



# Security Council

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Provisional

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Tuesday, 28 February 2023, 10 a.m.

New York

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<i>President:</i>	Mrs. Frazier/Mr. De Bono Sant Cassia . . . . .	(Malta)
<i>Members:</i>	Albania . . . . .	Mr. Spasse
	Brazil . . . . .	Mr. Costa Filho
	China . . . . .	Mr. Dai Bing
	Ecuador . . . . .	Mr. Pérez Loose
	France . . . . .	Mrs. Jaraud-Darnault
	Gabon . . . . .	Mr. Biang
	Ghana . . . . .	Mr. Issahaku
	Japan . . . . .	Mr. Ishikane
	Mozambique . . . . .	Mr. Fernandes
	Russian Federation . . . . .	Mr. Polyanskiy
	Switzerland . . . . .	Mrs. Baeriswyl
	United Arab Emirates . . . . .	Mr. Abushahab
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Dame Barbara Woodward
	United States of America . . . . .	Mr. Wood

## Agenda

### The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020), 2533 (2020), 2585 (2021), 2642 (2022) and 2672 (2023) (S/2023/127)

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*The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.*

### **Adoption of the agenda**

*The agenda was adopted.*

### **The situation in the Middle East**

**Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020), 2533 (2020), 2585 (2021), 2642 (2022) and 2672 (2023) (S/2023/127)**

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

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria; Mr. Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator; and Ms. Rasha Muhrez, Response Director, Save the Children.

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

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2023/127, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020), 2533 (2020), 2585 (2021), 2642 (2022) and 2672 (2023).

I now give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

**Mr. Pedersen:** The earthquakes that recently struck Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic have caused unspeakable suffering for millions of people. The Syrians affected — in both countries — were already deep into one of the greatest humanitarian crises of this century, after 12 merciless years of war and conflict. To then be battered by one of the biggest natural disasters of our times is almost beyond belief. The earthquakes struck when their needs were highest, when services were scarcest, when the economy was at its lowest and when their infrastructure was already

heavily damaged. It hit many areas in which refugees and internally displaced person (IDPs) live, and in areas with heavy war damage or in which conflict conditions remain acute.

I extend once again my deepest condolences and sympathies to those in Syria and Türkiye who lost family members and loved ones. I grieve for the Syrians who were participants in the political process in Geneva and who were killed or lost family members and friends. I grieve for all who have suffered pain and loss, who are witness to trauma upon trauma and who are now asking themselves how they will rebuild any kind of future. I also pay tribute to the heroic Syrians, across different parts of Syria, as well as the countless non-governmental organization workers, emergency responders and United Nations staff, who made and are continuing to make tireless efforts under severe conditions in the disaster-stricken areas.

The immediate priority is the emergency humanitarian response to the earthquake to Syrians wherever they are. My humanitarian colleagues have been working day and night to scale up the response. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths has briefed the Council more than once in recent days and will do so again today.

In support of the humanitarian imperative, I have urged all to depoliticize the humanitarian response. This means access: this is not the time to play politics with crossings across borders or frontlines. This means resources: this is the time for everybody to give quickly and generously to Syria and remove all hindrances to relief reaching Syrians in all affected areas. And this means calm: this is not the time for military action or violence.

I have carried this message to all interlocutors: to the Task Force on Humanitarian Affairs in Geneva; to Beirut, where I saw key donors convened by the European Union; to Damascus, where I saw Minister for Foreign Affairs Mekdad; to Amman, where I saw Minister for Foreign Affairs Safadi; and to Istanbul, where I saw the head of the Syrian Negotiations Commission (SNC), Mr. Jamous. I have been in contact with Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs Çavuşoğlu and engaged with senior officials from the Arab region, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United States of America and Europe. And today I have just

returned from Moscow, where I saw Foreign Minister Lavrov yesterday.

Syrians in the north-west, particularly in areas outside Government control, have expressed strong frustrations about the international community's inability to provide them with urgent assistance in the days after the earthquakes — something I have heard from many in civil society and from the Syrian National Council leadership in Istanbul. The tragic reality is that an effective response was hampered partly by challenges that relate directly to the unresolved issues at the heart of the conflict. I have long said that the situation in Syria is unsustainable, the status quo is totally unacceptable and the Syrian people are acutely vulnerable to issues not solely in their hands. It has taken tragic earthquakes to reveal that clearly, and the Syrian people are again the ones who are paying a heavy price.

But the earthquakes have also revealed another reality. We are seeing that it is possible to work for the common good. Notwithstanding the challenges and failures in the early days, the steps taken in response to the earthquakes — all temporary, all humanitarian, but all important — have sent a clear message. Yes, it is possible to make positive moves. It is possible to cooperate over Syria. I see several signals in that regard.

First, we have seen remarkable goodwill shown by many Syrians themselves, in both words and actions, in organizing and sending relief to their fellow citizens across front lines, irrespective of the challenges and hardships they themselves may be facing. I am humbled by their willingness to put politics aside. One Syrian interlocutor rightly told us that Syrian civil society has been on the ground and present in every house and in every family. Let me pause to note here that Syrian women have been at the forefront of those efforts. And on their shoulders lies the additional burden of calling out the particular dangers now facing women, especially those living in public spaces that do not afford them the privacy, dignity and security they need, and those working to overcome perceptions that women's needs are luxuries that can be put aside at a time of humanitarian crisis. At a moment of real vulnerability, I am hearing reports of women being raped, beaten and harassed. Women requiring post-partum care have been denied that care, as well as appropriate places to shelter. Girls and boys are especially vulnerable during such distressing and confusing events and have their own

protection needs when adults are occupied elsewhere and many schools are shut or out of service.

Secondly, I welcome the recent introduction of earthquake-related exemptions in several unilateral sanctions regimes, including by the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union, and their efforts to ensure that their sanctions do not interfere with the response, especially as a result of overcompliance. We have also seen a significant amount of goodwill and diplomatic energy with regard to Syria, in terms of the provision of assistance directly or via the United Nations and other relief agencies and of gestures of condolences. Continued donor generosity with pledges and quick disbursements in response to the flash appeal will be vital.

Thirdly, I welcome the decision of the Syrian Government to open the two crossing points of Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai from Türkiye to north-western Syria. Also notable has been the blanket approval for cross-line operations into north-western Syria until July, as well as other measures to cut red tape for humanitarian access and facilitate humanitarian financial transactions related to the earthquake response at a preferential exchange rate.

Fourthly, let me note for the record that we saw a relative lull in violence after the earthquake, which can facilitate relief operations and proves that calm can be achieved and maintained with political will. That too was something that I stressed during my visit to Damascus. However, I want to add that I am worried that we have seen that calm punctuated with reports of concerning incidents — exchanges of shelling and mortar fire between areas under the control of the Syrian Government, Syrian Democratic Forces, armed opposition or the Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham; a Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham cross-line attack; reported Turkish drone strikes; an air strike in central Damascus attributed to Israel; assassinations in the south-west; and terrible attacks attributed to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in the desert. Seeing reports of civilian casualties from military action is even more shocking at a time of natural disaster. We continue to stress the importance of calm throughout Syria. And we particularly and urgently stress to all parties with influence that in all earthquake-affected areas, all violence should stop immediately to enable relief and respite for the civilian population.

That is a mixed picture, but the four elements, involving action from various sides, are the kind of elements that we will need to build on if we are to move beyond responding to the emergency the earthquake has wrought and confront the challenges of resolving the conflict itself and addressing the deep crisis in Syria.

As we move from emergency response to recovery after the earthquake, the unresolved political challenges will pose bigger obstacles and bigger dilemmas. That will require navigating through one of the most complex political landscapes on the planet — a territory split into several zones of control; a Government under sanctions from key donors; *de facto* authorities elsewhere; more than one listed terrorist group; five foreign armies; interlocking violent conflicts; mass displacement; systemic human rights violations and abuses; institutions that are degraded, corrupted or absent; destroyed infrastructure; a collapsed economy; growing illicit drug trafficking; grinding poverty and skyrocketing needs. And it will require navigating those complexities in a context in which the international community is itself deeply divided.

Let us take inspiration from the Syrian people on the ground who have come together against the odds during this time to deal with their enormous challenges. The situation today is unprecedented. It calls for leadership, bold ideas and a cooperative spirit. A serious political way forward will require a serious conversation among key stakeholders to make progress on some of the unresolved political issues of the conflict that could block much-needed recovery after the disaster. That will require less posturing, less rhetoric and more pragmatism. It will require realism and frankness on the part of the Syrian Government, the Syrian opposition and all key outside actors. It will require firewalling Syria from wider geopolitical disputes among key players. It calls for a coordinated process.

I am coordinating closely with senior United Nations colleagues regarding engagement with the Syrian authorities and external stakeholders. I am also continuing to reach out to those stakeholders because we will need all the key Arab and European players and, of course, the Astana players and the United States, to work in a coherent effort. If all, and I really mean all, can envisage compromise from previous positions, all will gain. That can be done only at the political level.

I would say that an approach seeking reciprocal and verifiable confidence-building measures, the so-called

step-for-step paradigm, is more relevant now than ever before. That dialogue was already deepening, and its tenets of parallelism and verifiability and the issues it was seeking to advance will be critical if we are to make progress.

That is because — let us be honest — the earthquakes have exposed and aggravated many of the core issues related to resolution 2254 (2015), such as issues of governance, sovereignty and territorial integrity, a nationwide ceasefire, building a safe, calm and neutral environment, the file of the detained, disappeared and missing, the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs, many of whom have again been displaced by the earthquakes and have nowhere to go, and post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation, for which the earthquakes have only created new needs.

My message to all is the same: let us respond generously and work together to support the earthquake emergency response. Let all those with influence work to ensure full calm, especially in the areas affected by the earthquake. Let us build on the steps taken so far by all sides with further moves from all sides. In that spirit, let us identify and advance additional confidence-building steps from all parties to confront the challenges of recovery after the disaster and address unresolved political issues. Let us ensure a fully coordinated engagement in the period ahead to chart a political way forward.

I continue to consult widely, including with Arab countries and other key players. I am ready to use my good offices, develop proposals and convene the necessary players in an effort to help to find the way forward, consistent with my mandate under resolution 2254 (2015). We owe that to all Syrians living the compounded nightmare, who are desperate for a glimmer of hope.

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

I now give the floor to Mr. Griffiths

**Mr. Griffiths:** I think that it will come as no surprise to you, Madam President, and to Council members that, understandably, the remarks that I will make will significantly overlap with those of Mr. Pedersen because of the extraordinary events of recent weeks in Syria and, indeed, in Türkiye. It is therefore with an apology that I will focus my remarks in this briefing on the recent earthquakes and the response to them. The earthquakes have had an enormous humanitarian

impact and, as we heard from Geir Pedersen, impacts in other contexts, which is of the highest importance.

It is now three weeks since the earthquakes struck Türkiye and Syria. The devastating scale of the disaster is coming into sharper relief, but it is still not fully clear. At least 50,000 people were killed, including approximately 6,000 in Syria, mostly in the north-west. Many more people were injured. Tens of thousands of people still remain missing. We do not know if they are alive or dead. Hundreds of thousands are homeless.

Furthermore, to add misery upon misery, the worst-affected area was hit again by strong aftershocks yesterday and, of course, a few days ago by another earthquake. Additional death, destruction and damage have been inflicted on a population already traumatized by so many years of war and conflict.

This immense and almost unbelievable tragedy comes at an extremely difficult time for the people of Syria, compounding suffering in a country plagued by 12 years of conflict. Even before this most recent tragedy, some 15.3 million people — 70 per cent of the country's population — needed humanitarian assistance.

Amid the harsh winter season, the earthquake has destroyed entire neighbourhoods, rendering them uninhabitable, as I and many others saw earlier this month. While many Syrians, as always, have opened their homes to others, collective shelters are more crowded than ever. Early assessments indicate that 5 million people in Syria require basic shelter and non-food assistance. In many areas, four or five families are packed into tents, with no special facilities for older people, people with chronic illnesses or those with disabilities. Mr. Pedersen spoke movingly of the particular vulnerabilities and circumstances affecting women and girls.

Hundreds of buildings are still at a high risk of collapsing. The Governor of Aleppo spoke to me about the very high percentage of buildings that he feared would need to be brought down in the city of Aleppo. Thousands may need to be demolished. Many people are, of course, afraid to return to their homes, yet to be certified safe.

The risk of disease is increasing amid pre-existing cholera outbreaks. North-west Syria reports a very high number of cholera outbreaks since the earthquake. The prices of food, household costs and other essential items climb higher.

Most people need humanitarian assistance. Community tensions are mounting. But I would like to draw our full attention, as I have before in the Council, to the particular tragedy of the trauma that comes with such a sudden, vicious, violent and unforgiving disaster affecting people already in such dire circumstances.

The search-and-rescue phase of the earthquake response is ending. We all have witnessed heroic efforts to help victims caught beneath rubble, in north-west Syria for example, with very little assistance from international search-and-rescue teams, which have been able to operate elsewhere. Such moments show us that, as Council members can imagine, international efforts notwithstanding, the greatest heroism has been Syrians saving Syrians. Tragically, many first responders were victims themselves. Dozens of humanitarian workers were killed or injured during the earthquake and its aftermath.

As Geir Pedersen said, and many have commented, including myself, despite a faulty start, the humanitarian community is responding to this challenge. Since 9 February, when the Bab Al-Hawa cross-border point was brought back into functioning, the United Nations has sent more than 423 trucks into north-west Syria, carrying critical food, shelter, sanitation kits and medical equipment and supplies for at least 1 million women, men and children. Many more deliveries are planned in the weeks ahead as we ramp up that to the scale that is needed and to which the people in that area are entitled.

As I did on the day, I of course welcome the Government of Syria's agreement to open the Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai border crossing points for the United Nations and its partners to deliver humanitarian assistance to north-west Syria. As we said at the time and before, those crossings were a vital addition. In the past two weeks, those border crossings have already allowed us to more quickly and efficiently get closer to see and provide some solace to the people in need across the north-west. Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai will facilitate the further scaling-up of ongoing humanitarian operations, which have continued throughout through Bab Al-Hawa except for the three or four days of tragedy.

United Nations staff are now conducting near-daily missions into north-west Syria to complete essential humanitarian activities — assess gaps, support, talk to, consult and be guided by local partners and affected



populations, monitor programmes and liaise with local authorities.

I welcome the Government of Syria's fast-track visa approvals. Those new procedures have allowed United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and other humanitarian actors to surge specialized personnel to support operations in Damascus and affected areas of Syria.

In Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Latakia, the United Nations is helping people in overcrowded collective shelters and host communities, with a particular focus on responding to gender-based violence, the trauma of that morning and other protection risks, as I mentioned earlier. Referral systems, in-kind assistance and psychosocial support are among the measures being used to help mitigate the inherent risks. We released \$40 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund to support relief operations at the outset. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is also using the Syria humanitarian fund and the Syria cross-border humanitarian fund to funnel money as fast as possible to front-line organizations.

The earthquake response, as we know well from public comment and the evidence of our eyes, has not been without challenges. The efforts to restart cross-line missions to north-west Syria were delayed. We still continue to impress on all parties the need to facilitate timely and unimpeded access for humanitarian relief and personnel to those areas and to open all routes to get to all people in every way possible, as the Secretary-General has publicly said. The growing demand for critical items and their resulting scarcity, tents being the obvious example, together with rising prices, is straining supply chains into the region. Donors are beginning to fly in supplies to the Turkish border and are also crossing to Damascus and Aleppo. That is essential and most welcome. Local markets can no longer readily supply cross-border operations for some of the core items, hence the need for such costly but necessary airlifts. Critical infrastructure is badly damaged. Machines are still needed to clear rubble. Equipment and repairs are needed for makeshift hospitals. And we need tools to restore access to drinking water. We all worry about the pervasive threat of cholera in north-western Syria and beyond.

The United Nations is working to address unintended obstacles generated by sanctions and counter-terrorism laws, and as Mr. Pedersen said, we

welcome the licences provided by the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom. We continue to work to eliminate, eradicate or go around the overcompliance that still remains and constrains the delivery of assistance. Sustained involvement to make that happen remains essential. We are very pleased with the partnership that we have had with those Member States to improve the aim of their licences so that nothing will be prevented from reaching those in need and affected by the earthquake.

All those urgent efforts are necessary. An effective humanitarian response requires sustained effort beyond the time of great international attention, close coordination and of course generous support. The Syria flash appeal for three months calls for \$397 million to meet the most critical needs. The upcoming donor conference in Brussels will be a pivotal moment for our response in both Syria and Türkiye. Meanwhile, I should remind the Council that the 2023 humanitarian response plan will still require \$4.8 billion to address pre-existing needs. That is our largest humanitarian appeal this year worldwide, and it reflects the scale and gravity of the needs of Syria, 12 years into a conflict it never wanted.

We know what needs to be done to provide the people affected with dignified living conditions, and I hope we are now doing all we can to help make that happen. Everyone in this Chamber and at this meeting can help to make that a reality. Rising to this occasion is a shared endeavour. We thank those who have responded to our appeals so far, and we look to all to do so and to increase our support, so that in this particular unfair, undeserved and unexpected situation the people of Syria can at least know that the world cares for them.

**The President:** I thank Mr. Griffiths for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Muhrez.

**Ms. Muhrez:** I thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to address the Council at this critical time. I am speaking today both as a humanitarian and a Syrian.

I want to start by telling the Council the story of Maya. On the night of the earthquake, Maya spent the night in the city at the home of Tala, her great friend and cousin. She often slept there because it was closer to her university, and with the electricity and fuel shortages in her village, the commute was easier. They were both

so excited for their first year of university, with their whole futures ahead of them.

When the ground shook that night, and as the members of the family screamed for each other, it took only seconds for them to be buried under the weight of their whole lives, every possession they owned. Maya's father rushed from the village, the neighbours came, but with only their hands they were helpless against the crumpled steel and concrete. After 10 hours under the rubble, Maya's lungs gave up; she suffocated. When she was finally pulled out, her body was still warm. She had just died. The rescue was late, just a few minutes too late. Maya died along with her best friend and cousin Tala, her uncle and her aunt. Last Saturday would have been her nineteenth birthday. Maya and Tala were my cousins.

It was the neighbours who desperately tried to free Maya. Using limited equipment, pickaxes and their bare hands, families, neighbours, communities across northern Syria were the people who freed each other. Syrians called for help from the international community — we all saw the pictures of the devastation — and yet help simply did not arrive in Syria on the scale and at the speed that were needed. They were completely on their own in those first hours. When much of the entire world turned its back on Syrians, they stood by one another and saved what was left.

Now local rescue workers are clearing the rubble. Local organizations are providing children and their families with shelter, blankets and mattresses, warm clothes and food. Aid workers are using pickup trucks to move aid and essential supplies to families in need. At the same time, they have lost their own homes and their loved ones. They too are grappling with the emotional toll that the earthquakes have taken. I want to pay tribute to Syrian communities, aid workers and friends. Time and time again, when disaster and tragedy have struck, they have not given up. They have not turned to hopelessness. However, resilience has its limits.

Maya was one of millions of children who lived most of their childhood in the most difficult circumstances. They persevered despite dwindling resources. They went to school hungry. They endured cold winters and dark nights. They worked hard to secure a better future, but without change their resilience will not translate into a more dignified and safer future. We owe it to them to make that change, to provide the support that they need,

now and in the future. On behalf of all children in Syria, I am asking the Council, the international community and all the parties to the conflict in Syria to see that we need a new approach. Those who have survived are in desperate need of support to piece their lives back together. We are now in a race against time to avoid the secondary impacts of the earthquake. Services continue to be overstretched across the country, and children in northern Syria are at greater risk of violence and exploitation.

Even before the earthquake, after 12 years of conflict, humanitarian needs across Syria were vast. These earthquakes mean that families are more likely to be forced to make impossible decisions for their children, including life-altering compromises on basic education, nutrition and health care, as well as their children's protection. They may even take a perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

Many families tell us that their children have nightmares, worrying that there will be another earthquake. Six-year-old Samer's leg was broken and his head injured when his home collapsed due to the earthquake. Now living in a camp with his family, his mother told my team that he repeatedly tells her: "Thank God we have no walls, so nothing will fall on me." Children and their families will need ongoing psychosocial support to help them recover from their mental scars. Obviously, they should not be left to shoulder those challenges alone. They need our support, and for that we need access to the affected populations. Full humanitarian access to all those affected is now critical. We need access from all sides and through all avenues. Lives and futures depend upon it.

Save the Children welcomes the agreement to open two additional border crossings and the easing of administrative measures for humanitarian assistance put in place by the Government of Syria, just as we welcomed efforts made by the Council to ensure access. We also welcome recently issued licenses by the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union with the aim of easing the unintended impact of sanctions on humanitarian assistance. Today we call for all measures to facilitate the delivery of aid to continue.

It is time to talk about what comes next. If the problem of access can be solved — and it must be — then humanitarians and local organizations will need funding to scale up their activities to save lives and help people recover. The earthquakes are a

moment to reflect on how we work in Syria. We cannot be complicit in making Syria a country dependent on aid. The response to the earthquake should represent a moment to come together, put politics aside and rethink our approach. While the aid response over the past decade has kept children alive, is that enough? Do Syrian children not deserve a dignified, sustainable and hopeful future?

Now is the time to focus on recovery. We need to support local organizations and civil society to make meaningful changes in the support that people receive. Schools will need to be rehabilitated and hospitals made fit for purpose. Children need safe homes, not tents. Their parents need jobs that pay a decent wage and allow them to provide for their families. Without a change in approach, simply to rebuild what has been lost, Syrians would need to wait another lifetime.

We need new, creative approaches to meet the scale of the challenges that lie before us all. Samer's future cannot consist of tents, or of moving from place to place desperately searching for safety. It cannot be a future of poor health care, poor education and poor life chances. He has the right to grow up safely, to be healthy and to go to school, as well as the right to dream and plan for his future. Let there be no risk that Samer's life could be cut short, like Maya's was.

Like so many Syrians, I have lost family, friends and colleagues. In my most recent visit to Syria, I saw devastation and suffering. But I also saw solidarity and hope. I saw people who opened their doors to their neighbours and cooked hot meals for them, splitting food that had already been rationed. They took care of younger children and older people. Syrians are resilient. Let us support that resilience to help them achieve a better future.

In the past 12 years, Syria has endured conflict, economic crisis and now natural disaster. What more needs to happen to make us act differently? The children of Syria are counting on us all.

**The President:** I thank Ms. Muhrez for her briefing.

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

**Mr. Polyanskiy** (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Geir Pedersen, and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Martin Griffiths, for their briefings on the political

and humanitarian aspects of the situation in Syria. We also listened carefully to the remarks by today's civil society representative, Ms. Rasha Muhrez.

The entire world was shaken by the scale of the tragedy caused by the earthquake in the Syria-Türkiye border zone. We were all united in expressing our condolences to, and solidarity with, the victims' families. Both countries required urgent assistance — more than 20 humanitarian flights and nearly 1,000 tons of aid have been sent to Syria by the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations and the Russian Ministry of Defence. Comprehensive support for Syrians is also being provided through the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of the Warring Parties.

Security Council members concur in their assessment that the consequences of the disaster, which has struck several provinces in Syria, have virtually wiped out the humanitarian gains made in previous years. In view of the unprecedented scale of the catastrophe and guided by a humanitarian imperative, Damascus responded immediately and unconditionally to the request of the United Nations humanitarian wing by agreeing to open two additional crossing points on the border with Türkiye for the delivery of humanitarian aid by global Organization. We welcome such an approach by the Syrian Government. The agreement reached between Syria and the United Nations is fully consistent with the guiding principles for humanitarian assistance enshrined in General Assembly resolution 46/182, and therefore requires no further action through a Council decision. Thanks to that agreement, since 9 February, the United Nations has enjoyed full and unhindered access via not only the Bab Al-Hawa crossing point, as provided for in resolution 2672 (2023), but also the newly reopened crossing points of Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai.

In addition, within the first few hours after the tragedy, the Syrian authorities provided humanitarian workers with blanket approvals to work across the country. The same applies to the sending of humanitarian convoys to areas not under Damascus' control in the north-west. That measure opens up vast opportunities for the coordination of humanitarian deliveries along internal Syrian routes, which fully complies with resolution 2672 (2023), as well as with the position shared by all members of the Council that it is essential to deliver aid to those in need by all possible means.



However, the message of the Syrian leadership has still not been properly acknowledged. In the two weeks since the tragedy, due to outright sabotage by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists, not a single humanitarian convoy has been dispatched across the contact line. Despite the situation on the ground and the lack of logistical capacities and transport infrastructure, humanitarian deliveries to the north-west of the country from Damascus are urgently needed. That situation is puzzling, to say the least. We are talking about the very same militants who have taken root in Idlib, receiving humanitarian aid in some cases and blocking it in others. Unfortunately, they are, essentially, being indulged by a number of delegations in the Council who only weakly express concern about what is happening, thus preventing the Council from giving an honest assessment of the actions of terrorists.

If we add to that the copious evidence that Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham militants are openly appropriating humanitarian aid entering the enclave through the cross-border mechanism in order to then resell it to the local population, establishing control over volunteer humanitarian centres in the Idlib de-escalation zone and seizing the money they receive, then the picture before the Council is quite unpleasant.

Our Western colleagues are essentially trying to force all of us to cover up the corruption scheme from which United Nations-listed terrorists profit. And since the fighters have access to none of the cross-line supplies controlled by the Syrian Government — or at least fewer than the cross-border supplies — they are not interested in them. Subsequently, Western capitals are also showing only half-hearted interest in such supplies. My colleagues who act in such a fashion are not only coming across in an extremely unfavourable light, but are also undermining the future of the cross-border mechanism as a whole, which makes sense only as an element that temporarily supplements intra-Syrian deliveries. If entirely legitimate deliveries from Damascus are artificially hobbled, we see no sense in maintaining such deliveries under the cross-border mechanism, which violates the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Syria.

In parallel with the provision of urgent assistance to the population of Syria, urgent attention must be paid to the reconstruction of destroyed areas — residential, social and communal infrastructure. That will require impartial support from the entire international community. Back in 2017, the United Nations assessed

the amount of funding required for the restoration of this Arab country at \$250 billion. Given the pace of funding of the humanitarian plan for Syria over the past few years, we can confidently assert that the donor community either cannot or does not want to carry out this task.

To be honest, we are struck by the cynicism of some members of the Security Council, who are trying to reproach us for allegedly not doing anything to help to restore Syria, since we are not acting through the United Nations mechanisms. We have already provided our colleagues with statistics on what we have done and are continuing to do bilaterally in this area. However, they are deliberately ignoring the fact that the volume of assistance we are providing is many times greater than what they are allocating. We do not wish to act through the United Nations mechanisms, primarily because, despite all of our requests, they remain opaque, and we cannot get basic information on the projects being implemented.

In general, our colleagues' attempts to expose us as freeloaders when it comes to early recovery projects are beneath self-respecting international players. Moreover, the Syrian people themselves know perfectly well who is helping them and how much they are helping.

What our Western colleagues can indeed boast of is their efforts to preserve Syrian refugees in camps in neighbouring countries for political reasons. They can also boast of their suffocating sanctions, which place a heavy burden on the shoulders of ordinary Syrians. We urge Council members to be wary of assessments of exemptions from the sanctions regimes. The introduction of such exemptions is not an act of magnanimity or a panacea for the many ills that Western sanctions continue to bring to the Syrian people. Humanitarian exemptions do not deserve special praise, but are instead are the bare minimum of what the authorities of the United States and European countries can and must do in the current conditions. And, of course, the question of the full lifting of unilateral sanctions is not only not going anywhere, but, on the contrary, is becoming increasingly relevant.

The subject of sanctions, in particular, was reflected in the context of the consequences of the February earthquake in the thematic review of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. We also look forward to the report, promised in

January, of the United Nations country team in Syria on the impact of sanctions.

The United Nations Secretariat has repeatedly said that problems in the work of humanitarian workers on the ground due to the so-called “overcompliance effect” are not going away. Because of the American Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, even the efforts of the United Nations to deliver a humanitarian supply of Russian fertilizers impounded in European Union ports to Damascus were blocked. We emphasize that we do not have access to those fertilizers, but in the framework of the anti-Syrian sanctions regime, fertilizers are considered a dual-use product, which minimizes the chances of them being dispatched. Given that Syria faces an impending hunger crisis and its agricultural lands are occupied by the United States, we expect that if Washington is really committed to humanitarian values, it will take the necessary steps to allow the United Nations to carry out this humanitarian operation. For the time being, unfortunately, nothing of the sort is happening. We once again urge the United Nations Secretariat to address the problems of the negative consequences of sanctions against Syria and, in particular, to ensure that this shipment of our fertilizers is dispatched to the country.

Separately, we demand that the Secretary-General personally withdraw his scandalous methodology “Parameters and principles of United Nations assistance in Syria”, which serves as an umbrella for Western donors and de facto legitimizes their political assertions about the inexpediency of financing infrastructure projects in territories controlled by the legitimate Syrian authorities.

With regard to the military-political track of the Syrian settlement, we are forced to acknowledge that the existing problems on the ground, such as the illegal foreign military presence and the remaining hotbeds of terrorism, have been supplemented by new ones in the form of a threat of a possible military operation in the north of the Republic, as well as the activation of various armed groups, including because of the release of prisoners from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

Against that backdrop, Israel’s regular arbitrary military actions continue. On 19 February, the Israeli air force launched further attacks on the territory of Syria. Several targets in and around Damascus were attacked. One of the missiles hit a residential building

in a dense urban area. As a result, five people were killed and an additional 15 were wounded. And one of the fragments of the Israeli missile intercepted by the Syrian air defences landed just 300 metres from the building of the Russian Embassy in Damascus.

We firmly condemn Israel’s use of force in these cases, which is in flagrant violation of the norms of international law. We urge the Israeli side to stop its armed provocations against Syria and to refrain from steps that could have dangerous consequences for the entire region. We believe that continuing such a mistaken practice is absolutely unacceptable, especially in conditions in which many countries of the world, including Russia, are actively helping the Syrians to overcome the consequences of the devastating earthquake and sending their rescue workers, medics and humanitarian supplies to the country.

We once again recall that in order to achieve lasting stabilization and security, both in Syria and beyond, there must be a full restoration of the country’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as Damascus’ control over the entire national territory. Those principles underpin the agreements of the Astana format — Russia, Iran and Türkiye — on Idlib and the area beyond the Euphrates. Together with our partners, we will continue to scrupulously facilitate the achievement of sustainable and long-term normalization in Syria and the region.

We consistently call for advancing the Syrian-led and -owned political settlement process, with the support of the United Nations, without external interference and on the basis of respect for the principles of the sovereignty, independence and integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.

As part of that approach, we had a thorough exchange of views with the Special Envoy in Moscow on 27 February. During those consultations, we confirmed the need for the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015), which stipulates the promotion of intra-Syrian dialogue, including within the framework of the work of the Constitutional Committee. In that regard, we would like to once again note the relevance of Mr. Pedersen’s efforts to depoliticize the Geneva platform and resume the sessions of the Constitutional Committee, as well as to maintain regular contact with the Syrians. It is important to focus on those tasks and to not get distracted by other initiatives, the added value of which remains unclear to us.

**Mr. Wood** (United States of America): I too wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Griffiths, Special Envoy Pedersen and Ms. Rasha Muhrez for their briefings.

We are now three weeks on from the deadly 6 February earthquakes that killed so many. We reiterate our support for the response of the United Nations to all who have been affected by this tragedy. Thus far, we have announced \$185 million in humanitarian aid for the people of Türkiye and Syria.

We welcome the news that United Nations humanitarian aid continues to move through the Al-Rai, Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Hawa crossings, and we hope that the essential and life-saving cross-border shipments will increase as more supplies become available. We applaud the Syrian civil-society groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have provided such critical services across all of Syria, especially in the north-west. However, the humanitarian crisis in the earthquake-affected areas did not begin three weeks ago. The need for more United Nations aid and access, particularly in north-west Syria, has been painfully clear for years. And today, as we begin to grasp the devastation of the earthquakes, it is clear that aid will be necessary well into the future.

We as members of the Security Council must all continue to closely monitor the situation to ensure that humanitarian assistance is able to reach those in need. We must ensure that cross-border aid access to the Syrian people continues without undue interference. If that requires Council action, we must be prepared to act. The United States reiterates its support for the distribution of humanitarian aid through all modalities, including cross-line modalities. We strongly support the operational plan of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for cross-line aid to the north-west. We also call on the regime and Russia to finally facilitate unhindered cross-line humanitarian access to the Rukban settlement. As we work to increase aid to all the Syrians affected, we must remain cognizant of the troubling reports of the regime's diversion of life-saving aid, which has ended up for sale in markets or in the hands of authorities seeking to benefit from its distribution. We are also concerned about reports of other actors diverting aid or blocking deliveries. We call on the regime and all parties to facilitate humanitarian operations and refrain from diverting or politicizing aid.

We note with concern that in the wake of the natural disaster, there are troubling reports that the Al-Assad regime has resumed shelling in north-west Syria, causing more damage and distress. That underscores the need for a nationwide ceasefire and progress on the political track. We urge the Syrian regime to cooperate fully with Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts to convene good-faith discussions aimed at reaching a political solution to the conflict in line with resolution 2254 (2015). The effects of the earthquake have been all the more devastating as a result of the conditions created by a conflict that is close to entering its twelfth year. The situation in cities such as Aleppo is much more challenging in the wake of the earthquakes because many of their buildings had already been destroyed by the Al-Assad regime, which bombed and shelled its own citizens.

The Council is rightly seized of the humanitarian situation, but we all know that the Council can and should be doing more to support the political process. The Constitutional Committee remains stalled because of Russia's arbitrary demands. Let us all recommit to a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process under United Nations auspices, including through its European headquarters in Geneva. Resolution 2254 (2015) is the agreed-upon road map for resolving the conflict and addressing the long-term needs of the Syrian people. Instead of using the earthquake to distract from the need for reform, we call on the regime to at long last step up and generally participate in a political process that helps all Syrians.

We know that some Council members have suggested that United States sanctions on Syria may be hindering the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Some have made those suggestions in good faith; others have not. Let me make it clear that United States sanctions on Syria target those individuals and entities that have brutalized the people of Syria for more than a decade. They are individuals who have tortured Syrians, dropped chemical weapons on Syrians or stolen from the Syrian people through rampant corruption. United States sanctions do not target humanitarian assistance to those in need, and we have made that clear through our actions. Our sanctions programmes have numerous carve-outs to facilitate humanitarian, assistance, including disaster relief. And we have issued several general licences to make it clear to NGOs and humanitarian organizations that our sanctions do not target humanitarian assistance. Moreover, we stand

ready to assist humanitarian organizations if they perceive any hindrances in delivering assistance.

My final point concerns fertilizer donations. The United States is not the cause of any reported delays in Russia's ability to deliver fertilizer to Syria, as claimed by Russia. If Russia wants to donate fertilizer, it can do so. Russia should work directly with the United Nations to distribute agricultural donations within Syria through its local partners.

**Mrs. Baeriswyl** (Switzerland): I am delivering this statement on behalf of the co-penholders of the Syria humanitarian file, Brazil and Switzerland. Let me first thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, and Ms. Rasha Muhrez, the Response Director of Save the Children, for their briefings and hard work. I also thank the Secretary-General for his report (S/2023/127). And we want to once again express our heartfelt condolences to all the victims of the earthquakes — to all affected in Türkiye and Syria. Our gratitude also goes to all the humanitarian actors for their tireless efforts on the ground to ensure that aid is reaching those in need while themselves being impacted by the tragedy, as we heard from Ms. Muhrez.

Three weeks after the arrival of the earthquakes and their many aftershocks, humanitarian needs in Syria are greater than ever. People in the regions who are directly affected are surviving with an insufficient food supply, unsafe housing, inadequate medical support and a high level of exposure to a multitude of protection risks. Among them are the millions of Syrians who had been internally displaced as a result of the ongoing conflict. The need for food, shelter, heating, drinking water, medicines, fuel and broader gender-responsive protection services is high across all regions of Syria. The earthquakes have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities across the country linked to age, gender and health conditions. It is therefore crucial for the humanitarian response to ensure that the distinct needs of the various groups of people are met. The risks of sexual and gender-based violence are particularly high in this context of destruction and displacement.

We commend the efforts made by many countries to enable humanitarian assistance in Türkiye and Syria. We are encouraged to hear that United Nations

convoys have been able to deliver aid through the three border crossings at Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai since the 13 February understanding reached between Syria and the United Nations. As we have just heard, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 400 trucks have made such deliveries over the past three weeks. We hope that the number of trucks loaded with humanitarian aid will increase in the near future, if more funding is provided for the response. The necessary conditions for the swift and unhindered delivery of aid and essential services to take place in a sustained and predictable way must be ensured and maintained.

Furthermore, we welcome the fact that four cross-border United Nations inter-agency missions have so far been able to be conducted in the area affected by the earthquakes. Such missions are important in order to get assessments of the situation on the ground and respond accordingly, and we hope that they can continue. It is important to ensure that aid continues to be distributed without major security incidents on the ground. We urge all parties to continue to allow and facilitate rapid, safe, unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access in all regions of Syria. In that regard, all aid, including through cross-border and cross-line modalities, needs to be made available to humanitarian actors in order to ensure rapid, unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access. We call on all parties to protect the work of humanitarian actors by respecting international humanitarian law and ceasing hostilities, as they only add to the suffering of the civilian population.

As co-penholders, we remain guided by the humanitarian imperative and the needs of the people in Syria. The consequences of such a devastating natural disaster cannot be subject to politicization. We encourage all Member States to increase their support to the urgent humanitarian appeals in response to the earthquakes, as well as the humanitarian response plan for 2023, including the pooled funds. That should ensure the expeditious provision of life-saving aid, as well as the continuity of already existing programmes and projects, such as those of early recovery. The humanitarian situation in Syria was already worse than ever, before this earthquake. More than a decade of ongoing hostilities has left long-term consequences, and 15.3 million Syrians throughout the country were already expected to need assistance this year. That number will now further increase. It is our duty to help them.



*(spoke in French)*

I would now like to speak in my national capacity on the political situation in Syria.

As I just said, the earthquakes of 6 February and their numerous aftershocks have decimated entire communities in the north and north-west of the country. The testimony of Ahmad, a member of a civil society organization active in Aleppo province, illustrates that tragic situation. He said that:

“In a few moments, everyone became a victim. Civilians, aid workers, and even police, ambulance and civil defence personnel, all fell victim to this devastating earthquake. Eighty seconds was enough to change life there.”

For those Syrians, those 80 seconds of earthquake added to 12 years of conflict that have undermined the political and social foundation of their country. Switzerland thanks Special Envoy Pedersen for the commitment he has shown since the early hours of the earthquakes to the people affected, in accordance with the mandate given to him by the Council. In that connection, we welcome the two meetings of the Task Force on Humanitarian Affairs held under his aegis on 9 and 22 February in Geneva — the headquarters of the United Nations in Europe and of the main humanitarian organizations involved on the ground.

Switzerland would also like to amplify the Special Envoy's call for a national ceasefire and to encourage him to continue holding talks to that end with the main regional and international actors. From Aleppo to Al-Suwayda, from Deir ez-Zor to Homs, air strikes, indiscriminate attacks and armed clashes are endangering civilians across the country and seriously hampering the achievement of a lasting peace. We call on all the parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law and to protect civilians and humanitarian personnel.

In accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the appeal in the Secretary-General's recent report (A/76/890) on missing persons in Syria, Switzerland calls for the fate of the detained and missing persons to be fully clarified. The relatives of missing persons are among the 15.3 million Syrians who depend on humanitarian aid. They are among the millions of Syrian refugees around the world, and some of them lost additional family members during the 80 seconds of the

violent earthquake. Giving those relatives the right to know means opening the door to a political solution, which remains the only way out of the conflict.

**Mr. Biang** (Gabon) *(spoke in French)*: I have the honour to make this statement on behalf of the three African members of the Security Council (A3) — Ghana, Mozambique and my own country, Gabon.

We thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths for their informative briefings. We listened carefully to the moving testimony of Ms. Rasha Muhrez. We also welcome the participation of the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Türkiye in today's meeting.

*(spoke in English)*

As we have just heard, once again, Syria is in the throes of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that demands the particular attention of the Council. The situation has become more alarming following the 6 February earthquake that struck Syria at the same time as neighbouring Türkiye, and which was accompanied by numerous aftershocks that have caused a heavy human toll and untold suffering to the peoples of those two countries, as well as colossal material damage. In addition to the heavy loss of life, the earthquake caused major infrastructural damage to thousands of buildings, including schools and hospitals, some of which were reduced to rubble, exposing tens of thousands of people to harsh winter weather conditions and causing terrible injuries to survivors, including children.

The members of the A3 reiterate their sincere condolences to the families of the victims and send their best wishes for a speedy recovery for the injured. The Syrian population, exhausted by years of conflict and the aftermath of the recent earthquake, needs respite. A total of 15.3 million people — more than 70 per cent of Syria's population — needed humanitarian assistance even before the earthquake. Humanitarian and economic indicators continue to deteriorate, basic services are collapsing, and an ongoing cholera outbreak and climatic shocks are compounding an already dire situation.

We also call for a strong mobilization by the international community in support of the flash appeal for nearly \$400 million, launched by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in order to save lives and prevent new suffering in Syria following the

earthquake. We take note of the first announcements of donors pledging to provide financial or material assistance, which we consider encouraging. But we must do more. Moreover, we note with interest that the aid delivery operations that started on the ground on 14 February are continuing smoothly and unhindered at the crossing points of Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai. Given that access is the cornerstone of emergency relief, I would like to welcome, once again, the decision of the Government of Syria to authorize the opening of the two new crossings of Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai for a period of three months, in addition to Bab Al-Hawa. That has facilitated an increase in the pace and volume of the delivery of aid to Syrian nationals in need.

We are concerned about the continuation of hostilities in northern Syria, particularly in the de-escalation zone of Idlib, with the persistence of air strikes, mutual bombardments and clashes, in the midst of a cholera outbreak in 14 governorates. Those hostilities continue to exacerbate the suffering of civilians, exposing them to death, injuries and further displacement. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, a total of 42 civilians, including four women and 13 children, have been killed as a result of the hostilities, and at least 52 civilians, including two women and 17 children, have been injured. We call on all the parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law, in particular by taking constant care to spare civilians and civilian objects in the conduct of their military operations. We reiterate our call for an immediate ceasefire in Syria to facilitate the delivery of aid to the victims. We urge all parties to put aside their differences during this tragic national emergency.

The A3 commends the work of Special Envoy Pedersen, who continues his efforts to advance the confidence-building process step by step in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), and we reiterate our full support to him. We hope that the ninth session of the United Nations-facilitated Constitutional Committee can be held in Geneva as soon as possible and address the substantive challenges facing the Committee. We are closely following the Special Envoy's consultations with women and civil society, which are also an essential component of the political process and the building of lasting peace.

Since Syrian women should participate in building the future of their country, we encourage the Syrian

Government to develop legislative and policy measures aimed at eliminating discrimination against women and girls in all areas of life to achieve true gender equality. We urge all parties to respect the human rights of women and girls.

Furthermore, we take note of the recent introduction of earthquake-related permanent exemptions in several unilateral sanctions regimes. We also take note that the United Nations will continue to engage bilaterally with relevant actors on these issues in order to identify appropriate measures to address unintended consequences of such sanctions, as well as operational obstacles to the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The A3 calls for the lifting of sanctions by all countries concerned in order not to hinder relief operations for the benefit of the Syrian population in need.

In conclusion, in the light of the current difficult situation in Syria, this is not the time for political calculations. The A3 calls on all stakeholders and the international community as a whole to put the interests of the Syrian people first and work together to bring them relief.

**Mr. Ishikane (Japan):** I thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths and Ms. Rasha Muhrez for their briefings.

We are saddened to hear that Türkiye and northern Syria were hit by additional earthquakes on 20 February, and we extend our deepest condolences to those affected by these series of tragic events.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains extremely dire, with the earthquakes exacerbating the already existing crises in the country. The scale of needs in Syria is immeasurable, with record levels of poverty and food insecurity, a cholera outbreak and harsh winter conditions.

Japan welcomes the agreement between President Al-Assad and the United Nations to open two additional border crossings into north-west Syria for an initial period of three months. This has allowed the United Nations to scale up its cross-border aid operation, where it has already sent more than 400 trucks loaded with vital assistance. All modalities, including cross-border and cross-line operations, must be utilized to sufficiently respond to the vast humanitarian needs in Syria. In this regard, all hostilities have to stop, especially in the disaster-affected areas.

I would like to share with the Security Council that on 24 February, Japan announced its decision to provide \$27 million in emergency grant aid for earthquake damage in Syria and Türkiye, in addition to the provision of the emergency relief goods that have been already delivered. We are grateful to those working on the ground in Syria to facilitate the smooth and timely delivery of vital aid. We call on all parties, including the Syrian Government, to continue taking steps to help alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people.

While the imminent humanitarian crisis has rightly been at the forefront of our attention, we must not forget that a political solution remains crucial to ending the conflict in Syria. The humanitarian crisis cannot be fundamentally resolved without conflict settlement.

It is encouraging to hear that Special Envoy Pedersen and Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi continue their tireless efforts, including through engaging with Syrian parties and international stakeholders and working to resume meetings of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva. Progress in all these areas, including on the file of detained and missing persons, is imperative to achieve an end to the conflict by peaceful and diplomatic means.

Some briefers referred to Syrians — women and men — on the ground coming together and working together for their survival. Japan urges all parties, especially the Syrian authorities, but not just them, to fully engage and cooperate in the same spirit of solidarity that ordinary Syrians have shown on the ground with the good offices of the Special Envoy to advance a comprehensive and inclusive political process. This remains the only viable path towards peace and stability for the Syrian people.

The Syrian people must remain at the centre of our diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. The Security Council must put differences aside and work constructively towards improving the humanitarian situation and implementing a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned United Nations-facilitated political process in line with resolution 2254 (2015). After enduring 12 years of conflict, the Syrian people, especially women and children, deserve to see a peaceful and prosperous future on the horizon. Let us make that a reality.

**Mr. Pérez Loose** (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I am grateful for the information provided by Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief

Coordinator Martin Griffiths, and for the moving account by Ms. Rasha Muhrez, Response Director of Save the Children in Syria.

On behalf of the Government and the people of Ecuador, I would like once again to express our condolences to all the victims of the earthquakes, our solidarity with them and our deep wishes that may overcome this difficult situation, which has tested the response capacity of all actors in Syria and in the international community.

We acknowledge and are grateful for the work of Geir Pedersen, Martin Griffiths, Joyce Msuya, Ghada Mudawi and Mike Robson, as well as that of all the officials of the different United Nations agencies in the field and the non-governmental organizations operating on the front line. We also pay a posthumous tribute to the 79 humanitarian workers who died trying to alleviate the needs of the Syrian population on the ground.

We hope that three of the lessons learned in the course of these weeks will be analysed and make contributions to a peaceful transition in future. The first lesson is that, in contexts of peace and stability, the institutional framework has made it possible to deal efficiently and quickly with natural contingencies. Secondly, in any scenario, the results of solidarity and cooperative work contribute to increasing the visibility of and addressing the most complex problems, particularly those of such vulnerable groups as women, unaccompanied children, people with disabilities, displaced persons, among others. The third lesson is that this critical situation represents an opportunity in the political arena to seek sustainable solutions to the conflict in Syria focused on respect for unity, independence and territorial integrity, in accordance with the principles set forth in resolution 2254 (2015).

Since 6 February, the Security Council has held four meetings in which it has received first-hand information on the worsening conditions on the ground. We have discussed the best strategies to provide Syria with immediate relief, and we must acknowledge that positive results have been achieved. The opening of two additional cross-border crossings — Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai — through which 423 truckloads of medicine, food, water, blankets, tents and other essential supplies have been delivered to Syria proves what can be achieved with a little political will and genuine concern for the people of Syria. The border crossings and cross-line operations complement each other in facilitating

the provision of humanitarian assistance. The Council should therefore support both mechanisms.

Ecuador firmly condemns the fact that amid a situation marked by grief and insecurity, armed attacks continue on Syrian territory — incidents that have taken the lives of civilians and brought additional terror to the chaos that the country is already experiencing. We note with great concern reports from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warning about the increasing numbers of cases of sexual violence in community refugee centres. We call on the United Nations teams on the ground to implement oversight mechanisms that can facilitate the activation of the relevant protocols. We urge them to provide the corresponding reports with the speed and timeliness that those cases demand.

We also support the Secretary-General's flash appeal aimed at raising \$397 million to meet the humanitarian needs in the first three months. However, we are certain that that number will increase with the start of efforts to resettle the displaced and rebuild the strategic infrastructure destroyed by the earthquakes. Ecuador reiterates its intention to support initiatives that facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance to the most critical areas and the implementation of Council resolutions aimed at alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people.

**Mr. Abushahab** (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): We thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Griffiths for their important briefings. We also thank Ms. Muhrez for her touching briefing and express our sincere condolences to her and all who have been affected by the earthquake.

Our brother people of Syria suffered devastating tragedy this month. After 12 years of war and a terrible humanitarian situation, an earthquake inflicted additional hardships, killing or injuring tens of thousands of people, turning historic cities, emblems of an ancient civilization, into piles of rubble and leaving families displaced and children orphaned. And as the peoples of Syria and Türkiye struggled to recover and heal from the first catastrophic earthquake, on 20 February a second struck their countries, causing more suffering for millions. We once again extend our sincere condolences and sympathy to those affected.

During that difficult time, we have seen the spirit of international solidarity make itself felt in support of the Syrian people. Arab efforts have been at the forefront

of that support, as we have seen from the many Arab countries that have reached out to Syria in the past few weeks and from the support that Arab peoples have provided to their Syrian brothers, emphasizing how important it is to bring the Syrian Arab Republic back into the Arab milieu. Against that backdrop, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates made an urgent visit to Syria and Türkiye in the aftermath of the earthquake, where he saw first-hand the extensive destruction and suffering across affected areas. In the light of the current situation, I would like to highlight the following issues.

First, we must intensify the international humanitarian response in Syria in every possible way if we are to reach all who are affected. In the context, the United Arab Emirates welcomed the Syrian Government's decision to open two additional crossings for a period of three months in response to the urgent needs resulting from the earthquake, a critical step that is enabling the transfer of thousands of tons of humanitarian assistance across the Syrian-Turkish border. We also welcomed Mr. Griffiths' remarks about the continued unimpeded delivery of aid through the three crossings.

For its part, the response of the United Arab Emirates to the humanitarian situation accords with the principles of our foreign policy regarding aid to the afflicted. To that end, we worked quickly to launch a humanitarian operation with the aim of sending relief and medical aid to Syria and Türkiye, including search-and-rescue teams and the provision of field hospitals. In addition, we have allocated an aid package of more than \$200 million for both countries, including \$20 million in support of the United Nations Syria Humanitarian Response Plan. We are also facilitating an air bridge with more than 100 flights carrying aid and medical support, as well as an additional air bridge to Syria from Dubai's International Humanitarian City facilitating flights operated by the United Nations and international organizations.

Secondly, we underscore the need to expedite the removal of debris and begin the early recovery phase in all areas affected by the earthquake and suffering from a major shortage of basic services and lack of shelter for the victims. That requires the provision of heavy equipment and raw materials for restoring infrastructure and rebuilding where there is destruction. In that regard, we appreciate the efforts of the various relevant United



Nations bodies in support of early-recovery projects, as the focus should now be on the affected areas.

Thirdly, we must remain vigilant in view of the fact that terrorist groups continue to exploit fragile situations to achieve their goals. As we were all preoccupied with the disastrous effects of the earthquake, terrorist groups were working to obstruct the cross-line delivery of aid to achieve their own narrow gains at the expense of the Syrian people. My country categorically rejects such dangerous practices, which seek to exploit a catastrophic state of affairs. The current situation requires stepping up the scale and frequency of cross-line aid deliveries in order to meet the current needs and prevent terrorist groups from hindering those deliveries.

We are also deeply concerned about the reported increase in kidnappings and killings in Syria by Da'esh over the past few weeks. We condemn the terrorist attack killing 53 people and perpetrated in eastern Homs by Da'esh in a reckless exploitation of the disaster.

In conclusion, while the tragic earthquake is one of the worst natural disasters in history and will long remain a painful memory in our minds, we will continue to show solidarity with the Syrian people in their dire distress.

**Mr. Costa Filho (Brazil):** Brazil makes this statement on the political aspects of the conflict in its national capacity.

First of all, I would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths for their briefings. Brazil commends their tireless efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people after more than a decade of conflict and now the tragic consequences of earthquakes of an unprecedented magnitude. Last week, the Brazilian Government announced the donation of water purifiers and seven tons of nutritious dehydrated foods to the Government of Syria as part of the efforts to help to address the immediate needs of the affected populations.

We also thank the Syria Response Director for Save the Children, Ms. Rasha Muhrez, for her moving briefing and her insights. As Ms. Rasha Muhrez described, children all over Syria continue to endure terrible trauma, when they should be spared the consequences of the hostilities. The situation of children in camps, such as that of Al-Hol, is particularly concerning and deserves renewed attention. In that regard, we welcome the ongoing repatriation efforts.

The additional human suffering caused by the earthquakes exacerbates the need for a political solution to the conflict. Brazil's position remains unchanged. Only a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led United Nations-facilitated political process, with due regard for the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty, can provide a lasting solution to the conflict.

A comprehensive ceasefire is urgent. We join the Secretary-General in his repeated calls on all parties to exercise maximum restraint, maintain the various ceasefires agreed and respect Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We condemn all terrorist activities and recent attacks by foreign forces, which resulted in several civilian deaths and seriously undermine the political process.

Resolution 2254 (2015) provides a road map that could restore Syria's unity and sovereignty. For many months now, we have seen no progress in relation to the meetings of the small body of the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned United Nations-facilitated Constitutional Committee. It is our hope that, once reconvened, members will show renewed political will and a genuine willingness to move the process forward.

Brazil congratulates Special Envoy Geir Pedersen on his outreach efforts to re-engage key stakeholders to find a way out of the current stalemate in the political process. We also commend him for his continued engagement with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board.

We hope that the recent gestures of international solidarity in the aftermath of the earthquake will positively influence the political file so that new perspectives for a peaceful solution can be made possible. It is our expectation that the current humanitarian cooperation can pave the way for further confidence-building measures. In 2023, let us not only hope for, but also work hard towards, a favourable political outcome for Syria so as to bring about the peace, stability and reconciliation so desired by the Syrian people.

**Mr. Spasse (Albania):** Allow me to thank Special Envoy Pedersen, Under-Secretary-General Griffiths and Director Muhrez for their briefings.

In less than two weeks, it will be 12 years since a handful of Syrian teenagers were arrested by the Al-Assad regime for spraying pro-democracy graffiti

in Dara'a. That sparked the beginning of the Arab Spring protests and the brutal crackdown on protesters.

The Syrian teenagers of today have known only war and brutality. They have seen their relatives being arbitrarily executed or forcefully disappeared. They have had to face imminent starvation every day, and they know no education, health care, basic security or freedom.

For nearly 12 years, the regime has disfigured Syria into a land of blood, in which the aspirations of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity have been quelled and more than two in three Syrians require urgent humanitarian aid, with 12 million facing hunger — the highest number since the beginning of the conflict.

The recent devastating earthquakes have only increased the misery and dramatically heightened the humanitarian needs. We strongly support the continuation of the cross-border mandate for another six months to secure the uninterrupted delivery of vital aid for 4.1 million Syrians living in north-west Syria. We welcome the opening of the two additional border crossings to north-west Syria in response to the urgent and drastic increase in humanitarian needs, which are unparalleled in scale.

We continue to maintain that, in order to ensure predictability, readiness, support, the efficient mobilization of resources and project implementation, we need a new resolution. That will allow for those border crossings to provide sustained access, not just for as long as the regime deems it suitable, but for as long as it is needed.

The root cause of this unimaginable human tragedy that is Syria today is political. It cannot, and will not, be resolved without addressing the political grievances and the aspirations of the Syrian people for freedom and security. There is no path to peace for Syria other than the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). A real and inclusive political transition, with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and young people, is a necessary condition for any hope of progress and a just political solution in Syria.

We strongly support Special Envoy Pedersen in advancing the full and comprehensive implementation of resolution 2254 (2015), including his step-for-step approach in restarting the political process, especially by resuming the work of the Constitutional Committee.

We deplore the obstruction by the Syrian regime and its supporters, and we call on them to drop their absurd pretexts and allow the reconvening of the Constitutional Committee for its ninth session in Geneva, as planned.

In conclusion, allow me to reiterate our strong support for a new mechanism to clarify the fate of detainees and missing people in Syria. That is necessary to provide closure to nearly every Syrian family.

The profound and enduring humanitarian, political, military, security, economic and human rights crisis in Syria will not be resolved without a genuine commitment to and strong support for democratic reforms and functioning institutions, established by the people for the people. Only a new Syria, rooted in justice, will lead to the much-needed reconciliation, which is a prerequisite for lasting peace and development.

**Mrs. Jaraud-Darnault** (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Mr. Martin Griffiths and Ms. Rasha Muhrez for their briefings.

We are fully committed to helping the Syrian people. For 12 years, France has been committed to helping all Syrians in every possible way. After the earthquake, we released €12 million in aid and delivered 40 tons of emergency equipment, and we want to do more.

We welcomed the efforts of Martin Griffiths for more border crossing points to be opened. We would not have been in the situation of having to wait seven days if the other crossings originally planned by the cross-border mechanism had not been closed, one by one, since 2020 despite the continuing deterioration of the humanitarian situation.

Unimpeded humanitarian aid must be delivered to all Syrians in need. However, the complex humanitarian operations in Syria persist, particularly because of the regime, which diverts a substantial part of the aid that passes through Damascus and siphons off funds meant for humanitarian projects.

With regard to sanctions, they were adopted in response to war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the regime and its supporters. European sanctions have never prevented the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria. The amount of funding allocated by the European Union and its member States to the humanitarian response plan for Syria is proof of that — \$27 billion since 2011 at their request. In 2022, the European Commission and its member States provided \$770 million in aid.

On 23 February, States members of the European Union adopted a temporary humanitarian exemption for a period of six months. That exemption does not mean that the sanctions were preventing humanitarian assistance from reaching populations and responding to their needs. It is a matter of adapting that tool to the emergency caused by the earthquakes and to allow non-governmental organizations to act more quickly.

I would like to reiterate the importance of the Council remaining seized of the issue of humanitarian aid in Syria, which remains a country at war. We reiterate our call for a national ceasefire.

The humanitarian tragedy of the earthquake cannot, however, make us forget the realities of the war in Syria. The Special Envoy visited Damascus on 13 February. Unfortunately, despite his efforts, the regime continues to block any progress towards a lasting peace, under the aegis of the United Nations, as defined by resolution 2254 (2015), adopted unanimously by the Council.

The earthquake is a new tragedy added to the tragedies suffered by Syrians over the course of 12 years of war: the bombing of civilian populations, the use of chemical weapons and the systematic use of torture and sexual violence by the regime, which have been widely documented by the United Nations. Syrians are the victims of war crimes committed by the regime and its affiliates. Before the earthquake, the figures were already unprecedented: the brutality of the conflict and the regime's repression have caused one of the largest population movements of the century; more than 100,000 people are missing, most of them in the regime's prisons.

Syrians are demanding justice, because without justice no lasting peace is possible. France will relentlessly continue its fight against impunity; those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held accountable for their actions.

France's position therefore remains firm: in the absence of a credible and inclusive political process, we will not abandon our basic position vis-à-vis the Syrian regime, which must engage in a political process.

**Mr. Dai Bing** (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for their briefings and listened attentively to the briefing by Ms. Muhrez.

China once again expresses its condolences to the peoples and the Governments of Türkiye and Syria

for their grave losses in lives and property in the devastating earthquakes.

After the earthquake first struck, the Chinese Government immediately launched the emergency humanitarian assistance mechanism and provided ¥40 million to Türkiye and ¥30 million to Syria. We have expedited food assistance to Syria, to be followed shortly by prefabricated housing worth ¥10 million. Chinese society has broadly mobilized, with the public making financial and in-kind donations on their own initiative. Almost 20 non-Government emergency response teams headed to the earthquake-stricken areas. And China's Red Cross Society provided the Turkish Red Crescent and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent with emergency cash assistance and relief materials. Moving forward, China will continue assisting Türkiye and Syria in line with their needs in overcoming the disaster and rebuilding their countries.

When one country is in distress, all others rush to its rescue. Under the current circumstances, both bilateral assistance and the United Nations humanitarian appeal are urgently needed and should be welcomed and encouraged. China appreciates all parties, especially the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, among Arab countries, for extending a helping hand to the Syrian Government and people, appreciates Under-Secretary-General Griffiths and Special Envoy Pedersen for visiting the areas hit by the earthquake immediately afterwards and mobilizing international support, welcomes the United Nations flash humanitarian appeal for Syria for disaster relief and hopes that assistance from all channels will be operationalized and synergized as soon as possible.

China welcomes the Syrian Government's decision to open the Bab al-Salam and Al-Rai border crossings, which are already in use, allowing more convoys into north-western Syria to continuously deliver supplies to the affected population. That is a positive step by the Syrian Government to relieve people's hardship in the wake of the earthquake, which shows both serious, genuine willingness to work with the United Nations and proves the United Nations ability to solve tangible problems on cross-border humanitarian relief through coordination with relevant parties. Such healthy interactions are to be encouraged.

Regrettably, the cross-line delivery of relief supplies to north-western Syria is still impeded. We call on all parties to put the interests of Syrians first,

maintain a constructive spirit, step up communication and coordination, remove all barriers and fully tap into the cross-border mechanism.

Years of illegal unilateral sanctions have significantly worsened the economic and livelihood crises in Syria and brought its disaster-response capacity to its knees. The concurrent humanitarian crises of earthquakes, a harsh winter and cholera outbreaks have immeasurably exacerbated the humanitarian consequences of unilateral sanctions. This month, some countries announced a temporary relaxation in their unilateral sanctions against Syria, which in a way reaffirms the severity of the situation. It is our hope that the relevant policy changes will be implemented as soon as possible to truly unfetter humanitarian agencies and effectively facilitate disaster rescue and relief efforts.

It must be pointed out that, to address the systematic harm on the Syrian economic foundation and development capacity due to unilateral sanctions, neither temporary measures nor partial exemptions are enough. We urge relevant countries to immediately and unconditionally lift all illegal unilateral sanctions against Syria and stop artificially creating and worsening humanitarian catastrophes.

China's position on the Syrian political issue is consistent and clear. The Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process is the fundamental way to resolve the Syrian issue. China welcomes Special Envoy Pedersen's continued efforts, along the lines of a step-for-step approach, to facilitate dialogue, consultation and mutual trust among the factions in Syria.

The earthquakes, as unfortunate as they are, can also be an opportunity to forge ahead jointly. It is our hope that relevant parties in Syria will rise above political divisions, build consensus faster and endeavour to hold the ninth session of the Syrian Constitutional Committee at an early date.

The Syrian political process cannot proceed without a secure environment. The international community should adopt uniform criteria, in accordance with international law and Security Council resolutions, and crack down on all terrorist forces in Syria with zero tolerance. Relevant parties must stop conniving with, covering for and politically exploiting terrorist forces. The Permanent Representative of Syria, in his letter dated 19 February to the President of the Security Council, condemned the air strike by a relevant country

on residential areas in Damascus on that day. China calls again for earnest respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity and a cessation of the illegal presence and military activities of foreign troops in Syria. The illegal plundering of natural resources must also stop immediately.

**Dame Barbara Woodward** (United Kingdom): Let me join others in thanking Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for their briefings. I would like to offer condolences to Ms. Muhrez on the tragic loss of her cousins and thank her for her valuable insights and powerful testimony describing, in particular, the impact of the earthquake on children and their families.

I again want to express the United Kingdom's deepest condolences to all those affected by the deadly earthquakes that hit Türkiye and Syria this month. The United Kingdom acted immediately, providing additional funding to first responders in north-west Syria and announcing a further \$30 million in emergency relief to the United Nations and humanitarian partners across Syria and Türkiye and issuing a general license exempting further aid from sanctions. That has provided much-needed assistance, including shelter, to thousands in freezing conditions.

We welcome the urgent efforts of the United Nations to scale up the humanitarian response, as well as the opening of crossings at Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai. This latest tragedy has brought into sharp focus the importance of unhindered and predictable access, without conditions, into north-west Syria. The Council must continue to monitor this closely in the light of ongoing concerns that the regime continues to divert and interfere with aid deliveries.

Even before the earthquake hit, needs were already at their highest-ever levels after more than a decade of conflict, during which the Al-Assad regime has acted with complete disregard for the well-being of Syria and its people. We cannot allow the regime to use the latest tragedy to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Just this month, the Council heard further evidence of the regime's criminal use of chemical weapons against the civilian population in Douma in 2018 (see S/PV.9255). Thousands of families are left without answers about loved ones who have been disappeared into Al-Assad's prison system. At the same time, the regime continues to project instability into the region, including through the production and smuggling of



captagon. That illicit narcotic industry, worth tens of billions of dollars, funds a luxury lifestyle for a regime whose people, as Mr. Griffiths said, are packed into tents in freezing conditions.

The people of Syria's immediate need is for humanitarian support, but they need and deserve more than that. They need a sustainable, inclusive and just peace. As Ms. Muhrez said, we owe that to them. The United Nations-facilitated political process set out in resolution 2254 (2015) remains the only viable route to deliver that peace. We welcome meaningful efforts to progress towards that end, including important efforts in the region. We urge the regime to engage immediately and in good faith.

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

Let me begin by thanking our briefers — Under-Secretary-General Griffiths, Special Envoy Pedersen and the Response Director for Save the Children, Ms. Muhrez — for their remarks to the Security Council today. Malta is grateful for their briefings and collective call to action as we face the new emergency in Syria.

As we heard this morning, the acute impact of the earthquake is still being felt throughout Syria. Right across the country, and nowhere more than in the north-west, the scale of the crisis exceeds what was unimaginable less than one month ago. Water and sanitation, shelter, fuel, food and protection are now among the most immediate needs of the population. Prior to this most recent catastrophe, some 15.3 million Syrians were already in need of emergency humanitarian assistance. Now more than ever, we must work collectively to address the dual humanitarian crisis.

The impact of the disaster on children has been devastating. We have heard of 1,300 schools or temporary learning facilities in Syria being damaged or destroyed, with educational support needed for some 6.4 million children. Unaccompanied and separated children are in urgent need of protection and appropriate care arrangements while family tracing and case management take place. Families require emergency psychosocial support to help them recover from the horrors they have lived through. Women and girls deserve protection and a gender-sensitive humanitarian response. Nothing less than immediate and sustained humanitarian assistance is what is needed now to save

lives and avoid the worst of the secondary impacts of the earthquake.

We remain supportive of the principled delivery of humanitarian aid to all those in need through the most effective and direct modalities. In that regard, Malta welcomes the opening of the border crossings at Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai. We call for greater support for those operations and for Member States to assist in unlocking the supply chain challenges the United Nations is facing, thereby allowing the aid operation to scale up in size and speed to rapidly meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Malta expresses our hope that cross-line operations can also be scaled up in the days ahead. However, we underscore the continued importance of resolution 2672 (2023) and the additional border crossings, the scale and scope of which cannot be matched by cross-line operations at this time.

This crisis is yet another devastating blow to the population of Syria. The earthquake has magnified and exacerbated humanitarian suffering in Syria, yet we must not forget that it is far from being its cause. Twelve years of conflict and countless crimes committed by the Syrian Government and parties to the conflict have inflicted untold pain and suffering upon millions. Malta reiterates that, even in the face of the latest tragedy, we must remain steadfast in our calls for progress on the political track, in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

Malta was dismayed to hear reports of Government shelling in the north-west in the aftermath of the earthquake and calls again for a nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria. We urge the reconvening of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva and express our support for that Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process under the auspices of the United Nations. We reiterate that the return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons must be safe, legal and voluntary in accordance with the criteria set out by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. We call once again for the transparent and verifiable release of all those arbitrarily detained in Syria, as well as for the provision of information on the whereabouts and the fate of the thousands still missing.

In conclusion, Malta fully supports the work of Special Envoy Pedersen and his step-for-step initiative, and we call on Damascus to engage faithfully with his good offices. The earthquake that occurred on 6 February in Syria and Türkiye presents a tragic

opportunity to refocus and redouble our efforts towards ensuring a just and lasting peace for the people of Syria.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

**Mr. Sabbagh** (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): As the Syrian Arab Republic was recovering from the aftermath of the earthquake, burying its martyrs and racing against time to address the catastrophic consequences of that devastating earthquake, terrorist and Israeli occupation forces were targeting Syria and its people. The Da'esh terrorist organization carried out a brutal attack, killing 53 citizens and injuring others while they were foraging for truffles in the city of Al-Sukhna, east of Homs governorate.

Simultaneously with that terrorist aggression, the occupying Israeli entity launched an air strike on Sunday, 19 February from the occupied Golan, using missiles against residential neighbourhoods full of civilians in Damascus. According to initial numbers, that attack claimed the lives of five martyrs and seriously injured 15 civilians. It also destroyed a number of civilian homes and caused material damage to several educational centres and historical sites.

That Israeli terrorist attack was premeditated and part of Israel's systematic targeting of Syrian civilians and civilian objects, including homes, service centres, airports and seaports. Such an attack constitutes an absolute war crime and is a gross violation of international law and the principles and provisions of the Charter of the United Nations. It is an explicit threat to peace and security in the Middle East region. The Syrian Arab Republic called on the Security Council to assume its primary responsibilities in condemning those Israeli attacks and to take the necessary measures to deter them, hold accountable and punish their perpetrators and ensure that they are not repeated. In that regard, Syria reiterates its call on the countries supporting Israel in the Council, especially the United States of America, to stop obstructing the Security Council's fulfilment of its mandate to end the crimes committed by the Israeli occupation and terrorist groups and to hold them accountable.

More than three weeks have passed since the devastating earthquake that struck Syria, leaving thousands of victims and injured and destroying

hundreds of buildings and other infrastructure and service facilities. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, within its limited capabilities, continues to make every effort to facilitate the emergency response to the effects of the earthquake in the four afflicted governorates.

In that regard, the Syrian Government provided the necessary facilities and exemptions for the arrival of humanitarian aid and relief workers through the three Syrian airports, the Latakia seaport and the land border crossings with Lebanon and Jordan. It granted open approvals and facilities to the United Nations and international organizations operating in Syria, including by facilitating and accelerating customs procedures, granting visas and ensuring the entry of supplies and emergency relief workers to support those affected.

At the same time, the Syrian Government stressed its commitment to deliver humanitarian assistance to all Syrians on Syrian territory, including in north-west Syria. The Syrian Government took a sovereign decision to approve the opening of two additional border crossings — Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai — for a period of three months in order to deliver humanitarian assistance to our people in that region. That decision allowed the entry to date of hundreds of trucks carrying humanitarian aid, which reflects the importance of the agreement reached with the United Nations.

The Syrian Government also continued to grant the necessary approvals and facilities to deliver humanitarian aid from within Syria, including organizing cross-line humanitarian missions to north-west Syria, for a period of six months, in order to provide humanitarian assistance and to conduct humanitarian-needs assessments in that area to respond to the repercussions of the earthquake and its aftershocks.

Syria reaffirms the importance of continuing to implement all those measures in good faith. We reject all attempts to politicize the humanitarian situation in Syria, whether through orders from the operators of the terrorist group the Al-Nusra Front/Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham to prevent the cross-line entry of humanitarian assistance, or the scepticism and disruption practiced by some Western countries of the Syrian Government's decision to allow the entry of humanitarian assistance through two new border crossings, as well as the allegations of those countries that assistance is being derailed. That derailment is unconfirmed by the United

Nations and is a lie that aims to disrupt the efforts by the Syrian Government to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Syrians. Why have we not heard a condemnation by those countries of terrorist groups hindering the delivery of cross-line humanitarian assistance?

The Syrian Arab Republic once again expresses its thanks and appreciation to all countries that stood in solidarity with Syria and its people and promptly responded to the needs of Syrian people facing such difficult circumstances. That lent important support to national efforts to mitigate the effects of the earthquake and save many of the injured. We also express our appreciation to the Secretary-General for launching the flash appeal to respond to the catastrophic repercussions of the earthquake. International efforts should focus on rebuilding infrastructure and addressing the damage to the necessary service, health and educational facilities. That is an urgent need when it comes to the return of displaced people affected by the earthquake to their regions and homes.

In that regard, we express serious concern about the low levels of funding for the humanitarian response plan for Syria. The 2022 plan has received less than 50 per cent of pledged funding. That is why we call on donor countries to provide the necessary funding to the humanitarian response plan and to the humanitarian flash appeal for Syria in order to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance to all those in need across the country.

In his latest report on the humanitarian situation in Syria (S/2023/127), the Secretary-General reaffirms the

“importance of providing clear reassurances that no unilateral sanctions will interfere with relief operations benefiting the Syrian population.” (S/2023/127, para. 81)

We are well aware that the United States of America and the European Union will not acknowledge the extent of the negative impacts of the unilateral sanctions they impose on Syrians. I will therefore briefly present some aspects that expose the inaccuracy of their claims and prove that such unjust sanctions have a harmful effect on Syrians and that they were indeed originally designed for that purpose.

First, sanctions and restrictions imposed on the Syrian air transport sector and civil aviation equipment affected the safety of civilian passengers and caused

many difficulties for international relief flights to Syrian airports, both before and after the disaster. Many international airlines were forced to use Beirut Airport for fear of those sanctions, thereby incurring additional costs and delaying the delivery of assistance to the victims of the earthquake.

Second, sanctions and restrictions imposed on public and private hospitals in Syria, including children’s hospitals, and the preventing of international companies from selling medicines and necessary medical equipment to Syria exacerbated the vulnerability of the health sector in Syria, including during the pandemic and the earthquake.

Third, sanctions and restrictions imposed on the import of oil and oil derivatives to Syria have caused an acute shortage of fuel used for heating, transportation and electricity generation. Moreover, the illegal seizure by the United States of oil and gas fields in north-east Syria and oil-smuggling operations have deprived the Syrian people of that important material and billions of dollars in revenue.

Fourth, sanctions and restrictions imposed on the import of power stations, power-related equipment and spare parts have deprived Syrians of electricity for more than 20 hours a day, on average.

Fifth, sanctions and restrictions imposed on the import of equipment and machinery necessary for supplying drinking water, irrigation, sterilizing and purifying water and repairing and improving the sewage system caused the spread of many diseases, especially cholera.

Sixth, sanctions and restrictions imposed on the import of heavy construction machinery and other construction equipment to Syria weakened its ability to address the repercussions of the earthquake and demonstrated the urgent need for such equipment in rescue operations and the removal of tens of thousands of tons of debris and rubble of destroyed buildings, as well as to build housing units for hundreds of thousands of earthquake victims.

Seventh, restrictions and sanctions imposed on imports of fertilizers needed for agriculture and food production, or as a component for making them locally, have caused irreparable damage to Syria’s agricultural production and contributed to a sharp rise in the cost of locally produced food. They have undermined

food security for Syrians and led to acute levels of malnutrition.

Lastly, sanctions and restrictions imposed on Syrian banks, including the Central Bank of Syria, have led to the freezing or severing of financial relations with foreign banks and have prevented them from conducting the financial transactions necessary for all the vital sectors that I have just mentioned. The list goes on and on. Those are just some examples of the negative repercussions of the United States and European sanctions.

In conclusion, I would like to note that the efforts needed to overcome the destructive consequences of the earthquake are ongoing. They require heightened international support and enormous resources, which will be possible only when humanitarian considerations are prioritized over political considerations, sincere and genuine support is provided to Syria and its people, donors fulfil their commitments and a safe and stable environment is provided to Syrians. That requires supporting counter-terrorism efforts, stopping Israel's repeated and systematic attacks, ending the illegal foreign presence on Syrian territory and lifting the unilateral and coercive measures imposed on the Syrian people immediately, completely and unconditionally.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Mr. Iravani** (Islamic Republic of Iran): We thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Griffiths for their updates and insightful briefings.

The recent devastating earthquake in Syria has exacerbated the country's already dire humanitarian situation, leading to the collapse of structures and basic services and severely affecting people's ability to meet their basic needs. Given the seriousness of the situation, humanitarian assistance must be scaled up and provided in an impartial and non-discriminatory manner, free of politicization and conditions, in order to ensure that the most vulnerable individuals receive the assistance they require. We commend the United Nations and humanitarian agencies for their ongoing efforts to help the Syrian people and alleviate their suffering, especially at this challenging time. Iran was one of the first countries to respond positively to the humanitarian requests from Türkiye and Syria by sending humanitarian aid, and we will continue to do everything in our power to assist the people affected by the devastating earthquake in their time of need.

In order to address Syria's current humanitarian crisis more effectively, the international community should focus on lifting the inhumane unilateral sanctions. We must recognize that the unilateral coercive measures imposed on Syria, which are blatant violations of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, have made it more difficult for the people to meet their needs and have constrained the ability of Government institutions to deliver basic services and improve living conditions. The recent exemptions for humanitarian relief are not sufficient and are only an attempt to create the appearance of concern. It is therefore not enough to offer words of solidarity without taking concrete action. We call for the immediate, complete and unconditional lifting of the unjustified sanctions. In the meantime, the continued plundering of Syria's natural resources by foreign forces, which has resulted in a severe fuel shortage and exacerbated the humanitarian situation, must be stopped. According to the Syrian Arab Republic, those criminal acts have resulted in the theft of more than \$100 billion in Syria's national resources and wealth, primarily in the form of oil and gas.

We support the full implementation of resolution 2672 (2023), with its strong emphasis on prioritizing early-recovery projects aimed at rebuilding critical infrastructure, enhancing cross-line aid operations and addressing the pressing challenge of ensuring the supply of electricity, which is a basic requirement for all Syrians. Such efforts will not only provide immediate relief to the Syrian people but also lay a foundation for sustainable long-term development. It will be essential to carry out that work in close cooperation and coordination with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and in full respect for Syria's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. We appreciate and recognize the Government's efforts to support and facilitate humanitarian access to all areas of Syria. The Syrian Arab Republic's recent decision to open two new crossing points to facilitate humanitarian access deserves the Council's respect and support.

In order to ensure a more effective political solution to the Syrian crisis, we continue to emphasize that a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, facilitated by the United Nations, is the only viable approach to ending the crisis. Together with our Astana format partners, we will continue to work to achieve long-term and sustainable normalization in and around Syria. We support the ongoing work of the



Constitutional Committee. In that context, we commend the Special Envoy's continuing efforts to facilitate the next meeting of the Committee and welcome his recent visit to Damascus and contact with Syrian parties. We believe that the current procedural impasse in the Committee can be resolved through constructive engagement and good faith on the part of all the parties involved. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to direct our efforts towards initiatives that will only divert the political process and add no value.

Terrorism remains a significant threat to Syria and the wider region and must be addressed decisively. We are concerned about terrorist activities in the areas under occupation. The illegal presence of military forces in Syria, in violation of the Charter and international law, is the primary source of insecurity in the country and must be stopped if we are to create an environment conducive to a resolution of the crisis. We strongly believe that the fight against terrorism must be carried out in full respect for Syria's national sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence, and without using it as a pretext to violate the fundamental principles of international law.

In conclusion, we strongly condemn the Israeli regime's terrorist attack on a civilian residential building in a densely populated area of central Damascus on 19 February. Such attacks are a grave threat to regional peace and stability and violate international law, international humanitarian law and the Charter. The international community must compel Israel's regime to stop its repeated violations of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the terrorist attacks it has carried out on civilians and critical infrastructure in Syria. We urge the Security Council to take responsibility and explicitly condemn the Israeli regime's ongoing violation of the fundamental principle of Member States' national sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is the foundation of the Charter.

**The President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Türkiye.

**Mr. Önal** (Türkiye): As this is the first time that I am addressing the Security Council in my new capacity as the Permanent Representative of Türkiye to the United Nations, I would like to greet the members of the Council and congratulate Malta on its steering of the Council's work for this month. I also thank Special Envoy Pedersen, Under-Secretary-General Griffiths and Ms. Muhrez for their valuable briefings.

The people of Türkiye and its neighbour Syria are faced with the overwhelming consequences of one of the most devastating earthquakes in history. Our pain and sorrow are profound. Our thoughts and prayers are with all the victims, grieving families and millions of people affected. I would like to take this opportunity to convey the heartfelt thanks and appreciation of my Government and people for the flood of sympathy and expressions of support that we have received from the international community, including the Council, the United Nations and the European Union. As we try to deal with the enormous task of addressing the many dimensions of post-disaster emergency humanitarian assistance and recovery in an area larger than Switzerland, the Netherlands and Denmark combined, with about 14 million inhabitants, the continued international support, including through the United Nations flash appeal for Türkiye and Syria, will be crucial.

While grappling with those challenges in our own country, we are continuing to do our best to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people. We have already repaired the roads leading to the Bab Al-Hawa border gate, which were damaged and rendered useless by the earthquake. We have also made available the Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai border crossings for the transfer of desperately needed United Nations aid faster and in greater quantities to the worst affected areas. Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rai were already operational and open for zero-point aid deliveries by third countries and humanitarian organizations. Since the earthquakes, as Mr. Griffiths told us, a total of 456 United Nations aid trucks have passed through those border crossings, delivering essential relief items to millions of Syrians.

Maintaining a scaled-up United Nations response through those crossings as long as it is needed will be critically important to meeting needs in Syria in the most expedited, effective and efficient manner. We continue to facilitate United Nations field visits and assess the needs in the areas affected, in addition to ensuring the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the region by third countries. Our airspace is also open to planes carrying humanitarian aid to Syria. On day one of the earthquake, we announced that if need be, we would also consider opening the Kessab border crossing for international aid to the regime-controlled areas through Türkiye. That remains our position.

The United Nations humanitarian flash appeal for Syria is an important instrument by which the

Syrian people's most urgent needs can be met in the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes. It is essential that the resources raised through the flash appeal be channelled to the places where they are needed most and used to alleviate the plight of the people in the areas affected. In addition to cross-border aid, Türkiye also continues its efforts to facilitate cross-line deliveries. The first cross-line aid delivery to Ras Al-Ayn after the earthquake — and only the second since 2019 — was made on 26 February, transporting medical and humanitarian aid to the region. We are also working to facilitate cross-line aid delivery from Aleppo to Idlib.

The devastation wrought by the earthquake has exacerbated the suffering, despair and displacement of the Syrian people. It has also demonstrated once again the interrelated nature of all the components of the Syrian crisis and has increased the urgency of creating momentum in the political process. A sustainable political solution meeting the aspirations of the Syrian people can only be reached in line with resolution 2254 (2015). We need greater alignment of the positions of all stakeholders if progress is to be achieved, and we fully support Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts in that direction.

As we have come to emphasize, the return of refugees is also part and parcel of the settlement of the Syrian crisis and should be treated as such. Along with the political process, simultaneous steps should

therefore be taken to facilitate the safe, dignified and voluntary return of the Syrian refugees. Throughout that process, it will remain essential to eliminate terrorist elements such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party/People's Protection Units and Da'esh and to disrupt their separatist agendas in Syria. Terrorism is the biggest threat to the territorial integrity of Syria as well as to peace and security in the region. Türkiye will continue its efforts to contribute to the maintenance of calm on the ground and to the fight against terrorism.

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

As this is the last scheduled meeting of the Council for the month of February, I would like to express the sincere appreciation of the delegation of Malta to the members of the Council and the Council's secretariat for all the support they have given us. It has indeed been a busy month, and one in which we rallied to arrive at a consensus on several important issues within our purview. We could not have done it alone and without the hard work, support and positive contributions of every delegation and the representatives of the Secretariat, including the technical support team and the conference service officers, interpreters, verbatim reporters and security staff. As we end our presidency, I know I speak on behalf of the Council in wishing the delegation of Mozambique good luck in the month of March.

*The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.*