; it is a legal obligation of all sides to the conflict. Those who deny such protection should be held accountable.

In Idlib governorate and surrounding areas, where the fate of some 3 million people continues to depend on the restraint exercised by the parties, recent shelling and fighting in areas in and around the demilitarized zone continue to result in civilian deaths and injuries, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and the displacement of the civilian population. We

are also concerned by the risk of military escalation and, in consequence, another great humanitarian catastrophe. Civilians across Idlib and surrounding areas have continued to face a range of protection threats and massive humanitarian needs have persisted. In this particular context, we consider the agreement between Russia and Turkey on the Idlib de-escalation zone to be a crucial move towards avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe. At the same time we have to stress — unfortunately, yet again — that all parties to the conflict should ensure the full implementation of the agreement.

We reiterate our call on all parties to the conflict to implement the ceasefire so as to ensure unhindered and safe humanitarian access for all humanitarian actors to the whole territory of Syria. Despite the changes in territorial control within Syria, the authorization of humanitarian deliveries continues to be vital, particularly in northern Syria. First, access to priority areas — such as the Rukban area, as well as areas that have recently changed control — ought to be granted, including for cross-border deliveries of humanitarian assistance. The first convoy to Rukban last November was a positive step in the right direction. We should underline nevertheless that its meaning was rather symbolic when we take all the needs into consideration. Therefore, we look forward to the speedy approval of a facilitation letter by the Syrian authorities in order to bring in the needed second convoy.

While underlining the obligation for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure by all the parties to the conflict, we insist on practical measures to alleviate civilian suffering.

Let me conclude by underlining that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. A political agreement remains the only way towards peace. This requires a genuine political transition, in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). In that context, let me express full support for the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Geir Pedersen. Tangible progress in overcoming the stalemate in the political process is of the utmost importance.

Mr. Allen (United Kingdom): Let me begin, if I may, by welcoming Belgium and Germany to the role, with Kuwait, of humanitarian co-penholders and by thanking Kuwait and Sweden for their outstanding efforts, especially the renewal in December of

resolution 2449 (2015), on cross-border aid to Syria, for another year. Let me also set out the United Kingdom's full support for Special Envoy of the Secretary-General Pedersen and our ongoing belief that only a political solution, based on resolution 2254 (2015), can bring sustainable peace.

Today, I am going to focus my comments on humanitarian issues. Let me take Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock's four points as a guide.

First, in north-west Syria, the United Kingdom is concerned about the growing presence of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and the implications of any increase in violence for the ongoing humanitarian response. We remain highly concerned for the 3 million vulnerable people in the area — over 2 million of whom are entirely reliant on cross-border aid. Fifty per cent of the population of that area have been displaced from their homes, sometimes multiple times, stretching scarce resources beyond their limits and putting further strain on host communities. We must not lose sight of the risks. Under-Secretary-General Lowcock has spoken of a catastrophic humanitarian impact if a military intervention takes place. It is vital that the ceasefire negotiated by Russia and Turkey be maintained.

The situation of the estimated 42,000 people in Rukban remains of serious concern. Eight children have died there in the past month. Sustained humanitarian access is crucial. It is welcome to hear that verbal approvals have been given and security guarantees made. This must now be followed through on the ground and in reality. The second convoy is vital, but it will not alone solve the problem. Our focus must be on ensuring quality access for the United Nations and its humanitarian partners. That means access for the United Nations to independently assess needs, deliver assistance and monitor the impact of that assistance. We urge the Syrian authorities and those with influence over them to ensure that this happens. In 2018, the United Nations asked the Syrian authorities to undertake 1,382 missions. Over half were never approved. We should all be able to agree that this is unacceptable.

Let me say that I agree with the Russian Ambassador's comment that the politicization of humanitarian assistance is unacceptable. In that regard, the United Kingdom is deeply concerned about conditions in former opposition-held areas that the regime now controls. Claims that life there has returned to normal are false. People there risk arbitrary

detention, conscription and discrimination based on their perceived attitude towards the Al-Assad regime. That is clearly not an environment for a safe, dignified and voluntary refugee return — the conditions set out by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Up to one-third of people living in areas that have changed control in the past year are in so-called hard-to-reach areas. They are hard to reach only because the Syrian authorities do not allow the United Nations sustained humanitarian presence in those areas and, thus, humanitarian needs are particularly severe. Again, this is unacceptable. The Syrian regime should not politicize humanitarian assistance.

For our part, the United Kingdom will continue to fund humanitarian assistance according to need, and not by any other criteria. Those funds from the United Kingdom have been distributed by the United Nations and its humanitarian partners all over Syria, as set out in the various documents and reports of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and others. The Syrian crisis has been the object of the United Kingdom's biggest-ever humanitarian response. We have mobilized \$3.5 billion in support since 2012, including a new commitment of over \$450 million at the most recent pledging conference in Brussels.

Let me close by saying I agree entirely with the French Ambassador's comments about reconstruction.

Mr. Esono Mbengono (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation would like to express its gratitude for the convening of this meeting and to Mr. Mark Lowcock and his entire team for the work they are doing. We assure him once again of the ongoing support of the Government of Equatorial Guinea for the activities of humanitarian organizations in Syria, including United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations.

While it is true that the active conflict in Syria has somewhat abated, ongoing clashes in the north and south-east of the country continue to cause many casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, as well as large-scale displacements. Indiscriminate artillery attacks against civilians and civilian targets, regardless of who is responsible for them, undoubtedly lead to an increase in humanitarian needs and reaffirm the need for civil protection. Moreover, humanitarian access to the areas affected by the fighting is still very restricted, and the Government of Equatorial

Guinea remains very concerned about the civilians who continue to be trapped in areas controlled by the Islamic State. As Mr. Lowcock once stressed, the fate of millions of Syrians depends on the restraint exercised by the parties. To that end, further efforts are needed to protect the civilian population.

There are also ongoing concerns about protection for people who have been moved to displaced persons camps. The Rukban camp, as has been stressed at this meeting, houses approximately 42,000 internally displaced persons, who are de facto hostages of the terrorist factions operating in the area and are now facing very low temperatures and a lack of attention. As Under-Secretary-General Lowcock underscored, because of the cold and these difficult living conditions, in just one month eight children died, most of them under the age of four months. More children could suffer the same fate in the coming weeks if they do not receive medical assistance, protection and shelter.

Faced with these dire conditions, Equatorial Guinea is pleased to see the process under way to deploy a second humanitarian convoy to Rukban, as recommended by United Nations teams in the most recent report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/1104). We also urge all the parties to the conflict to urgently guarantee the deployment to Rukban of the humanitarian convoy, including mobile hospitals, in accordance with resolution 2449 (2018).

The announced gradual withdrawal of United States troops from Syria should not be a green light for further clashes. Indeed, a Turkish offensive against the Kurdish militia of the People's Protection Units could further exacerbate the war situation. It should be remembered that the priority in both northern and south-eastern Syria is to neutralize all terrorist factions of the Islamic State.

The very high sums disbursed so far for the reconstruction of the country — approximately \$109 million — and the alarming figures of the conflict, which include more than 300,000 dead since the beginning of the war, more than 6 million displaced persons in the country, more than 5 million displaced persons around the world, and more than 6 million people suffering from acute food insecurity, among other statistics, demonstrate the horror of the war and the need to put an end to this incessant struggle.

In conclusion, as the eighth year of this conflict draws to a close, as has been emphasized, the only way

out of the situation in Syria is to find a peaceful and diplomatic solution. This unbearable conflict must end for the sake of the Syrian people and for the future of the region.

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

I thank Mr. Mark Lowcock for his report and for the work that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has been doing to meet the needs of the more than 11 million people affected by the conflict in Syria. As this is the first time I have taken the floor on this subject, I should like to recognize and commend Mr. Lowcock, his team and so many others on the ground.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains alarming. There is a continuing crisis of displaced persons and major challenges remain in terms of access those affected. The number of people in acute need in Syria continues to reach alarming levels, and women and children continue to be disproportionately affected. I believe that this situation has been made very clear to us by Mr. Lowcock's briefing and the reports that reach us from the various humanitarian actors on the ground under truly difficult and complex circumstances, both for the affected people and for themselves.

We have listened carefully to the constant warnings about the challenges faced by humanitarian actors in providing a humanitarian response that is sustained, based on need and in strict adherence to humanitarian principles, which on many occasions relate to very high levels of insecurity. I also highlight the efforts undertaken to assist the millions of displaced persons and the thousands who continue to seek better living conditions for their families. We also share the concerns already expressed at this meeting with regard to the protection of civilians, in particular in regions where there have recently been hostilities and especially with regard to the need to maintain sustained humanitarian assistance in hard-to-reach areas and for humanitarian access in general.

Against this background, I shall focus my comments on the three points I have just mentioned.

First, we note with attention and great concern the fact that the protection challenges that arise from the displacement of civilians as a result of the hostilities in several regions of the country, where an estimated

25,000 people have had to flee under terrible conditions, which have been exacerbated by the impact of a harsh winter and the rains in the region of recent weeks. According to reports, these conditions have claimed the lives of seven children. For that reason, we call in the most urgent terms on the parties to the conflict to take the measures necessary to save and protect the lives of the civilian population, especially women and children, in accordance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. The parties to the conflict must also allow the free movement of those people, after having exhausted the due investigation processes required for their relocation. Moreover, we believe that the dignity of those people, as well as their right to decide where to go after being forced to leave their homes and abandon their belongings, must be respected. Furthermore, it seems to us that by this year, humanitarian action throughout most of the country should support communities that are gradually hoping to rebuild their lives and work towards creating an enabling environment for their development and access to basic services for vulnerable populations.

Secondly, with regard to the Rukban camp, we view positively the arrangements under way for the delivery of much-needed aid to the thousands of people there. The deplorable situation seen last November has been exacerbated by the onset of winter and the lack of health facilities and personnel to care for the sick, in particular children. Assistance must be delivered urgently. We therefore urge the relevant authorities to pay the utmost attention to that issue in order to alleviate the suffering of those people in terms of health, food security, medicines, drinking water and essential winter items. Access to that very remote area must be sustained and based on needs assessments so that such assistance can reach those areas where it is needed.

Thirdly, in a new context, where 54 per cent of those with acute needs are in areas controlled by the Syrian Government, we believe that it is vital to work hard to increase national capacities to meet those needs. We believe that it is important to integrate the affected communities into that process, making them agents of their own recovery and providing them with the necessary conditions to build a new future. I cannot fail to mention here the key role that Syrian women will play in that recovery process. As an important step, we understand that it is necessary to be able to carry out needs assessments. In that way, we will pave the

way for comprehensive rehabilitation and building the resilience of those communities.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the resolution of the crisis situation faced by the Syrian people can be found only once the conditions are in place for a political settlement in the country, based on the principles of inclusiveness and constructive dialogue, leading to solutions for and by the Syrians with the participation of all sectors of Syrian society.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

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

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to welcome Mr. Lowcock and thank him for his briefing to the Security Council.

Since the start of the terrorist war imposed on my country, Syria, the Syrian Government has spared no effort in meeting all the humanitarian needs of those Syrians affected by that unprecedented terrorist war. My country has always sought to cooperate with the United Nations and with its humanitarian agencies in line with the guiding principles set out in General Assembly resolution 46/182, including respect for State sovereignty. The Syrian Government has therefore taken a number of measures to allow the United Nations to operate in Syria effectively and safely during the years of the crisis and to gradually expand its humanitarian work. I underline the words “effectively” and “safely” because over the past eight years of the so-called Syrian crisis, no United Nations humanitarian worker has been under threat in Syria. There was a price to that because many officers and soldiers of our armed forces had to sacrifice their lives in order to save United Nations humanitarian workers.

I once again emphasize that the Syrian Government stands ready to cooperate with the United Nations and Member States that are working in good faith to improve the humanitarian situation, support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Syria and provide the necessary environment to ensure the return of Syrian refugees and displaced persons in safety and dignity. We must not forget that sustainable development must be achieved in Syria in parallel with the provision of humanitarian assistance. Those two tracks should not be separated. It can clearly be seen

those who have good intentions towards my country and those who harbour ill intentions towards it.

The Security Council has adopted eight resolutions on the humanitarian situation in Syria. It has held hundreds of meetings and considered nearly 60 reports on this topic. However, all those resolutions, meetings and reports will not alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people until they address the root causes of their suffering. In that regard, I would like to make the following points, which may help members of the Council to understand the root causes of the suffering of the Syrians that they alluded to in their statements.

First, we firmly believe that we would have been able to make greater progress together if some partners within the United Nations had committed themselves from the beginning to the principles of humanitarian action, including impartiality, non-politicization and full cooperation and coordination with the Syrian Government as the main party responsible for providing for the needs of Syrians. Even members of the Council that are the co-penholders on the Syrian humanitarian issue did not coordinate or consult with the Syrian Government. In that regard, we express our satisfaction over the positive meetings and continued honest dialogue with Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, as well as other representatives of the Secretariat, whether in Damascus or in New York. We hope that those meetings will help us to make further progress this year at the humanitarian and development levels without any political pressure or diktats from donors. We believe that humanitarian action is noble, not a tool for political subjugation.

Secondly, over the past years, we have called on the authors of the reports not to include information provided by so-called open sources or by Arab or foreign media hostile to my country. We warned many times against some Member States relying on false information and misleading reports in dealing with the situation in Syria. The past years have proved us right. We have provided considerable evidence to the Council in our letters and statements. Those lies include the fabricated stories of a child called Omran in Aleppo or Hassan Diab in Douma. In December 2016, the Egyptian Interior Ministry arrested five adults and two children who were filming fabricated bloody scenes in the city of Port Said in Egypt in order to disseminate that video footage and to allege that it took place in the Syrian city of Aleppo. There are also lies fabricated by the so-called White Helmets under the guidance of

the intelligence services of certain Western States with regard to allegations of the use of chemical weapons, which give some permanent members of the Council the pretext they need to launch one act of aggression after another against my country without international legitimacy. It seems those countries follow two tracks: a legitimate one within the Council and an illegitimate one outside it.

I would like to give the Council another piece of evidence. Germany's *Der Spiegel* magazine announced that one of its reporters, Klaus Relotius, an international award-winning journalist, had fabricated news articles when reporting on the crisis in Syria. That means that the *Der Spiegel* — the mirror — did not reflect the situation faithfully.

Thirdly, the following measures, inter alia, must be taken to end the suffering of Syrians.

There must be full commitment to respecting Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, as set out in the Council's resolutions. There must also be full commitment to supporting the efforts of the Syrian Government, both at the humanitarian and development levels, while avoiding any practices that might violate those lofty principles, such as cross-border operations by agencies with hostile agendas based in neighbouring countries and participating in violating my country's sovereignty.

There must be genuine cooperation with the Syrian Government to eliminate the remnants of armed terrorist groups, while also ending all support to terrorism being provided by well-known Governments. We underscore that, in order to eradicate the Al-Nusra Front terrorist group, which is on the Council's list of terrorist organizations and is currently operating in Idlib, the efforts of the international community must be consolidated in line with Council resolutions on counter-terrorism.

There must be an end to the illegal presence of American, British, French and Turkish forces on Syrian soil. Those forces support terrorism and hinder humanitarian action, as we saw in the case of the Rukban camp, which is in an area controlled by American forces. There is also a need to stop the illegal international coalition from committing any further crimes against Syria, which have led to the death or injury of thousands of Syrian civilians, most of them women and children, as well as to the destruction of the country's infrastructure.

There must be commitment to United Nations resolutions that reaffirm the illegitimacy of all unilateral coercive measures, which have largely and adversely impacted the lives of Syrians. Such measures, adopted by the United States and some of its allies, impede Syrians' access to their basic daily needs and amount to economic terrorism against certain targeted countries, including my own. They seek to destabilize countries through imposing economic measures, after having failed to do so through political intervention, military aggression and supporting terrorism.

My country stresses its commitment to a solution based on a Syrian-lead and Syrian-owned political process. Special Envoy Geir Pedersen visited Syria a few days ago. We emphasised to him that we stand ready to cooperate with him to facilitate a Syrian-led dialogue in order to reach a political solution to the crisis in Syria in line with the interests of all Syrians, so as to eliminate terrorism, end any illegitimate foreign presence in Syria and safeguard Syria's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): 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 12.05 p.m.