



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

Provisional

8520th meeting

Tuesday, 30 April 2019, 3 p.m.

New York

President: Mr. Heusgen (Germany)

Members:

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| Belgium | Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve |
| China | Mr. Ma Zhaoxu |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Mr. Moriko |
| Dominican Republic | Mr. Trullols Yabra |
| Equatorial Guinea | Mrs. Mele Colifa |
| France | Mr. Delattre |
| Indonesia | Mr. Syihab |
| Kuwait | Mr. Almunayekh |
| Peru | Mr. Meza-Cuadra |
| Poland | Ms. Wronecka |
| Russian Federation | Mr. Nebenzia |
| South Africa | Ms. Goolab |
| United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . . | Ms. Pierce |
| United States of America | Mr. Cohen |

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, to participate in this meeting.

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

I now give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: I thank you, Sir, for this opportunity to brief the Security Council for the second time. I have spent the past eight weeks shuttling between the Syrian Government and the opposition and consulting with key players. I am doing everything I can to move forward on rebuilding trust and confidence and opening the door to a political process in Geneva between the Syrian Government and the opposition, a process that can begin to build a new future for all Syrians — women and men — and between Syria and the international community. After eight years of conflict, that process will be long and difficult, but I think that it is possible to move forward step by step. To that end, I have been seeking to advance the five priorities I outlined to the Council in February (see S/PV.8475), which are grounded in a comprehensive approach to my mandate pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015).

I remain absolutely committed to engaging the Syrian Government and the Syrian Negotiation Commission in a sustained comprehensive dialogue. Such a dialogue is the very foundation of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), that fully respects Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity. In March and April, I engaged in positive shuttle consultations. Foreign Minister Al-Moualem hosted me twice in Damascus; he demonstrated a positive attitude and we were able to advance certain issues. I also met twice with the Syrian Negotiation Commission's leadership in Riyadh and Geneva; they also demonstrated a positive attitude that enabled us to advance the issues.

In both sets of interactions I stressed the importance of working on the full range of issues addressed in resolution 2254 (2015). I stressed the need

to make a tangible difference in Syrians' lives. Both the Government and the opposition remained open to discussing a broader range of issues. It is my hope that such regular engagement will continue to build trust and confidence and will evolve into a sustained dialogue that leads towards building a safe, calm and neutral environment and brings about peace.

That has also been my message to international stakeholders in recent weeks, but I would like to reiterate — action and tangible progress, not just dialogue, are needed. I need not remind the Council that the situation for Syrians remains dire.

We have seen a very troubling surge in violence in recent weeks in and around the Idlib de-escalation zone, some of which led to civilian casualties and further displacement. I welcome the recommitment of the Astana players to fully implement the Idlib memorandum, including through coordinated patrols, but more must be done. De-escalation must be consolidated.

Idlib is not the only part of Syria that remains heavily militarized or where Syrians continue to suffer. The situation in the north-east is calmer for now but its underlying dynamics remain unresolved. We have also received reports of growing tensions and violence in the south-west. Many threats of renewed escalation, and even threats to international peace and security, remain outstanding in Syria. I would like to remind the Council that resolution 2254 (2015) calls for a nationwide ceasefire.

Terrorist groups listed by the Council remain a major threat. Only last week, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant took credit for attacks on Syrian Government forces in the desert. Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham still controls large swathes of territory. I would like to stress, however, the Secretary-General's reminder that counter-terrorism operations cannot override the responsibility to protect civilians.

Even where violence has abated, the toll of suffering remains staggering. There is a desperate need to meet the humanitarian and protection needs of Syrians, whose suffering is not limited to refugees and displaced persons — millions of Syrians all across the country face a critical shortage of commodities, including fuel, that is approaching crisis levels. The 73,000 people in Al-Hol, 92 per cent of whom are women and children, are facing a terrible situation. Humanitarian needs and protection concerns remain acute.

I remain deeply concerned about the situation in Rukban. We continue to pursue principled and durable solutions, in coordination with all stakeholders. Most civilians who have recently left have been able to relocate from temporary shelters. Most residents of Rukban remain in the settlement and are in dire need of assistance, including food and essential medicines. The deployment of a third humanitarian convoy to Rukban remains urgent in order to avoid the further suffering of more people in the camp. As I have remarked to all stakeholders, the more steps we see taken to address the issues of which I speak, in coordination with the United Nations, the more momentum is created to build confidence within Syria and internationally.

I have discussed in depth with the Syrian Government and the opposition the specific need for concrete action on the release of detainees/abductees and the clarification of the fate of missing persons. Meaningful progress on that key humanitarian issue would send a positive signal to Syrians and would be an important confidence-building measure. I appreciated the openness to consider more meaningful actions in my dialogue.

In parallel with my bilateral engagements, my Office participated in two additional meetings of the Working Group on the subject, held in Moscow and in Nur-Sultan. The Working Group was made up of representatives from Iran, Russia and Turkey, with the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also represented. I am ready to host the next meeting of the Working Group in Geneva.

The Working Group was able to secure the release of a small group of detainees/abductees in northern Syria on 22 April. For the first time, members of my team were present on the ground as observers, which enabled us to make an assessment of how the operation was to be conducted and share recommendations with the Working Group. My team's observations included some positive elements. However, there is considerable room for improvement in terms of the procedures to be followed during future release operations to ensure consistency with international humanitarian law.

We need to scale up and speed up the release of detainees/abductees, particularly vulnerable ones, such as women, children, the elderly and the sick. The Syrian Government and the opposition should ensure the detainees/abductees' protection prior to, and following, their release. They should move away from the one-for-

one exchange framework and address the issue on a larger scale.

The fate of the tens of thousands of persons who have gone missing since the beginning of the conflict must be clarified. In close coordination with the ICRC, my Office is developing procedures for compiling, consolidating, safeguarding and exchanging information, as well as conducting searches for missing persons. The scale of the issue is of unprecedented proportions that oblige us to continue our collective attempts to make progress — months, if not years, of meticulous and committed work will be required to complete the process.

For any political solution to be durable, it must meet the aspirations of the Syrian people. I have made it a priority to engage a wide spectrum of Syrians in recent weeks. In calling for concrete action, I recollect the voices of those many Syrians, from refugees in neighbouring countries to people living in shelters in Homs. The appalling scale of Syrian's suffering and the uncertain future of millions weighs heavily on me, as it should, of course, on us all. I believe that most people will judge a political process on the basis of its ability to deliver improvements on the ground and to take into consideration the needs and priorities of all Syrian men and women.

I strongly believe in the importance of engaging a wide range of Syrian interlocutors. I intend to further my outreach and engagement with Syrian refugees, civil society, women's organizations and other Syrian actors, including through the Civil Society Support Room. The Women's Advisory Board continues to remind us of the specific security, economic and human rights concerns of Syrian women, who bring diverse experiences and views to the table and share the right to have a voice at the table.

Clearly, much hope rests on at last convening a constitutional committee. It could be the first sign of real progress. It could, if approached in the right spirit, help unlock a broader political process that leads to the holding of United Nations-supervised elections in a safe, calm and neutral environment. I will continue to work towards a final agreement on the composition and terms of reference of a credible, balanced, inclusive and viable constitutional committee. Many earlier differences have indeed been narrowed down.

While nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, we have a clear understanding on balanced co-chairing

arrangements, a formula for decision-making, a shared acceptance of the United Nations facilitation role and a political commitment to ensure the safety and security of all those who will be involved. Both the Syrian Government and the opposition have been constructive on those points, and I am grateful to them. I believe that the final terms of the mandate can be agreed on with a modicum of goodwill.

It is now agreed that six specific names on the earlier so-called civil society list need to be removed. Work continues to identify a set of names that, when viewed in totality, will have the support of all concerned in order to enhance the quality and credibility of the list. Efforts are being made to achieve the objective of at least 30 per cent female participants.

Those are all the elements of the process on which I believe it is now possible to advance. I have expended a lot of effort to build buy-in. If everyone is prepared to compromise just a little, the process can move forward.

For my fifth priority I spoke of the need to improve international dialogue on Syria. Yes, a credible and sustainable political settlement must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned. Yet the process and its outcome must enjoy international support and legitimacy. The conflict is highly internationalized, and external intervention is one of its hard realities. Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity must be respected and restored — but saying so will not make it so.

In that context, let me emphasize once again that the United Nations position regarding the occupied Syrian Golan will continue to be determined by the Security Council and General Assembly resolutions on that issue. I will discharge my mandate while fully respecting Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

External intervention poses real threats to international peace and security. Five international armies operate across Syria's land and airspace, in tension or even in conflict, generating risks for dangerous escalation. Those risks must be contained and ultimately removed.

Different formats of international cooperation for resolving the Syrian conflict exist at present. I had useful conversations with the Astana guarantors in Nur-Sultan on 25 and 26 April. I will hold formal

consultations with them in Geneva in May. I will consult with the members of the small group in Geneva on Friday.

I remain convinced that key international players agree on much more than might be apparent. I believe that they all understand the need for international cooperation on Syria. I will continue to use my good offices to help the key players with influence to join in one active conversation to provide common support to a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process under United Nations facilitation.

As we approach agreement on the constitutional committee, I would like to use the opportunity to facilitate a revitalized and broad-based international process of cooperation. To realize my mandate, a common forum supporting the Geneva process must be found. I believe that we are making progress. I hope that the next time I brief the Council I will be able to report tangible achievements on the long road towards a political settlement of the conflict in Syria.

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

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

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): At the outset, the United States is compelled by the urgency of the humanitarian conditions in the Rukban camp to reiterate in the strongest terms our call on the Al-Assad regime and the Russian Federation to permit deliveries of United Nations assistance from Damascus and lift its restrictions on commercial routes to the encampment immediately. The last United Nations-Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy delivery reached the camp in February. People are starving. We count on Special Envoy Pedersen's assistance to secure the approvals from Damascus and Moscow as soon as possible. A third convoy to Rukban could represent a gesture by Damascus and its allies of goodwill and seriousness towards United Nations efforts to relaunch the political process.

Unfortunately, and despite the Special Envoy's intense diplomacy, the political process remains stalled by the Russian Federation and its supporters, as evidenced by the latest round of Astana process meetings held in Nur-Sultan on 25 and 26 April. Once again, the so-called Astana process has failed to produce tangible steps towards securing serious commitments to advance the political process, the release of civilian

detainees, the approval of a humanitarian convoy to deliver food and medicine to thousands of starving people in Rukban or a nationwide ceasefire.

The Russian Federation and the Al-Assad regime have consistently sought to stall United Nations efforts to launch a credible political process. The Al-Assad regime seems determined to end the conflict by waging war on the Syrian people, rather than by implementing principled political reform. The Security Council and the international community are united, and must remain united, in our recognition of the United Nations-led political process in Geneva as the sole legitimate forum for achieving a lasting, inclusive and credible political solution to the conflict. That is why the United States and our Syria small group partners — Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom — will convene in Geneva on 3 May for consultations with the Special Envoy on the way forward towards implementing resolution 2254 (2015).

The United States also continues to support Special Envoy Pedersen's focus on constitutional reform. We commend the Special Envoy and the Syrian opposition for their efforts to ensure that any committee formed to draft a new constitution will be balanced and credible. The United States position on the constitutional committee is clear. First, the committee, if formed, would represent only a symbolic first step towards achieving the political solution envisioned in resolution 2254 (2015), and could potentially serve as a confidence-building measure upon which the parties could secure progress on other benchmarks.

No matter how close the parties may be to agreement on a constitutional committee, the United States expects United Nations diplomatic efforts to continue along the other tracks established for detainees and missing persons, counter-terrorism, elections and the creation of a safe, calm and neutral environment. The United States insists that the Syrian opposition and the United Nations reach agreement on the membership and procedural elements of the constitutional committee before it is formally established, which is the only way to ensure its credibility and legitimacy.

The political transition outlined in resolution 2254 (2015) cannot succeed as long as violence remains an ever-present threat in northern Syria. The United States reiterates its calls on Russia and the Al-Assad regime to halt their recent military escalation in Idlib province and uphold the September 2018 Russian-Turkish ceasefire.

Despite Russia's claim to be targeting terrorists, since February those operations have killed more than 200 civilians and targeted first responders as they attempted to save lives on the ground. More than 120,000 people have fled their homes, moving closer to the Turkish border in order to seek safety. That must end.

In north-eastern Syria the United States is working hard to guarantee the security of our NATO ally Turkey, while also securing the enduring defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It is vital that security conditions remain stable in order to consolidate our hard-won gains and ensure that ISIL is not able to regain momentum or control of territory.

Finally, progress on the release of civilian detainees and missing persons is a vital component in achieving a political solution under resolution 2254 (2015). However, the token prisoner swaps between the Al-Assad regime and Syrian opposition groups brokered by the so-called Astana guarantors do not represent credible or significantly meaningful steps towards building the trust and confidence necessary to achieve a political solution. Hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children remain imprisoned without cause, and the regime continues to arbitrarily arrest, torture and execute detainees. The United States believes that the United Nations is the only appropriate arbiter for ensuring progress on the release of detainees and missing persons from the Al-Assad regime's prisons.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his briefing. We share many of his views.

Russia is taking active measures to advance the political process and restore trust among the conflicting Syrian parties. Intensive work with Iran and Turkey is under way within the Astana format, in cooperation with the Special Envoy and in coordination with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition. On 25 and 26 April we held the twelfth high-level international meeting on Syria in Nur-Sultan, which resulted in the adoption of a joint statement by the guarantor countries. Incidentally, I want to point out to the United States representative that we are not the "so-called" guarantor countries, we are simply the guarantor countries.

Today we circulated the joint statement as an official Security Council document. The Astana troika reaffirmed its steadfast commitment to the sovereignty,

independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. In that context, it was noted that in accordance with Council resolution 497 (1981), the Golan is still Syrian territory under Israeli occupation. Special attention was paid to the situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone, where tensions persist. Militants from the terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham are intensifying their attacks on Syrian armed forces' positions while simultaneously attempting to reorganize themselves into a so-called moderate opposition and unite the various armed groups operating in Idlib into a single one under their command. The fight against organizations that the Security Council recognizes as terrorist must continue. The guarantors are determined to fully implement the agreements on stabilizing Idlib.

In the most recent exchange of views in Nur-Sultan on north-eastern Syria, it was acknowledged that stability and security in that region can be ensured only on a basis of respect for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity and by rejecting separatist plans that undermine the national security of Syria and its neighbours.

Substantive consultations were held both in the trilateral format and with the participation of Special Envoy Pedersen on accelerating the launch of the constitutional committee, which will enable the start of a viable process for settling the Syrian crisis. Like the Special Envoy, we are optimistic that the preparatory work on this front can be completed very soon.

We held the eighth meeting of the Working Group on the release of detainees/abductees, the handover of bodies and the identification of missing persons. We welcomed the success of the efforts in November 2018 and February and April 2019 to release people, 82 altogether, who had been forcibly detained, representing a unique contribution to building trust and confidence among the Syrian parties.

We also remain optimistic about the future development of the situation in Syria. We can all see that as the situation is normalized, major terrorist hotbeds are eliminated and the country returns to peaceful life, issues related to post-conflict reconstruction and the provision of humanitarian assistance come to the fore. Humanitarian assistance must be extended to all Syrians throughout the country without preconditions. We are pleased that the United States delegation has

finally taken an interest in the fate of the residents of Rukban camp, as we have long been calling on them to do. We urge it to include them in the overall resettlement efforts, which regrettably the United States has prevented for a long time.

We once again urge everyone to recognize the harm that has been done by the unilateral sanctions that a number of Western countries have imposed and that only exacerbate the humanitarian situation in Syria. Ordinary citizens are suffering. To a great extent it is because of those restrictions that we have witnessed a large-scale fuel and energy crisis in Syria in the past few days.

Syria is one of the key States in the Middle East and an integral part of the Arab world. It should not be artificially ripped from the regional context in the interests of short-sighted, politicized, opportunistic aims. We therefore support Damascus's speedy restoration to the Arab family, which will help rebuild inter-Arab harmony and improve the general situation in the Middle East. I believe that our partners in the Astana format will agree with me that we are open to honest interaction without hidden agendas. We should point out that at the meeting in Nur-Sultan the troika agreed to invite Syria's neighbours Iraq and Lebanon to join the Astana process as observers. We call on all those who are genuinely interested in restoring peace in Syria to engage constructively in our efforts. Together we can help end the war and focus on the political process and national reconciliation.

Mr. Almunayekh (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his informative briefing and for his tireless efforts since he assumed his post. The State of Kuwait reiterates its full support for his efforts to revive the Syrian political process in order to arrive at an equitable political Syrian-led and -owned settlement, under the auspices of the United Nations and in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). That resolution laid out practical steps for a political transition period, including several phases such as the drafting of a constitution and the holding of free and fair elections that enable the participation of all elements of Syrian society, including those living abroad, in line with the new constitution and under the auspices of the United Nations.

With the Syrian crisis entering its ninth year as of last month, we support the Secretary-General's four recommendations. The first urges all parties to preserve

the Russian-Turkish ceasefire in Idlib. The second calls for all military operations to respect international humanitarian law and human rights. The third stresses sustained access to humanitarian assistance. The fourth seeks to promote international support with a view to reaching a political solution that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and supporting the Special Envoy in implementing resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

In February the Special Envoy indicated in his briefing (see S/PV.8475) the five objectives he wished to focus on, and we believe that achieving them would advance the Syrian political process. All the parties should work to support the Special Envoy in fully realizing his mandate.

We have taken note of the twelfth meeting of the Astana guarantors in Nur-Sultan, as well as the small group's meeting with the Special Envoy in Geneva. We note in that regard the importance of making progress on the constitutional committee. We stress that it should be balanced and credible, and should include representatives of all sectors of the Syrian society. We also emphasize the importance of working to make greater progress in securing the release of Syrian detainees and determining the fate of missing persons, especially given the humanitarian aspect of our work. We reiterate that the return of Syrian refugees must be safe, voluntary and dignified. Measures such as arbitrary detention and expropriation would obstruct the efforts to enable their return, and in that regard we reject any demographic changes in Syria.

On the issue of accountability, we stress the importance of ensuring accountability for those who violate international humanitarian law and human rights law in Syria. We reiterate our support to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. We stress that it will not be possible to achieve a sustained and comprehensive peace in Syria without justice and without ensuring that there is no impunity for the perpetrators of such crimes.

In conclusion, we reaffirm that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. The only solution is a political one that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. That would be done through a political settlement in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015)

and the Geneva communiqué of 2012 (S/2012/522, annex), with a view to preserving unity, independence and sovereignty of Syria.

Mr. Trullols Yabra (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We wish to express our appreciation for the briefing provided today by Mr. Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, following his extensive consultations in the framework of finding an inclusive and sustainable political solution to the conflict in Syria. We reiterate our support for his practical and direct approach, as well as the five pillars that underpin his diplomatic mediation efforts and the establishment of credibility in the process.

Despite the apparent inertia in which we find ourselves, we believe that both the international community and the Syrian population are watching attentively, and perhaps with some apprehension, to see whether the ongoing political process will produce results. Coupling that with the tense calm being experienced by the population of northern Syria, who live in fear of yet another humanitarian catastrophe, we believe it is imperative to redouble efforts to avoid a military escalation, which would affect the lives of millions of civilians, endanger the credibility of the political process and bring into question the ability of the United Nations to prevent further suffering and come up with a credible and sustainable political solution.

The political process and the situation in Idlib are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, we believe that the success of one depends upon the capacity of the international community — and of the Security Council in particular — to avoid an even greater tragedy. In that regard, we deplore the recent attacks in the demilitarized zone in Idlib, which have claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians, including children, and we urgently call on the parties involved to maintain their commitment to the ceasefire and the full implementation of the agreement between the Russian Federation and Turkey. We hope that all the necessary steps will be taken to avoid violations of the agreement and of international humanitarian law.

We take note of the recently concluded round of talks held last week in Nur-Sultan, where the Astana guarantors expressed their commitment to the advancement of a Syrian-owned and United Nations-facilitated political process under the guidelines of resolution 2254 (2015). We recognize the progress, albeit insufficient, towards the establishment of the

constitutional committee and its terms of reference. We hope that the forthcoming consultations, facilitated by the United Nations and to be held in Geneva on a date not too far in the future, will produce satisfactory results and demonstrate concrete progress. That would provide renewed vigour and impetus to the political process towards the definitive resolution of the Syrian conflict. We urge the parties to exercise the greatest possible degree of flexibility and show a constructive spirit in those consultations. We invite them not to lose sight of the need to alleviate the suffering of a people stricken by years of conflict and to steer their course towards a new future. For the Dominican Republic, the success of the consultations lies in agreeing on an inclusive constitutional committee that leads to the meaningful and significant participation of women as agents of peace, progress and well-being for all.

In conclusion, we reiterate our commitment to resolution 2254 (2015), and we urge the full respect and implementation thereof. In that context, we advocate the consolidation of the role of the United Nations in the facilitation, mediation and rapprochement between the Syrian Government and the opposition, with a view to building the necessary political will for the establishment of the constitutional committee and its terms of reference. We are hopeful that the committee will be able to convene at a not-too-distant date as a concrete step towards a renewed, credible and inclusive political process.

I express our desire to see more meaningful progress with regard to the release of detainees, a factor that is vital to the building of trust and credibility in the political process from a holistic point of view.

We assure Ambassador Pedersen of our determined support for his work and his conclusions from the efforts thus far, the lessons learned and the shared commitment to end the conflict. We urge the parties to move decisively towards bringing about concrete results that unequivocally put a new face on the Syrian conflict — one that speaks of a transition towards a future of hope and justice.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. I am going to be brief, but I do not want my brevity to be construed as a lack of interest. Simply, I think that many of the previous speakers have spoken very eloquently. Our colleague from the United States, for example, spoke

about the political process. Therefore, if I may, I will start with some points about the security situation.

What the Special Envoy said about the troubling resurgence of violence worries us. There have been reports this morning that the Syrian authorities have deployed multiple barrel bombs in attacks in northern Hama, which I think is the first time such weapons have been used in over seven months. Such use of indiscriminate weaponry is unacceptable, but what is particularly worrisome is that it seems to be a signal that the Syrian regime is not serious about the protection of the Syrian people. It would therefore be good to hear from the Special Envoy whether he thinks that calls into question the commitment to the political settlement.

We have also seen some recent correspondence from the Syrians to the Security Council alleging activity by armed terrorist groups with the support of “foreign intelligence agencies”. This is about chemical-weapon attacks, and there are more allegations that the White Helmets are involved. I have been very categorical in this Chamber — and I regret the need to be so again — but the White Helmets are a humanitarian organization. They are purely a humanitarian organization. They are very brave people. They are Syrians. And to date they have saved 115,000 lives. We therefore look to the Syrian authorities to abide by their international obligations in relation to chemical weapons and to refrain from using them.

I would like to say something briefly about Idlib. Like others, we are very concerned by the frequent reports of the regime shelling areas in the demilitarized zone, and we understand that over 120,000 people have been displaced since February as a result. We look to Russia and Iran, which — along with Turkey — are the Astana guarantors, to ensure that the ceasefire agreed at Sochi is fully respected and that the current actions cease immediately. Let me be clear: not only do we want to see the ceasefire respected, we want to see those Member States with influence use that influence to ensure that the ceasefire is respected.

Turning to the political process, I think the Special Envoy has made very good efforts, and I thank him for those efforts. We support him as he continues onward, and I think he was right to say that he should work on the full range of issues under resolution 2254 (2015). I wish to recall that resolution 2254 (2015) was adopted in December 2015, which was 40 months ago. Forty months ago, the resolution set a deadline of six months.

That is, 34 months ago, a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution was to have been set up. We really cannot allow the Syrian authorities to drag that process out indefinitely. We therefore definitely and strongly support the Special Envoy's drive to get that matter sorted out in the coming months. Paragraph 4 of that resolution calls for the establishment of a credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance. If I could ask, what is the Special Envoy's assessment of the Syrian authorities' progress in responding to the Council's request contained in that resolution?

What has been done on the constitutional committee is a good step forward. Anything that can convene the international players in Geneva is to be welcomed. I can promise the Special Envoy that we will be supportive and pragmatic about that. But, again, we would call on those with influence over the Syrian regime to encourage it to engage seriously and constructively in the political process, including by creating conditions for humanitarian access.

I would like to look ahead to a point when the current Syrian authorities will want to be reintegrated into the international community. Without such reintegration, Syria will never be stable or fully prosperous, which is all the more reason that there needs to be a credible political process. But I would remind the Council that the United Kingdom has been clear, and is still clear, that we will not consider providing reconstruction assistance absent that credible political settlement.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): Since this is, I believe, the last public meeting we have together, allow me also to warmly congratulate you, Mr. President — indeed, you and your entire team — for the outstanding work of the German presidency throughout this month of April, and, if I may also allow myself to mention it, the particularly close — I would even say unprecedented — cooperation that has united our two countries and our two presidencies during the joint presidencies in March and April. I thank you very much, Sir.

I would like to thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Geir Pedersen, for his insightful briefing on the actions he has undertaken to implement the five priorities he presented to the Security Council two months ago (see S/PV.8475). I would like to reiterate to him France's full support for his mission, the extreme complexity of which we all know. Today I

will focus on two points— the situation on the ground and the political process.

To all those who claim that the war in Syria is over, I would like to remind them of the grim reality of the situation in that country. The terrorist threat is still present, whether from Da'esh or Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. The humanitarian situation is catastrophic. The situation on the front lines remains very volatile. In that context, the urgency, in our view, is to secure a real ceasefire across the entirety of the territory of Syria. A ceasefire is essential to enable us to save lives and focus our efforts on the two inseparable priorities that unite us — the fight against terrorism and the active search for a political solution.

However, I would like to highlight in particular the seriousness of the situation in the north-west. The intensification of the regime's strikes in recent days is extremely worrisome. The presence of thousands of terrorist fighters in the area and the risk of a humanitarian disaster are a source of deep concern for all. In that particularly difficult context, France calls on Russia specifically to honour its commitments to maintaining the ceasefire in Idlib and to putting pressure on the regime to stop its strikes.

Similarly, we are all aware of the considerable efforts that remain to be made in the north-east to ensure Da'esh's complete and definitive defeat. In that regard, we welcome the continued presence of the United States. Any military offensive against the area must be avoided at all costs.

Across the country, and especially in the areas under the regime's control, the information we are receiving is particularly worrisome. The Syrian regime is continuing its policy of repression. We condemn the obstacles imposed by the regime to prevent safe, continuous and unhindered humanitarian access, in particular its refusal to allow the delivery of a third convoy to Rukban. France calls on Russia to use its influence to ensure that that convoy can be authorized as soon as possible, which would be an important symbolic gesture before Ramadan.

We would also like to recall that the return of refugees requires the Syrian regime to make firm, concrete and verifiable commitments with regard to the security of persons and the restitution of property and land. The information we are receiving on that subject is appalling. The restrictions on access to populations seeking to return to their homes imposed by the regime

on the United Nations are unjustifiable. They are proof that the regime wants to leave its hands free to pursue its repressive strategy without hindrance and that in reality it is hostile to the return of refugees to their homes. The United Nations must be able to provide objective follow-up on that essential subject. France warns the international community against the exploitation of the refugee issue by the regime and its supporters, which in the face of all the evidence seeks to reverse the burden of proof.

Turning now to the political process, I would like to stress the urgency of moving forward despite the inertia and delaying tactics. On behalf of France, I would like to welcome the Special Envoy's efforts to reach an agreement on a constitutional package through numerous contacts with Syrian and international actors. We will support any agreement on the constitutional committee that is credible and balanced, both in its composition and in the operating regulations it provides for. It is up to the Special Envoy — and him alone — to tell us when he considers that those two conditions are met. Such an agreement seems to us to be within reach.

However, the political solution cannot be reduced to the constitutional committee alone. In that spirit, we also support the Special Envoy's efforts to implement all the elements of resolution 2254 (2015). A credible political process requires three complementary elements in particular — a national ceasefire, which I just discussed; confidence-building measures to create a neutral and secure environment; and the holding of free and transparent elections. It is crucial for the Special Envoy to continue to be proactive on all those elements.

I would like especially to stress the urgency of implementing confidence-building measures, including unilateral measures, such as measures that would result in progress regarding prisoners and missing persons, forced conscription and the reform of property laws. The third release of prisoners under the auspices of the Astana group underscores once again the need to go beyond the strict reciprocity imposed by the regime and move to a new level under the auspices of the United Nations. We welcome the priority given by the Special Envoy to that issue.

It is our collective responsibility to continue to exert pressure on the Syrian regime to encourage it to really engage in a credible political process. That is primarily the responsibility of Damascus' sponsors. For its part, France, together with the European Union, will continue

to impose sanctions on the regime and refuse to finance the reconstruction of the country or normalize relations with Damascus until there is credible and irreversible progress towards a political solution, which alone will put an end to the Syrian tragedy.

With social anthropologist Laëtitia Atlani-Duault, I expressed here in the Chamber the fear that the Syrian tragedy would be the downfall of the United Nations and everything it represents (see S/PV.8434). I continue to think that. After all those years of Security Council failures in Syria, it would be yet another grave moral and political failure to turn the page today and look elsewhere out of fatigue or cowardice. First, it would be a serious error in judgement to think that the Syrian tragedy is behind us. Secondly, for perhaps the first time in eight years, we believe that we have a narrow but real window of opportunity to put an end to the conflict. We cannot allow that window to close. We have therefore a responsibility as members of Security Council to switch off our automatic pilots, build on our points of convergence and finally seize hold of peace in Syria.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): Since this is the last open meeting under your presidency, Mr. President, we would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude and congratulations on the outstanding manner in which you presided over our work during the month of April. We are also grateful for the convening of this meeting and we convey our thanks to Mr. Pedersen for his important briefing. We wish him the best in finding a political solution in Syria.

We would like to begin by welcoming the developments described by the Special Envoy on the possible upcoming establishment of a constitutional committee that the Syrian people and the international community could recognize as legitimate, balanced and consistent with the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). We note the sense of urgency in making tangible progress on that issue, because further delays would have a very negative impact on the process in terms of its credibility and legitimacy, especially because today marks 15 months since the Sochi meeting.

We stress the importance of ensuring that the committee be representative and include all sectors of Syrian society, in particular Syrian women, and that it be provided with transparent and democratic mechanisms for its functioning and decision-making.

We wish to express our full support for the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General in his efforts to move in that direction. To that end, we believe it is essential that the parties continue to work on measures that foster greater understanding, such as on the release of detainees, the identification of missing persons and the return of remains, as Mr. Pedersen noted.

The serious situation faced by the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons poses another serious challenge, in response to which not only are financial resources required but, more important, the political will to assure them a safe and dignified return under internationally accepted parameters.

I conclude by stressing the importance for the Council to remain attentive to developments on the ground in order to ensure the maintenance of the Idlib ceasefire, which was brokered in September 2018 and recently reaffirmed by the Russian Federation and Turkey. The prospects for the success of any effort to achieve sustainable peace in Syria, such as the constitutional committee, to a large extent depend upon preventing Idlib from becoming the scene of further violence and another humanitarian tragedy.

Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his briefing and his commitment.

The situation on the ground in Syria remains worrisome, and we are particularly concerned about the escalation of violence in Idlib. We call on all parties, in particular the Astana guarantors, to strengthen their commitment to the agreement signed in September. A military offensive would lead to a humanitarian crisis with disastrous consequences, not only for the 3 million inhabitants of Idlib but also for the entire region. We call for the ceasefire to be implemented throughout Syria.

After eight years of conflict, millions of people are still in need of humanitarian assistance and millions are still displaced. Syrian citizens must remain at the centre of our concerns. In the current context it is difficult to describe the developments as positive, but it is our duty to keep hope alive and work together as members of the Security Council towards a political solution. We encourage the Special Envoy in the implementation of his five objectives.

We support the Special Envoy in pursuing his specific actions in favour of detainees, abductees and

missing persons. We note the recent exchange of 18 prisoners, but we still have a long way to go. Much progress remains to be made in that area, in accordance with international humanitarian law. Thousands and thousands of Syrians are waiting for a sign of life from their loved ones. We call on all Member States to use their influence on the parties to the conflict to promote the release of arbitrarily detained persons. I would like to ask the Special Envoy what prospects he sees for moving beyond the one-for-one exchange that has existed so far in order to be able to expand the prisoner exchange.

Belgium calls for the convening of a constitutional committee as soon as possible, as a first step towards a more in-depth dialogue and genuine negotiations on the implementation of the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015) under the auspices of the United Nations.

However, the United Nations can confer its seal of legitimacy only if the composition of the committee meets the necessary criteria of credibility, balance and inclusivity. In addition, its procedures and working methods are not just technical details but must also be an integral part of each agreement. The parties should work diligently and constructively towards a solution. A successful agreement must reflect a real commitment by all parties. We support the Special Envoy in his regular exchanges with the parties to the conflict to deepen dialogue and build trust.

In conclusion, Syria and its citizens deserve a peaceful and inclusive future. The path to lasting peace is through reconciliation and justice. Only when the conditions for a safe, dignified, voluntary and well informed return are met will refugees be able to go home. Only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition is firmly under way will Belgium be ready to support the country's reconstruction.

Mr. Syihab (Indonesia): I would like to begin by thanking Special Envoy Pedersen for his very comprehensive briefing. My delegation appreciates his efforts in engaging with all relevant parties and in facilitating a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis.

We note with appreciation the meeting between the Astana guarantors and Special Envoy Pedersen in Nur-Sultan last week. Indonesia has always supported all efforts aimed at advancing the political process, through negotiations and peaceful means, within the framework of the Geneva process and resolution 2254

(2015). Indonesia sincerely hopes that the dialogue among all relevant stakeholders will continue, with a view to contributing to a credible and sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict. My delegation wishes to highlight two pertinent points.

First, on the constitutional committee, Indonesia is of the view that the ongoing dialogues are indeed promising. We share the view that establishing a constitutional committee would serve to open the way for a lasting political solution in Syria. However, all of us in the Chamber are also fully aware that that is not an easy task. Various actors are involved, with different views, interests and understandings. The international community needs to do its part by always ensuring its support towards advancing the political process in Syria and finding ways to create a middle ground among all the parties involved.

Building trust is key. Distrust and suspicion are clearly not going to lead us anywhere. My delegation supports the establishment of an inclusive and credible constitutional committee that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people on the basis of respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In that regard, I would specifically like to commend the Special Envoy's tireless efforts in building the confidence of all parties in order to advance the process. The whole process of political settlement must be implemented by the Syrians and cannot be imposed from outside. There is no way to restore peace in Syria except through a political solution.

Secondly, on the way forward, my delegation believes that the international community needs to invest further in maintaining the ceasefire and in creating a concrete road map to comprehensively resolve the Syrian conflict in a way that is acceptable to all. The situation in Idlib needs our special attention. The Council must continue calling on all parties to the Syrian conflict to abide by the ceasefire agreements and to prevent more civilian casualties. We must prevent a military escalation in Syria, which would disrupt any progress on the political front. Moreover, the issue of safe, voluntary and dignified refugee returns, including the post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of Syria, require serious discussions if we want to bring about stability and genuine peace.

I think that it is fair to say that after many years, there is now a glimmer of hope for realizing a comprehensive political solution to the conflict. Compromises are

required and delays would bring only more suffering and lives lost.

Indonesia stands ready to support the Special Envoy's mandate and to contribute constructively in the process of achieving sustainable peace in Syria.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): At the outset, I thank Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing. I also appreciate his active consultation and extensive mediation activities since assuming office.

The Syrian conflict has entered its ninth year and brought unprecedented suffering to the entire country. The Chinese side deeply sympathizes with the Syrian people for such suffering. The international community should continue to intensify its efforts to promote the political process in Syria, strive to achieve peace as soon as possible, help the Syrian people return to and rebuild their homeland and resume their lives in peace. The Special Envoy has for some time been in close contact with the various parties regarding the formation of a Syrian constitutional committee. A few days ago, the twelfth round of the Astana dialogue was successfully held in Astana, now called Nur-Sultan. Russia, Turkey and Iran issued a joint statement expressing their intention to speed up the establishment of the constitutional committee. China appreciates and supports the active efforts of the United Nations and relevant parties to promote a political settlement of the Syrian issue.

Regarding to next phase, I wish to emphasize the following imperatives. First, we must continue to leverage the role of the United Nations as the main channel of mediation and advance the political settlement process. The United Nations should strengthen its coordination with the Syrian Government and push for the early formation of a representative constitutional committee acceptable to all by balancing the legitimate concerns of both the Syrian Government and the other parties in order to set in motion a sustained and effective political process. The international community should support the mediation work of the Special Envoy, back the Astana process in continuing to play its role and help foster synergies among the many diplomatic efforts. The Council members should remain united and speak with one voice in an effort to create an enabling climate and conditions conducive to a political solution to the Syrian issue.

Secondly, the international community must act determinedly to combat the terrorist forces in Syria

and create safe conditions for the political process. Terrorism threatens Syria's security and stability. Counter-terrorism is therefore an important aspect of settling the Syrian issue. Both the north-western and north-eastern parts of Syria face serious counter-terrorism challenges, with terrorist groups entrenched in Idlib and some terrorist fighters moving freely. In keeping with the new trends and characteristics of the counter-terrorism landscape in some regions, the international community should strengthen coordination and cooperation and unify standards in fighting all terrorist organizations designated by the Security Council, consolidate the achievements of counter-terrorism and continuously improve the security environment in Syria.

Thirdly, the Syrian parties must prioritize the future of the country and the fundamental interests of the people, meet each other half way and continue to resolve differences through dialogue and consultation. The international community should encourage and support the Syrian parties to build mutual trust through prisoner exchanges among other measures and continue to promote national reconciliation. Political negotiations are the only realistic way to resolve the Syrian issue in a lasting way. The Syrian must seek a solution that is acceptable to all parties through an inclusive political process based on the Syrian-owned and Syrian-led principle and the spirit of resolution 2254 (2015).

Ultimately, the future of Syria must be decided by the Syrian people themselves. The sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria must be upheld in moving the political settlement forward. China stands ready to enhance its communication and coordination with the relevant parties, including the United Nations, jointly advance the Syrian political process, vigorously improve the humanitarian situation in Syria and support the Syrian Government in conducting refugee returns and economic and social reconstruction.

Ms. Goolab (South Africa): Allow me to join other speakers in thanking you, Mr. President, for the able and fair manner in which you have presided over the Security Council in the month of April. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his briefing today and for the work he and his team have done towards bringing about an end to the crisis in Syria and finding a long-term, sustainable political solution in the country.

South Africa welcomes the continued engagement between Special Envoy Pedersen and both the Syrian Government and opposition groups in pursuing his and the international community's objective towards establishing credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, setting a process for drafting a new constitution and the conduct of free and fair elections.

Such engagement is essential to ensuring that any political agreement reached between the parties benefits from the positions and views of all and reflects the will of the Syrian people.

In that regard, my delegation would like to reiterate that the only sustainable answer to the situation remains the realization of a political solution through an inclusive Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process.

In order to achieve this, the constitutional committee must be established without delay. We welcome the Special Envoy's efforts to finalize the composition of a credible and balanced committee and its rules of procedure. In that regard, South Africa also calls upon all parties to maintain their commitment to ensuring a 30 per cent representation of women in the Committee, as it is well established that women offer a unique perspective in matters of peace and reconciliation that cannot and should not be ignored.

My delegation has taken note of the recent meeting of the Astana guarantors in Nur-Sultan and their commitment to the United Nations-facilitated political process in line with resolution 2254 (2015), which contains all the provisions necessary for ensuring a viable political solution for Syria. We hope that these discussions will aid in achieving the goals set by the Special Envoy for achieving a political settlement in Syria.

It should be noted that some parties have taken advantage of the situation in Syria to advance their own interests and lay claim to territory occupied illegally. This cannot be allowed, and the United Nations, and its Security Council in particular, must honour its responsibilities and condemn such actions.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the international community must support a political solution to the situation in Syria as a matter of urgency as well as support the United Nations and Special Envoy Pedersen as the main channel for negotiations and mediation.

Mrs. Mele Colifa (Equatorial Guinea): We thank the Special Envoy, Mr. Pedersen, for his updated briefing on the work he has done since his most recent report to the Council (see S/PV.8475).

We are aware that much remains to be done in Syria. As we seek a way to put an end to the terrorist groups operating in Idlib based on the Russian-Turkish agreements and defeat the main terrorist forces, it is necessary to focus on fully stabilizing the situation on the ground and on promoting a political solution pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015). We must therefore be fully determined to step up efforts to form the constitutional committee so as to give genuine impetus to the political process aimed at putting an end to the eight years of war in Syria.

We welcome the meetings held recently by the Special Envoy in Damascus and Geneva and in the framework of the Astana process to discuss the formation and launch of the work of the constitutional committee. We would recall that the bilateral and trilateral rounds of talks held on 25 and 26 April in Nur-Sultan were focused primarily on ensuring that progress is made in the efforts of the parties to reactivate the political process, the need for constitutional reform and the holding of free and fair elections, and on the reaffirmation of Geneva as the venue for the achievement of a permanent political solution to the conflict in Syria, as agreed in January 2018 in Sochi.

In the current context, we must be objective and recognize that there is no longer room for eventualities or expectations, and that the constitutional committee should be formed as soon as possible.

The political process in Syria would begin only after the formation of the constitutional committee, and, as we have stated recently, we are fully aware of the fact that it remains difficult to set specific dates for the formation of the committee and the launching of its work. For that reason, we once again urge the parties, especially the Syrian authorities, to take the necessary measures, give priority to their cooperation with the Special Envoy and actively expedite the culmination of the process.

In that same vein, it would be advisable to take measures to further strengthen the Astana process, with the incorporation of additional States as observers. We share the view that the participation of additional States in this negotiating process will make the solutions

reached in the rounds of consultations even more robust at the international level.

I would conclude my statement by encouraging the Special Envoy once again to continue investigating all possible opportunities to overcome the obstacles standing in the way of the formation of the committee and by reiterating the firm commitment of my Government to a political solution to the conflict in the framework of resolution 2254 (2015).

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): Let me thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his comprehensive and insightful briefing. I would also like to assure him of our full support.

As we heard last week from the representative of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (see S/PV.8515), the humanitarian situation in Syria is particularly worrying. Let me stress that our actions aimed at protecting the population and providing a collective response to the humanitarian challenges should be of the utmost priority. We must prevent any military hostilities from bringing about disastrous humanitarian consequences. This is a *sine qua non* for reaching a sustainable peace agreement.

The demand for accountability for war crimes cannot override the simultaneous responsibility to protect civilians. In this context, all parties to the conflict should refrain from and condemn arbitrary detention, the taking of hostages and forced disappearances.

We must be resolute in implementing effective measures to prevent and combat terrorism. In that regard, we would like to encourage the parties involved to make efforts to ensure that military escalation is avoided at all costs, especially in north-east Syria, where it could easily lead to the re-emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

I would like to underline that the only way towards durable peace is an intra-Syrian framework political agreement, in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

We hope that the coordinated efforts of Russia and Turkey, based on their agreement on the Idlib de-escalation zone, will help to stabilize the tense situation in that area. We ask them to follow through on their commitment and protect civilians as a matter of priority.

We look forward to the establishment of the constitutional committee. Let me underline that the success of this undertaking requires the full and constructive engagement of all parties to the conflict. It can succeed only when the Syrian authorities participate in the negotiations in good faith and without preconditions.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the European Union common position on the reconstruction of Syria. We fully support the safe return of Syrian refugees.

Mr. Moriko (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation thanks Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his detailed briefing on the political process in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Côte d'Ivoire, which is deeply committed to dialogue as the best way of resolving conflict, is willing to support any initiative aimed at bringing the parties to the conflict together so as to restore peace and stability and create conditions conducive to shared prosperity.

My country therefore welcomes the holding on 25 and 26 April in Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan, of peace talks on the political process aimed at emerging from the crisis. That twelfth round of negotiations, the Astana process and all the other peace initiatives will be conducive to the establishment of a framework for consultations in which all the parties to the Syrian crisis can agree on issues related to relaunching the political process, combating terrorism, returning refugees and beginning post-crisis national reconstruction.

Côte d'Ivoire welcomed the joint communiqué issued after the talks, which stressed the importance of accelerating the operationalization of the constitutional committee and affirmed the participants' willingness to support the Special Envoy's efforts. My delegation also believes that the initiatives to advance the political process for ending the crisis must be supported by confidence-building measures among the parties to the conflict. We therefore welcome the steps taken to release detainees in November 2018 and subsequently in February and April. In that regard, we urge the Working Group and the Syrian parties to continue their cooperation with a view to consolidating the developing atmosphere of trust.

While the Astana process and the United Nations-led peace initiatives have enabled us to hope for lasting peace in Syria, my delegation nevertheless remains

concerned about the negative impact of the resumption of hostilities in the de-escalation zones in northern Syria, particularly in Hama, Idlib, Aleppo and Latakia governorates. We are particularly concerned about the serious repercussions of the resumption of fighting in the midst of an already worrisome humanitarian situation in the region, where the escalation of hostilities since February has reportedly left more than 200 people dead and another 120,000 displaced, according to the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. We want to take this opportunity to reiterate our call to the actors in the Syrian crisis to cease hostilities immediately and work to create the conditions necessary for providing humanitarian assistance to the populations affected by the conflict.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire affirms its continued support for the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and encourages him to continue his mediation efforts among the Syrian parties. We also urge the warring parties to prioritize a path of dialogue and comply with resolution 2254 (2015), which outlines a road map for the political process in Syria.

Lastly, Mr. President, I would like to join others in commending you for the quality of Germany's presidency of the Council during the month of April.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as representative of Germany.

I too would like to express our full support for Special Envoy Geir Pedersen. We welcome his five priorities and hope that when he briefs the Council next time, he will be able to report on tangible results. We are particularly concerned about the escalation of violence, which runs counter to what he said, especially in the north-west. With regard to the United Kingdom representative's comments about the recent dropping of barrel bombs, perhaps he can shed some light on the reports he alluded to. We also support Mr. Pedersen's efforts with regard to the detainees. It represents some progress, but we need to see significantly higher numbers. We also need to see a greater level of mutual releases.

With regard to the refugees and all the refugee camps, I need not repeat what we said in our last meeting (see S/PV.8515), when we concentrated on humanitarian issues. Where Rukban and other camps are concerned,

the return of refugees can take place only when it is safe, well-informed, voluntary and dignified. Mr. Pedersen is working to achieve a credible political settlement and political support, and we need that and a balanced and inclusive constitutional committee. I want to underline and repeat what he said with regard to ensuring that it includes 30 per cent women at a minimum. As other colleagues have made clear, Germany will not consider providing reconstruction support until a credible, inclusive and genuine political process is under way.

I want to highlight one aspect that has been somewhat ignored, which concerns prisoners and crimes committed. The regime continues to arrest people in the south-west, for instance, and Al-Assad's prisons remain full, with 10,000 still incarcerated under the flimsiest of accusations. We do not know the numbers because so far the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross have not had access to those prisons. I would like to urge the representative of the Russian Federation to impress on the Al-Assad regime that it should provide access to all who are in detention facilities, in particular those controlled by the intelligence agencies. I have said before that the crimes and the unspeakable atrocities that have been committed by all sides during the Syrian conflict remain an issue. There are horrific accounts of murders, torture and crimes of sexual violence against children that must be investigated and their perpetrators brought to justice.

While making sure that that happens is of course a goal in itself, accountability is also a precondition for peaceful development and sustainable peace. It is needed for the justice for the victims, but it is also needed for national reconciliation, without which there can be no peace in Syria. With regard to accountability and impunity, I want to highlight the importance of making use of the Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, which we support. We are very grateful for the Secretary-General's commitment to including sufficient means in his budget proposal for the Mechanism to be able to do its job, which as I said is key to achieving sustainable peace in Syria.

I also want to join others in asking Mr. Pedersen about the constitutional committee, which I think is key. I do not know if at this stage he can say anything

more with regard to the six or seven names still under dispute. I would like to ask him if he could comment further on the mandated timeline rules of procedure of the constitutional committee. With regard to the point I have highlighted, perhaps he could also say something from his perspective on the importance of accountability for reconciliation and peaceful development in Syria.

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

I give the floor to Mr. Pedersen to respond to the comments and questions that have been raised during our discussion.

Mr. Pedersen: I would like to thank all the members of the Security Council for their firm support for my mission and for the work that I and my team are trying to do in delivering a new Syria. As I said, that must obviously be a Syrian-led and -owned process, but we also need strong international support in order to move forward. I am encouraged by what I have heard here today. I am, of course, looking for what unites us and not what highlights Council members' differences.

I have been asked several questions. Let me start by emphasizing that I think that we all share the concern about the increased violence, which I mentioned in my briefing, not just in the north-west but elsewhere too. In the past few weeks, as was rightly stated, we have seen attacks on Government positions and on civilians by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, and we have also seen the Government respond by striking various targets in Idlib governorate. As I said in my briefing, that has led to increased civilian casualties and further displacement. However, I think it is also important to remind ourselves that the situation has been relatively more stable in the wake of the ceasefire agreed on through Turkey and Russia. As I said in my briefing, we encourage Turkey and Russia to continue to uphold the ceasefire and to increase the patrolling in the area, which we believe is key. I also emphasized in my briefing to the Council that all counter-terrorism activities must respect international humanitarian law, and I want to repeat that once more.

With regard to the constitutional committee, I want to emphasize that I do believe we are making progress. As I said, it is a package. It is a discussion of names and the rules of procedure. As I tried to make clear in my briefing, we have made what I believe to be tangible progress on the rules of procedure, and it

should be possible to come to some kind of agreement in that regard. When it comes to the names there is still some work to be done, but what we have achieved is also good, I believe. As I said, we have agreed that six names have to be replaced. We are currently discussing how we can establish a format that could be agreeable to all parties in the Government and the opposition so that we can move forward on it. I have emphasized from day one that I think the constitutional committee could be a door-opener for the political process. In itself it will not mean much if there is no political will to use that door-opener, and of course it should be the beginning of a process. We need the Council's support to continue that work. Listening to everyone today, I am confident that I will have it.

From day one, one of my top priorities has been the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons. As I highlighted to the Council, both in my briefing in March (S/PV.8475) and today, that has been one of my key messages to both the Government and the opposition. I have emphasized to the Government that in my view unilateral action is needed when it comes to the issue of detainees and missing persons. As I said, I have received good responses, but what I need is tangible results. I will therefore continue that work, together with my team and hopefully also with the support of relevant international actors. I hope to be able to report more on that when I return to the Council next month.

I want to emphasize that after eight years of war, it is difficult for the warring parties to take the first step. That is why I believe it is extremely important that the Syrian parties, the Government and the Syrian National Council continue to hear from the Security Council that it is united behind my mandate and supports a political process, and that hopefully we can soon start to work seriously in Geneva.

Once more, I want to thank the members of the Council warmly and offer my congratulations to Germany, as I understand that this may be the last meeting under the German presidency.

The President: As April comes to an end, let me put on my German hat. I think Geir Pedersen is right that this is the last meeting during the Germany presidency, as I have not heard any requests for a night meeting. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues around the table for all their support,

patience, constructive criticism and encouragement, and I would also like to ask them to convey that message to their wonderful teams.

I would like to thank the Secretariat, the Director and her team and the representatives of the Secretariat, including the conference service officers, interpreters — who I am afraid will not have good memories of the German presidency — translators, verbatim reporters and security staff.

I want to say that it is neither ordinary nor routine for Germany to be on the Security Council. Germany believes in a multilateral, rules-based international order, with the United Nations at its helm, and the Security Council is one of its most important organs, if not the most important. In our view it is therefore vital to strengthen the United Nations, with the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its key documents. Our objective this month was not to promote any specific German interests but rather to strengthen the United Nations and the Security Council, and we hope that we have been able to contribute to that in some innovative ways, such as the German-French presidencies, greater interaction, greater transparency with the curtains, more civil-society briefers and more women among the briefers. The issue of women was actually the highlight of our presidency, with women in peacekeeping and discussions of sexual violence in conflict and the participation of women.

I would like to return my French colleague's compliments. I am very appreciative of our joint presidencies, which were not only part of our innovation efforts but represent something that is very deeply rooted in France and Germany. We are not teenagers anymore. After decades of war that did not end until the second half of the previous century, for us working together is in our DNA. We work together bilaterally and within the European Union, and we were very pleased to bring that spirit into the Security Council. Maybe it will inspire some others as well, and I thank all the members of the Council. Last but not least, I would like to thank my own team. They have worked extremely hard and provided lots of ideas, and their engagement and constructive criticism have also been very important. I thank them all.

I believe I speak on behalf of all the members of the Council in wishing the delegation of Indonesia

good luck in the month of May. We hope it will keep the curtains open, and we are also ready to pass on the hourglass, but we will quite understand if it does not carry on with that. I have to share a secret here. Halfway through our presidency, we reset the hourglass to measure only four minutes rather than five and a

half. I did not tell Council members, in the hope that we could speed up our discussions. But we have refilled it back to five and a half minutes, and Indonesia can take it over.

The meeting rose at 4.50 p.m.