



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

8471st meeting

Tuesday, 26 February 2019, 10.40 a.m.

New York

Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Ndong Mba	(Equatorial Guinea)
<i>Members:</i>	Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Adom
	Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Germany	Mr. Heusgen
	Indonesia	Mr. Syihab
	Kuwait	Mr. Albanai
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	South Africa	Mr. Matjila
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Hickey
	United States of America	Mr. Cohen

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) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/157)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.40 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) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/157)

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

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Ms. Reena Ghelani, Director for the Operations and Advocacy Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to participate in this meeting.

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/2019/157, 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) and 2449 (2018).

I now give the floor to Ms. Ghelani.

Ms. Ghelani: I provide this update today on behalf of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock.

A fortnight ago, we got a glimpse of what life is like for some 41, 000 displaced Syrians, mainly women and children in Rukban, near the Syria-Jordan border. What our colleagues witnessed is a dire humanitarian situation — people struggling for survival, facing hunger and lacking the most basic necessities. The convoy earlier this month was the largest and one of the most complex carried out by the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent since the crisis began, nearly eight years ago. The mission lasted 10 days and involved 133 trucks loaded with essential humanitarian assistance, vaccines and logistical items. The assistance delivered was critical and will save lives.

But the gravity of the situation for civilians in Rukban means that sustained humanitarian access is needed moving forward. Food supplies, for example, are expected to last only 30 days. While the primary objective of this latest convoy was to provide immediate humanitarian assistance, teams also carried out surveys of the intentions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to inform discussions on possible durable solutions. An overwhelming majority — about 95 per cent of IDPs — expressed the wish to leave the camp, while more than 80 per cent wished to return to their areas of origin.

However, all those consulted, regardless of their profile or tribal affiliation, have ongoing concerns related to the situation at destination — the lack of civil documentation, concerns about access to their property and concerns related to their safety and security, especially the fear of detention and military conscription — and requested information and guarantees on all of those issues.

On 16 February, a statement was released by the Joint Coordination Committees on the Repatriation of Syrian Refugees of the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic regarding the opening of humanitarian corridors from the Rukban settlement. The United Nations has not been involved in the opening of those humanitarian corridors, beyond providing supplies to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent for immediate assistance to those who decided to leave through the evacuation corridors.

The United Nations welcomes all efforts to ease the suffering of people stranded in Rukban and to identify durable solutions. These efforts, however, need to ensure that any returns or relocations are voluntary, safe, dignified and well-informed and abide by core protection standards that comply with international humanitarian law and human rights law. Dialogue is ongoing with communities in Rukban, the Russian Federation, the Syrian authorities and others to ensure that will be the case in any relocation process.

The United Nations remains extremely concerned about the protection of civilians who remain in the last Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-held areas in south-east Deir ez-Zor governorate and those who were able to flee the fighting. Since late last year, more than 37,000 people have fled from Hajin to the Al-Hol camp in Hasakah governorate, some 300 kilometres north of Hajin. Close to three quarters of the total population of

the Al-Hol camp is now made up of women and children under the age of 5. Thousands of additional people are expected to arrive at Al-Hol camp in the coming days and weeks.

Extremely harsh conditions are reported along the route north, including cold temperatures and a lack of food, water, shelter and health services. At least 75 people, two thirds of them children under the age of 1, have died since December 2018, either while in transit or shortly after arriving at the Al-Hol camp, mostly due to exposure and a lack of access to health care while making the journey northward.

Response efforts are being scaled up in Al-Hol camp and in Hajin and surrounding areas, despite considerable security challenges. For example, on 15 February, a Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy of six trucks loaded with United Nations and International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement supplies reached Hajin and distributed aid to some 5,000 people. Late last week, the United Nations and partners also completed food distributions to 15 towns and informal settlements in the eastern part of Deir ez-Zor governorate.

In addition, the United Nations has established a transit centre in Suwar, midway between Hajin and Al-Hol, to receive people during the transit journey. However, the screening sites just outside Hajin still remain inaccessible to humanitarian organizations. Moreover, protection concerns for the displaced include constraints on freedom of movement, with many of those arriving at Al-Hol expressing a preference to move to other locations, in most cases to connect with family members or friends in Deir ez-Zor governorate.

Across north-west Syria, an estimated 2.7 million men, women and children remain in need of humanitarian assistance. Some 40 per cent of children are out of school, while 2 million residents rely on water-trucking for most if not all their clean water. Each month, some 1.7 million Syrians are reached with critical assistance through cross-border operations out of Turkey. Ensuring sustained humanitarian access is therefore critical.

To date, the recent expansion of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham areas of influence has not been reported to have resulted in a significant change in levels of humanitarian access. The United Nations and partners are closely monitoring the situation to ensure that independent, neutral and impartial humanitarian action is respected. A number of measures are in place

to mitigate the risks of diversion or interference with aid operations, including screening and vetting of implementing partners, monitoring of distributions, commodity tracking systems, facilitating regular feedback from affected communities and maintaining engagement with all parties to the conflict in order to address operational challenges as they arise.

We have frequently reported to the Council on the plight of civilians in Idlib and surrounding areas in north-west Syria, who simply have nowhere else to flee should there be a full-scale military incursion into the area. While the September agreement of last year between Turkey and Russia to establish a demilitarized zone staved off immediate military escalation, the last few weeks have witnessed an increase in fighting, with dozens of civilians reportedly killed and dozens injured. Up to 36,000 people are reported to have been displaced as a result of intensified shelling, many of whom have moved northward and are now residing in camps on the border with Turkey.

As stated last week by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights:

“Large numbers of civilians, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Idlib and northern Aleppo, are living an intolerable existence. They are trapped between the escalation of hostilities and bombardment, on the one hand, and, on the other, are forced to live under the extremist rule of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other extremist fighters who regularly carry out targeted killings, abductions and arbitrary detention.”

I reiterate today that the risk of military escalation, and potentially catastrophic humanitarian consequences persists. It is therefore critical to sustain and fully implement the Russia-Turkey agreement of 17 September 2018.

Staggering levels of humanitarian need persist throughout Syria. This year, an estimated 11.7 million people will require humanitarian assistance across the country. The United Nations and its partners reach millions each month with life-saving humanitarian assistance across Syria. That is only possible only thanks to the generous support of international donors. More than \$5 billion was contributed to the humanitarian response plan and the regional refugee and resilience plan for 2018 — a huge amount of money, which has saved lives and given hope to millions.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank every Government that supported our appeals over the last year, and to urge Member States to ensure timely funding for humanitarian operations in Syria and neighbouring refugee-hosting countries in 2019. The conference to be held in Brussels from 12 to 14 March will be a critical marker in that regard.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Ms. Ghelani for her briefing.

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

Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium): I will present this statement on behalf of the co-penholders on the Syria humanitarian file: Kuwait, Germany and Belgium.

I would like to start by thanking Reena Ghelani, Director for Operations and Advocacy of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for her valuable briefing. I would also like to thank, through her, all the humanitarian and medical personnel throughout Syria for their courage and the tireless efforts to alleviate human suffering in Syria. They have been there for eight years, since the start of the conflict, and continue to provide life-saving assistance, including most recently through the humanitarian convoy to more than 40,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the Rukban camp.

The situation for IDPs at the Rukban camp has further deteriorated over the winter months. That has put particular strain on the camp's vulnerable population, the vast majority of whom are women and children. After months of inexcusable delays, in early February the United Nations finally got the green light to deploy, together with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, a joint inter-agency convoy consisting of 133 trucks. Humanitarian workers handed out much-needed food, sanitation and hygiene supplies, and provided winterization materials. They also conducted the vaccination campaign for some 7,000 children. Finally, they undertook an intentions survey of the inhabitants of the camp in order to explore a lasting solution to the dire humanitarian situation in Rukban.

According to the results of the survey, an overwhelming majority of the inhabitants wish to leave the camp and many of them want to return to their area of origin, although they expressed security and safety concerns, as well as concerns about the lack of

civil documentation and about access to their property or housing. Indeed, while the convoy was a much-needed step, and regular, sustained United Nations humanitarian access to Rukban remains a necessity in the short term, a more lasting solution is needed through collective efforts and arrangements, in full coordination with the United Nations.

Those relocation efforts, however, must uphold key principles. All returns or relocations must be voluntary, safe, dignified, well-informed and in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law and key protection standards. People must be able to relocate to a place of their choosing. United Nations humanitarian staff must be granted access to the population prior to any departure, during movement and after relocation in order to provide protection support, assess needs and deliver assistance. Family unity needs to be safeguarded and children, women, the elderly and people with special needs must be afforded special protection during all phases of the relocation. Regular, free and unfettered access of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to returnees is key to finding and successfully implementing durable solutions for IDPs and voluntary returnees.

We continue to urge all parties to grant regular, safe, sustained and unconditional humanitarian access across Syria. Parties to the conflict must allow the humanitarian community to provide protection and assistance based on needs, including gender-specific needs, and in an impartial and non-discriminatory manner. Far too often, constraints of a bureaucratic or security nature, imposed by all parties, remain. Far too often, the United Nations is not able to reach people in need. That considerably affects United Nations access to areas with high needs, particularly during the current winter months.

We are closely following the situation in the north of Syria, specifically in Idlib governorate, where 3 million civilians are located — half of them IDPs. After a period of relative calm, the recent surge of violent incidents has resulted in numerous civilian casualties. The Russian-Turkish ceasefire memorandum of understanding has been instrumental in preventing the catastrophic consequences that would be caused by any military offensive.

We reiterate our call on all parties to continue to engage in the full implementation of the agreement, as the situation in Idlib remains particularly fragile. We

also call for a nation-wide cessation of hostilities, as stipulated in resolution 2401 (2018). Furthermore, we call on all parties to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, as laid out by international humanitarian and international human rights law, as a matter of priority. We strongly condemn all attacks against civilian infrastructure, particularly schools and hospitals, as well as indiscriminate attacks on densely populated areas.

Following weeks of intense fighting in the area of Deir ez-Zor, fighting is subsiding. Over the past weeks, some 25,000 people, especially the most vulnerable — women, children and the elderly — fled the area of Hajin to relocate to the Al-Hol camp. Along the 300-kilometre route, they further encountered harsh conditions — cold temperatures and a lack of food, water, shelter and health services — and serious protection concerns. We deplore the loss of lives amongst those making this journey northwards, in particular the many newborns and young children. The situation at the Al-Hol camp is dire; the camp is overcrowded and its capacity has been overstretched by the numerous new arrivals, pushing the number of people at the camp to almost 47,000. We welcome the installation of a transit centre, halfway between Hajin and Al-Hol, to provide urgently needed assistance to IDPs. We support all efforts to allow United Nations humanitarian access in order to alleviate human suffering.

Thousands of Syrian men, women and children continue to be arbitrarily arrested and detained. We take note of the recent release of a number of detainees and prisoners. However, more needs to be done, and we call on all actors to continue work on that important issue, towards concrete, tangible progress. We condemn the reported use of torture and sexual violence against those men, women and children. Perpetrators are to be held accountable.

The conflict in Syria will soon enter its eighth year. The humanitarian needs, both inside the country and in the region, remain particularly high. Inside Syria, nearly 12 million people — of whom almost half are children — are still in need of humanitarian assistance, ranging from food provisions and medical treatment to water, sanitation and hygiene, protection and psychosocial support services, child protection, protection from gender-based violence and mine action. United Nations humanitarian agencies and partners continue to reach more than 3 million people per month, both from inside Syria and through the

cross-border mechanism, as mandated by the Security Council. Among them, 700,000 people — most of them displaced — are in acute need and receive lifesaving assistance.

The third Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, which will take place in Brussels in mid-March, will allow us to renew our focus on the plight of the population affected by the Syrian conflict, as well as Syrian refugees in the region, and renew our commitment to and concrete support for their humanitarian needs. It will offer a forum to discuss the most critical humanitarian issues, such as ensuring access and the provision of life-saving aid and protection, as well as approaches to ensuring livelihoods and resilience. It will also seek new financial pledges to address the needs in Syria and the region. We call on all potential donors to contribute to meeting those needs.

The people of Syria deserve to live in peace. Only peace, grounded in strong inclusive foundations, can break the cycle of violence. Therefore, we need to advance the political process through a genuine and inclusive political settlement in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and other relevant Security Council resolutions.

We also continue to advocate for the accountability of all those responsible for breaches of international law, in particular international humanitarian law and human rights law. To that end, the co-penholders will continue to support the important role of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria. Without an inclusive political solution in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and without accountability, no sustainable peace is possible.

I should like to conclude by expressing our full support for Special Envoy Pedersen in his engagement to implement resolution 2254 (2015). We look forward to his first briefing before the Council this Thursday.

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): I thank Ms. Ghelani for her briefing and the important work that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and her partners are doing to support the Syrian people.

We applaud OCHA's work to facilitate the largest-ever humanitarian aid convoy in Syria during the successful joint United Nations-Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivery from Damascus to the Rukban

encampment on 6 February. The United States also salutes the courage and selfless dedication of the humanitarian workers who so bravely carried out the delivery to ensure that life-saving aid reached Syrians in desperate need.

While that convoy was successful in achieving its aim of providing immediate support for the Rukban population, that assistance will only sustain the population for approximately 30 days. Therefore, the United States urges the Al-Assad regime and the Russian Federation to facilitate a new United Nations-Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy to Rukban before the end of March. The Al-Assad regime and the Russian Federation can ensure, if they have the will, that the United Nations can regularly provide unfettered humanitarian assistance to Rukban as long as there are vulnerable civilians at that location.

The United States has not impeded and will not impede any voluntary departures and has long advocated for freedom of movement for internally displaced persons (IDPs) throughout Syria. We remain steadfast in our support for safe, voluntary, dignified and informed departures from Rukban. The United States insists that any process to arrange for departures be coordinated with the United Nations and reflect humanitarian principles.

To that end, the United States takes note of the receptivity of the United Nations to all efforts that will ease the suffering of those displaced in Rukban, including Russia's checkpoint initiative, as long as those initiatives allow for truly safe, voluntary, dignified and informed departures. The United States looks forward to continuing to coordinate with the United Nations, Russia and other partners to develop a plan to support voluntary and informed returns from Rukban that best address the long-term needs of the population.

The United States calls on all parties, including Russia and the Al-Assad regime, to ensure that the following five minimum conditions are met on departures from Rukban.

First, they should ensure that any planning is coordinated with the United Nations and allow for United Nations monitoring and oversight of movements, ensuring that departures are in line with humanitarian standards.

Secondly, they should ensure that IDPs are given access to information about potential departure options

and accurate information on conditions, including security, in their preferred place of return.

Thirdly, they should ensure that guarantees are provided against arbitrary arrest and detention.

Fourthly, they should ensure that a clear explanation is provided of military conscription requirements for IDPs who decide to leave.

Fifthly, they should ensure that sustained humanitarian access is facilitated to allow aid to reach those who do not wish to depart Rukban.

Rukban is only one example of the extreme and challenging humanitarian conditions faced by millions of people throughout Syria. The regime has an obligation under resolution 2165 (2014) to enable the immediate and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance by the United Nations and its implementing partners. It is unacceptable that the Al-Assad regime continues to hinder regular access for the United Nations and other relief agencies to eastern Ghouta, Yarmouk and Dara'a.

As long as civilians cannot count on the Al-Assad regime and its allies to allow the United Nations to provide sustained unfettered humanitarian aid to areas under its control, it is clear that conditions are not conducive for sustained and voluntary returns and that the time is still not right for the international community to support reconstruction efforts in regime-held areas of Syria, absent irreversible steps towards a political solution to the conflict.

We are also concerned about the increase in IDPs fleeing the last grip of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS) as it tries to cling to territory in the middle Euphrates river valley. We thank our partners who continue to provide additional shelter, medical care and crucial food assistance to address the needs of IDPs in places like Al-Hol and across north-east Syria.

We also welcome the recent announcement by Prime Minister Al-Mahdi that the Government of Iraq is prepared to help facilitate the repatriation of Iraqi nationals in Syria. The United States will continue to work with its coalition partners on stabilization efforts in north-east Syria to prevent the return of ISIS now that its territorial control has collapsed.

Finally, concerning the situation in Idlib, the United States is concerned about the recent increase in shelling by the regime of Idlib governorate, which has spurred the movement of an estimated 20,000 people towards

the Turkish border. The United States reiterates its calls on all parties to uphold the Turkish-Russian brokered ceasefire in order to prevent a dangerous escalation of the conflict and a humanitarian catastrophe. The ceasefire is vital to protecting 3 million civilians and protecting the border of our NATO ally Turkey.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I would first like to thank Ms. Reena Ghelani, Director for Operations and Advocacy of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for her very useful briefing, and to commend the excellent work of all the teams involved in responding to the urgent humanitarian situation in Syria. I also commend the commitment of the humanitarian co-penholders, as was expressed by the representative of Belgium only a few minutes ago.

Let us be clear. We would be making a serious miscalculation and a huge political mistake if we were to assume that the Syrian tragedy is behind us. It is not — as the country enters its ninth year of the conflict, the risks of escalation continue to be very real and the humanitarian situation remains a disaster.

In the Idlib region in particular, ceasefire violations are on the rise and the risk of a humanitarian disaster remains acute, as illustrated by the recent displacement of more than 20,000 people in less than one week. Equally distressing are the situations of the besieged population in Al-Baghouz, where a large number of people have lost their lives while trying to leave the area, and of the 47,000 people who are currently living in Al-Hol camp. Those calamities are the result of the horrific and systematic policy of Da'esh, in particular its resort to mining on a massive scale and its use of human shields. In that context, now more than ever, we must remain fully prepared to act with regard to three key inseparable priorities — the need to protect civilians, ensuring humanitarian access and achieving a lasting political solution in Syria.

Our first priority is therefore the protection of civilians. The protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel, must be an absolute priority for all stakeholders. Hospitals and schools remain the target of attacks, which is completely unacceptable and at odds with international humanitarian law. It must therefore be stressed that all parties must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. That is not a wish but a requirement.

In particular, we must do everything possible to preserve the ceasefire in Idlib over the long term, in accordance with the commitments reiterated at the Istanbul quadripartite summit. An offensive would have disastrous humanitarian, migration and security consequences throughout the region. To avoid that worst-case scenario, Turkey and Russia must continue their efforts to preserve the ceasefire agreement that they were able to broker last September and monitor its proper implementation.

Our second priority is ensuring humanitarian access. I would like to recall a statistic that is more eloquent than long speeches — of the 200 requests for access made to the Syrian regime during the months of December and January, only 40 per cent were authorized. In particular, it is unacceptable for the regime to be blocking access to areas it has reclaimed. We again call on actors with influence over the regime to ensure immediate, safe, comprehensive, unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access throughout Syria, in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions and international humanitarian law.

Humanitarian access must be respected at all stages — from independent needs assessment to the implementation and monitoring of humanitarian projects — in order to ensure that aid reaches the targeted populations, in particular and as a priority the most vulnerable. In Rukban, we welcome the deployment of the United Nations convoy in early February, but the situation remains extremely worrisome and calls for a two-pronged approach.

On the one hand, it is imperative to allow the United Nations to regularly deploy convoys to meet the needs of the more than 40,000 people in the camp, who live in appalling conditions. On the other hand, the results of the United Nations survey are clear — 95 per cent of people wish to leave the camp. The return of displaced persons from Rukban must be voluntary, safe and dignified and must be conducted in accordance with international humanitarian law and in close coordination with the United Nations. We must also ensure that displaced persons have access to all necessary information, including information on the security situation in the areas to which they wish to return and access to their property and basic services, as well as the necessary guarantees against the risk of arrest, arbitrary detention or forced conscription.

Reports that the Syrian regime practises such violations in the territories now under its control, in particular in the south-west and eastern Ghouta, are particularly worrisome. I therefore call on the regime's supporters to put an end to those violations, which is a prerequisite before the return of internally displaced persons and refugees can be considered. In areas outside the regime's control, it is crucial that the entire international community continue its efforts to meet the urgent needs of the population.

Regarding the north-east in particular, our mobilization must remain intact — it is a humanitarian imperative, contributes to the stabilization of the region and should help prevent the resurgence of Da'esh. I would also like to sound a warning of the risk of humanitarian disaster and serious human rights violations that a military intervention in that area would pose, regardless of its origin.

Our third priority — a decisive one — is the launch of a sustainable political process. Only an irreversible, credible and inclusive political transition will break the cycle of Syrian tragedy and pave the way for reconstruction. Concrete progress in the implementation of all elements of resolution 2254 (2015) is necessary to achieve lasting improvements in the humanitarian situation and to make possible the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees. That was the commitment made by the European Union and the Arab League at their summit on 24 and 25 February by declaring that they will pursue their respective policies towards Syria in line with the tangible progress made towards a political settlement.

It is our belief that today, perhaps for the first time in eight years, there is a small window of opportunity to put an end to the Syrian conflict. Our shared responsibility is to seize that opportunity through an inclusive political solution, because that is the only way to prevent the same causes leading to the same effects in future repetitions of the Syrian tragedy. That is why we call on each member of the Security Council to assume its responsibilities to allow the establishment of a credible political process, under the supervision of the United Nations, within the framework of resolution 2254 (2015).

The Council should be aware that there will be no lasting political solution without justice for Syrian victims. Following international arrest warrants issued by French courts against senior officials of the

repressive Syrian regime, the recent arrest in France and Germany of three former security officers suspected of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity is an important step, which demonstrates that serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights will not go unpunished. In that regard, France reiterates its support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

The Council can count on France's full mobilization at all levels in support of the political process and the efforts of Mr. Geir Pedersen, the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, to whom we pledge our full support.

Mr. Adom (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation welcomes today's briefing and congratulates Ms. Reena Ghelani, Director for Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for her excellent briefing on the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

My country remains concerned about the precarious humanitarian situation in the country despite the efforts made by the international community since the outbreak of the conflict eight years ago. According to United Nations agencies, at least 50 children died in January and February from hypothermia, malnutrition and medical conditions, 11.7 million Syrians currently living within the country's borders still need humanitarian assistance and nearly 5.7 million refugees have been registered in neighbouring countries.

That is why my country places great hopes in the third Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, to be held from 12 to 14 March. The Conference should enable us to take stock of the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and define the main priorities for 2019. In that regard, Côte d'Ivoire urges the international community to continue to support efforts to meet the basic needs and ensure the protection of those persons in distress.

My country is deeply concerned about the persistent reports of civilians killed or injured by air strikes and ground fighting in eastern Deir ez-Zor. The difficult living conditions of tens of thousands of people, including women, children and displaced elderly people in the region, are equally worrisome. With a view to reversing that pernicious trend, Côte d'Ivoire

urges all parties involved in military operations, both in Deir ez-Zor and throughout Syria, to comply with international law on the protection of civilians and hospital infrastructure. In that regard, my country would like to recall that obstacles to the free movement of persons and goods, as well as violations of the rights of displaced persons, constitute serious violations of human dignity and are liable to prosecution under international law.

It is also worth recalling the need to ensure safe, prompt, unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access for people in distress, both in Rukban and throughout Syria, in accordance with resolution 2401 (2018). Côte d'Ivoire welcomes the progress made in the deployment of a second convoy to Rukban, where about 42,000 people are living in difficult conditions.

My country is also concerned about the military escalation in the north-west and north-east of the country, where the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate as a result of renewed hostilities. Especially in Idlib province, civilians are victims of human rights violations perpetrated by armed groups.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire calls on the parties to the conflict to uphold the ceasefire in the Idlib demilitarized zone, ensure respect for international humanitarian law and intensify diplomatic efforts for a political solution to the Syrian crisis, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the complementary Astana and Sochi processes.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China thanks Ms. Reena Ghelani, Director for Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for her briefing. China attaches great importance to the humanitarian situation in Syria and commends the United Nations and all the parties concerned for their efforts to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria.

As we speak, there are still close to 12 million people in Syria in need of humanitarian assistance. In north-east and north-west Syria, many localities have been ravaged by floods. The situation in Rukban camp remains a cause for concern. A large number of civilians are heading towards Al-Hol camp. Humanitarian relief operations are facing challenges. At the same time, as the overall situation, including the security situation, stabilizes in Syria, we will see a more favourable environment for improving the

humanitarian conditions. In that context, China wishes to make the following observations.

First, the Syrian parties should put the future of the country and the well-being of the people first, continue to abide by the relevant Council resolutions, implement previously reached agreements, continue to engage in the political process and create conditions to further alleviate the humanitarian situation. The international community should steadfastly support the role of the United Nations as the primary mediator, lend its support to the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and push the Syrian parties, through a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process and on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015), to seek solutions through negotiations that accommodate the concerns of all parties. Council members should engage in comprehensive consultations and foster conditions that are conducive to a political settlement of the Syrian issue. The future of Syria can be decided only by the Syrian people, without outside interference. The international community should respect the Syrian Government and people in their efforts to safeguard national security and stability.

Secondly, the United Nations and the international community need to scale up assistance — in cash and in kind — to the Syrian people. In the light of evolving needs, they should adjust and improve their humanitarian relief operations. Cross-border humanitarian relief measures represent ad hoc arrangements under special circumstances. Full respect should be accorded to Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, in strict compliance with Council resolutions. Humanitarian operations should be guided by the United Nations guiding principles on humanitarian relief and the relevant provisions of international law, under the oversight of the United Nations throughout the process, with particular emphasis on greater transparency and better communication and coordination with the Syrian Government.

Thirdly, the international community needs to actively support the Syrian Government and people in socioeconomic reconstruction in order to create the conditions for the return of refugees and displaced persons. According to a survey, 83 per cent of the people in Rukban camp wish to return to their place of birth; efforts should be made to make that happen. Steady progress in reconstruction can give hope to the Syrian people and lead to long-term stability in Syria. The return of Syrian refugees to their home can also ease the pressure on host States.

China attaches great importance to the humanitarian situation in Syria and has contributed its part to alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people. Since the outbreak of the crisis, and acting through bilateral and multilateral channels, China has provided much humanitarian aid to refugees, both inside and outside Syria, including medical, winter and nutritional supplies. At the opening ceremony of the eighth ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in July last year, President Xi Jinping announced that China will provide additional assistance to the people in Syria and other regions. Work has been in full swing to fulfil that pledge. Moving forward, China will continue to provide assistance to Syrian refugees in Syria and neighbouring countries to the best of our ability.

Mr. Matjila (South Africa): We wish to thank the Director for Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Ms. Reena Ghelani, for her comprehensive and yet sobering briefing, complemented by the Permanent Representative of Belgium on behalf of the co-penholders. We would also like to welcome our colleague the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

South Africa reiterates its deep concern about the dire humanitarian situation in Syria. Almost eight years after the start of the conflict, the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic remains one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Some 13.1 million people require humanitarian assistance, including 6.2 million people who are internally displaced. The humanitarian crisis in Syria has a particularly severe impact on women, children and people who live with disabilities. Children have been disproportionately affected, with over 5 million children at a heightened risk of undernourishment, dehydration, diarrhoea, infectious diseases and injury. Millions more will need to be supported after being exposed to the traumatic events and violence of the past eight years.

South Africa calls for the full implementation of resolution 2449 (2018), which renewed the authorization for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria. My delegation welcomes the successful humanitarian operation undertaken in Rukban. Initial reports by OCHA reveal that the operation, involving 133 trucks, was the largest humanitarian operation ever undertaken by the United Nations in Syria. The Rukban operation distributed humanitarian assistance to more

than 40,000 people in the form of health, nutritional and education supplies and more 66,000 blankets and sleeping bags. Additionally, more than 7,000 children were vaccinated. Given the difficult environment in which the operation took place, OCHA and its implementing partners should be commended for their success. We also commend the Government of Syria for authorizing and facilitating access to Rukban.

We should be mindful of the fact that there is an urgent need for humanitarian assistance in north-eastern Syria in places such as the Al-Hol camp, three quarters of whose population are women and children under the age of five. We also remain concerned about the situation of civilians, particularly those trapped in Hajin, the last area controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. We call on all the parties to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, for all movements to be voluntary, for displacement to last no longer than necessary and for the displaced to be able to return as soon as possible in safety and dignity.

We welcome the ongoing de-escalation agreement between Turkey and Russia, which has averted potentially catastrophic humanitarian consequences, especially in Idlib province. We urge the parties to sustain it.

It is important to ensure that the Syrian authorities allow speedy and sustained access to humanitarian assistance, bearing in mind the importance of respect for international humanitarian law and for protecting the civilian population.

We reiterate our view that the only sustainable solution to the Syrian question, after so much bombing and destruction, continues to be a political settlement achieved through an inclusive Syrian-led dialogue aimed at a political transition that reflects the will of the Syrian people, with guaranteed protection for all groups of Syrian society. We therefore urge the Council to unite to fully implement resolution 2254 (2013) and to support Mr. Pedersen, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, who will be briefing us on Thursday.

Finally, we are looking forward to the release of the strategic humanitarian needs plan for 2019, as well as to the pledging conference to be held in Brussels in March. We call on the international community to make its support as generous as possible. We, as the international community, and the Council in particular,

must continue supporting the humanitarian efforts in Syria.

Mr. Syihab (Indonesia): My delegation would like to thank Director Reena Ghelani for her briefing on the current humanitarian situation in Syria. We also want to express our appreciation to the United Nations humanitarian workers for their tireless efforts in providing assistance in Syria.

We are deeply alarmed by the increase in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib, as well as the consequent additional suffering for many civilians in the Hajin area caused by air strikes and intense fighting. They are in an extremely vulnerable position, and it is obvious that the international community must enhance its efforts to address the issue, not only by alleviating people's suffering but also by halting the attacks and hostilities. In that context, Indonesia would like to focus on the following points.

First, with regard to the importance of ensuring the continuation of well-targeted humanitarian assistance, more than 11.7 million people in Syria depend on such assistance, which makes the effort daunting but also crucial. We were therefore delighted to learn that a second convoy reached Rukban, where some 41,000 people have received life-saving assistance. Sadly, as the Secretary-General states in his report (S/2019/157), eight children have died owing to the dire situation in the camp, which was exacerbated by the harsh winter conditions and was something that could and should have been prevented. With regard to Hajin, it is deeply disturbing to learn that many civilians have been reported killed or injured and that thousands have been displaced from Hajin to the Al-Hol camp. The large influx into Al-Hol and the current conditions there, where more than 40,000 people are now living and thousands more are expected, clearly need particular attention. We are pleased that the United Nations has scaled up its efforts by opening a transit centre in Al-Suwar. However, we need to do more. Sixty-one children were reported to have died while in transit or after arriving at the Al-Hol camp. That, too, could and should have been prevented. We urge all the parties to the conflict to take all possible measures to protect civilians, especially women and children, and to ensure the unhindered delivery of the humanitarian assistance they need. The urgency of maintaining life-saving assistance to the millions of people in need of it in Syria cannot be overemphasized.

Secondly, Indonesia believes that it is crucial to ensure the safe and voluntary return of refugees to their home areas in Syria. In that regard, we share the call made by Russia, Iran and Turkey during the tripartite summit in Sochi, on 14 February, concerning the importance of ensuring the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons. All interested parties should be on board with this and should enhance their coordination, in accordance with international law and taking into account the interests of the countries that are hosting refugees.

Thirdly, all parties should redouble their efforts and respect their commitments to maintaining the existing ceasefire agreements in order to prevent serious humanitarian consequences. The Secretary-General's report has highlighted the risk of military escalation and the likely catastrophic consequences in Idlib. We want to reiterate once again that we cannot afford more setbacks on humanitarian issues. We cannot afford to see more children losing their parents because of the crisis, or more people trapped without food, water or shelter.

My delegation believes firmly that a normal and peaceful life for all Syrians is possible. However, everyone in this Chamber is fully aware that in the absence of a political solution in line with resolution 2254 (2015), the humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate. We can and must avoid that. Indonesia stands ready to support the work of Special Envoy Geir Pedersen in advancing the political process in Syria and finding a peaceful solution to the conflict.

In conclusion, my delegation emphasizes the importance of observing the international principles of humanitarian assistance, which include humanity, neutrality and impartiality, as well as full respect for States' sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank Director Reena Ghelani for her comprehensive briefing and to commend the work of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Syria.

The conflict in Syria has brought enormous suffering to its civilian population. Almost 12 million people are in need of multisectoral humanitarian assistance. More than 6 million are internally displaced, of whom an estimated 870,000 live in sites of last resort.

The conflict, which has been characterized by widespread and systematic violations and abuses of

international humanitarian and human rights law, affects the most vulnerable groups — children, young people, women and girls, the elderly and people with disabilities. People with both physical and psychological disabilities often have particular problems with protection in humanitarian emergencies, as they are more likely to be exposed to targeted violence, exploitation and abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence. We should do our utmost to prevent this group from suffering further, as they are already disproportionately affected by violent conflict, and should ensure that humanitarian assistance and all services are available and accessible to those with specific needs.

Getting back to a broader context, I want to underline that we continue to be very concerned about ongoing impunity for serious violations of international humanitarian law. I want to make it clear that there can be no peace without justice. Any military operations should be fully in line with international humanitarian and human rights law in order to ensure that the thousands of civilians who are trapped in the middle of the fighting are not harmed. The protection of civilians is not a choice but a legal obligation for all parties to the conflict. Those who do not comply should be held accountable. In that context, I want to underline the significance of the agreement between Russia and Turkey on the Idlib de-escalation zone as a crucial move in averting a humanitarian catastrophe. All parties to the conflict should ensure that the agreement is fully implemented.

We welcome the arrival in Rukban of a second convoy at the beginning of February, for which I want to thank all the actors involved, especially the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which in eight days of operations managed to deliver humanitarian assistance to 40,000 people in Rukban, providing them with life-saving support. Nonetheless, it is only a temporary measure, sufficient for about a month. We desperately need a long-term, safe, voluntary and dignified solution for thousands of people, many of whom have been in the Rukban area for more than two years now. We are encouraged by the positive steps that the Syrian authorities have taken recently and expect them to authorize another convoy.

The European Union is holding a third Brussels Conference for Syria from 12 to 14 March, in a demonstration of the international community's deep concern about the situation in Syria and its

unwavering commitment to supporting the millions of people affected by the conflict. The international community has contributed on an unprecedented scale to alleviating the immense humanitarian and resilience needs in Syria and across the region, and to supporting a peaceful solution to the conflict. I trust that this year we will once again be able to prove our solidarity with all those in need.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. A political agreement in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) remains the only pathway to peace.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We are grateful for the convening of this meeting, and we thank Ms. Reena Ghelani for her valuable briefing this morning.

Peru has been following the situation in Syria with great concern. The extreme vulnerability of the humanitarian situation has been exacerbated by the escalation of violence in recent weeks. We are alarmed that some 11.7 million people still require humanitarian assistance in order to survive, most of them women and children. There are several focuses of concern right now, Syria's north-west being one of the most serious, given its population density and high volatility. We are deeply concerned about the fact that the impact on the civilian population is being aggravated by the growing control that terrorist organizations have in the area, with new fatalities, arbitrary detentions, kidnappings and destruction of infrastructure. Peru reiterates its firm condemnation of terrorism. While believe it is essential that the terrorist groups that remain in Idlib and other parts of Syria be brought to justice, we emphasize that combating this scourge should not be seen as a justification for endangering the lives of millions of people.

In the circumstances, maintaining the agreement reached by Turkey and the Russian Federation in September is crucial. We also want to focus attention on the tragic situation of the nearly 40,000 displaced people in Rukban, who face daily shortages of food, drinking water, medical care and supplies, as well as extreme weather conditions. We acknowledge and support the humanitarian work carried out by the United Nations and agencies such as the Red Crescent, and we welcome the recent provision of assistance in this area. We emphasize how important it is to ensure that this aid

is provided in a sustained manner, and that at the same time urgent efforts are made to reach comprehensive solutions that can put an end to these people's suffering, especially considering that 95 per cent of them have expressed the desire to leave the camp and return to their places of origin. In that regard, we welcome the humanitarian corridors that Russia has set up in the area aimed at ensuring people's voluntary, safe and dignified return within internationally accepted parameters. We also urge the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies to continue to increase their assistance to the tens of thousands of internally displaced persons in north-eastern Syria who are fleeing the violence of the remaining groups affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

We encourage efforts to improve the conditions in the Al-Hol camp, and hope to see more initiatives such as the transit centre in Al-Suwar, which is providing urgent medical care to displaced persons en route to safer places. We also want to point out that any military operation, such as that under way in Baghouz, must respect the principles of precaution and distinction enshrined in international humanitarian law.

In conclusion, I want to stress that only a political solution that lays the foundations for sustainable peace in Syria can make it possible to overcome the continuing humanitarian disaster there.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Ms. Reena Ghelani for her briefing.

We are pleased with the steadily declining violence in Syria. Despite the continuing trend towards stabilization, however, there are still some hotbeds of tension in the Syrian Arab Republic, including in Idlib governorate and east of the Euphrates. The situation in north-western Syria is fragile and cannot be artificially maintained for an extended period of time. The threat posed by militants from the Al-Nusra Front alliance with the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, who have taken almost complete control of these territories, will not disappear on its own. Calls for freezing the situation only encourage the terrorists. In that regard, together with our Turkish and Iranian partners, we are continuing our efforts to develop a formula that will make it possible to combat the terrorist threat without harming the civilian population. The high-level meeting in Sochi on 14 February confirmed that the Astana troika remains united in its quest for ways to stabilize the situation

on the ground in Idlib and the north-east as soon as possible.

We support the view of the importance of increasing the humanitarian assistance to Syria. The Syrians are indeed in need of a great deal. But while the assistance entering the country is much needed, it must be comprehensive and depoliticized. We know that some countries have been pressured in an effort to dissuade them from helping people living in territories controlled by Damascus. That is absolutely unacceptable. The use of unilateral sanctions, whose greatest impact is on ordinary Syrians, is equally shameful. Instead of causing suffering to Syrians with the idea that it will do damage to the authorities in Damascus, the focus should be on the most effective way of improving the humanitarian situation in Syria, which is by helping to restore its ruined civilian infrastructure and national economy. We want to stress that if the representatives of the Syrian Government are not invited to the upcoming Brussels Conference, it will not carry its full weight.

The number of refugees returning to Syria from neighbouring States is steadily increasing. I want to emphasize that no one is forcing refugees to return. It is estimated that just under 2 million Syrians, in 10 countries, have expressed the wish to return home. Since 30 September 2015 some 370,000 overall have returned from foreign countries. With the help of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, 12 entry checkpoints have been set up, including one at an airport and one at a seaport.

The Syrian authorities are taking steps aimed at making the process of Syrian refugees' return sustainable. In 412 towns and villages that have suffered the least from military action, centres have been set up for welcoming and housing up to 1.5 million people. In the Aleppo, Damascus and Hama governorates, a State programme is being implemented to rebuild towns that have been liberated from the militants, including with the provision of water and electric infrastructure, targeted aid and assistance for people in returning to their permanent homes. The amnesty process is continuing for those who evaded military service, including refugees and former members of illegal armed groups. More than 55,000 have been amnestied so far. We hope that those who truly care about the fate of ordinary Syrians will take a close look at the situation, considering the realities on the ground, and join in the efforts to overcome the destruction and restore normalcy to people's lives.

We want to draw special attention to two issues. First, we are concerned about the situation in the Al-Hol camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs), which is located in north-eastern Hasakah governorate. There are almost 50,000 refugees there, the majority of them women and children. All of them had fled Hajin, which the coalition headed by the United States, together with its protégé forces on the ground, has razed to the ground, leaving many civilian victims, incidentally. As far as we remember, no one called for an end to the bombing at the time. The camp is now taking in people from Baghouz, which the coalition is also flattening. People may say that the air strikes are all high precision, but the same was said about Raqqa, where bodies are still being pulled out from under the rubble.

It is time that everyone, including United Nations bodies, dropped their double standards and looked at things objectively. The problem in Rukban, where from 6 to 14 February the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent conducted an operation to deliver and distribute humanitarian assistance, is not related to a lack of desire on the part of the IDPs to move to Damascus-controlled territory. On the contrary, a United Nations survey of the camp showed that 95 per cent want to leave Rukban, and 80 per cent want to return to areas under the control of the Syrian authorities. The problem in Rukban is the illegal occupation by the United States of part of sovereign Syrian territory in the area of Al-Tanf, where militants from the Maghawir Al-Thawra armed group, who have been tarnished by their ties to terrorists, are nurtured. As far as we can tell, there is no access to or exit from the area, and thanks to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and inadequate food and medicine, dozens of people have already died. According to some reports, the camp has seen its first case of leprosy. In accordance with the Geneva Convention, the United States, as the occupying Power, bears full responsibility for the situation of Rukban's inhabitants. Article 55 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states that

“[t]o the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population; it should, in particular, bring in the necessary foodstuffs, medical stores and other articles if the resources of the occupied territory are inadequate.”

Article 56 states that

“the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring and maintaining ... the medical and hospital establishments and services, public health and hygiene in the occupied territory, with particular reference to ... the prophylactic and preventive measures necessary to combat the spread of contagious diseases”.

The Convention emphasizes that external humanitarian assistance does not relieve the occupying Power of its responsibility. As a result, the international humanitarian community, the United Nations and specialized agencies, donors and partners, are doing what the United States should be doing in accordance with international law. We have a proposal for a way out of the situation and a lasting solution to the problem of Rukban, which is to evacuate all who want to leave the camp and go where they choose. “All who want” are the key words, of course. We must get on with implementing that idea instead of wasting time in planning new convoys, which only emphasize the disregard for international humanitarian law in that part of Syria.

That is the point of the Russian initiative which on 19 February opened two corridors to enable civilians to leave the camp, under the humanitarian guarantees of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. And people are ready to leave. We simply need to stop blocking their way.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Ms. Reena Ghelani for her comprehensive briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria. I would also like to once again thank the thousands of humanitarian workers in the camps providing assistance and protection in order to save lives in Syria. We recognize that ensuring the necessary conditions for safe, sustained, effective and quick humanitarian work remains a great challenge.

The Dominican Republic is particularly concerned about the ongoing violent incidents and military operations that endanger the lives of civilians and forcibly displace them in difficult circumstances, often with deplorable consequences, as was the case with the recent displacement of thousands of people from Hajin to Al-Hol camp that in just a few weeks claimed the lives of 61 children. Moreover, it is estimated that 10.2 million Syrians are living in hostile zones. We therefore call on all parties involved in military activities to strictly abide by international humanitarian law and safeguard the lives, freedom of movement and integrity of civilians

and civilian infrastructure. While we realize that Syria is continuing to experience one of the most acute and urgent humanitarian crises of our times, second only to that in Yemen, my delegation believes it is important to consider the real conditions on the ground in order to enable steps to be taken, even small ones, towards lasting peace for the Syrian people. We believe that in order to do so, we must begin by ensuring basic health, education and security conditions.

The figures are not encouraging. One of three schools in Syria has been damaged or destroyed. Forty per cent of health centres are not operating at capacity. I have already mentioned the high level of insecurity affecting a large number of people, whose very future is frankly uncertain. Six and a half million people are suffering from food insecurity, and 2.1 million children are not attending school, with a high rate of child employment.

Those are just some of the poignant statistics coming out of United Nations reports, which do not enable envisaging even a budding progress in the years to come. We therefore believe that the 2019 humanitarian response plan must include a comprehensive approach towards laying a firm foundation for ensuring a better future for the Syrians, including lasting solutions to the situation facing the millions of displaced persons. It is very complex situation. We look forward to the successful outcome of the donors conference to be held in Brussels in March.

I would like to join the other delegations that expressed their views earlier on the situation concerning the makeshift camp in Rukban and the extensive and effective joint operation carried out by United Nations agencies and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent — the largest-scale humanitarian operation that has been carried out in the country. Concerning the conditions described by Ms. Ghelani earlier, we would be remiss if we failed to stress the need for assistance in facilitating the return to Rukban in a regular and sustained manner. We urge the Syrian authorities to authorize access to a fresh convoy as soon as possible. In particular, we support seeking lasting solutions for the Syrian children of Rukban and any other affected location, including local integration and resettlement, and ensuring that any return of refugees and displaced children is safe, voluntary, dignified and informed, while at the same time decisions are made in the light of the best interests of the children concerned, within the framework of the family and their overall well-being.

Lastly, we echo the many calls to the parties to fully implement the Russian-Turkish brokered agreement on a demilitarized zone in Idlib under international humanitarian law. As the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other actors have stated, an escalation of hostilities would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences. Equally catastrophic is the insecurity that the trapped civilians are facing. According to reports, last week 16 civilians, including women and children, were reportedly killed and more than 70 injured in the Al-Qusour neighbourhood of Idlib by two explosive devices, the second of which appears to have been designed to kill and maim people, including medical workers attempting to help the victims of the first bomb.

Diplomatic efforts must be ramped up to find a political solution to the crisis in Syria in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), while avoiding new military offensives, which inevitably end up harming civilians, mainly children, women, the elderly and people living with disabilities.

Mr. Hickey (United Kingdom): At the outset, let me thank Ms. Reena Ghelani for her briefing, as well as to pay tribute, through her, to all the United Nations staff members who are doing such important humanitarian work in Syria.

Today Ms. Ghelani reminded us that the humanitarian situation in Syria remains grave. We cannot afford to lose sight of the 12 million people suffering daily. Eighty per cent of Syrians live below the poverty line, and one third of the population does not have reliable access to affordable food. The Security Council must therefore step up its efforts to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those who need it throughout Syria. We must also do much more to support United Nations-led efforts to end the conflict through a political process.

I agree with all the remarks made today by the representative of Belgium on behalf of the three humanitarian co-penholders, but I wanted to highlight three points: the situation in Rukban, the situation in regime-held areas and the situation in Idlib.

First, concerning Rukban, the United Kingdom welcomes the news that an urgently needed humanitarian convoy finally reached Rukban on 6 February, delivering assistance to thousands of people in desperate need. The situation of more than 41,000 people sheltering in Rukban remains a serious

concern. We must not see the same repeated delays before the next convoy, which the United Nations has now requested. The United Nations-conducted intention survey in Rukban shows that the majority of residents wish to leave the camp, but it also highlights their fears and concerns about doing so. Many are worried about their safety and security if they choose to return to their homes. Lack of civil documentation and concerns about access to their property were also reported. Those concerns need to be addressed before people move. The United Nations is therefore right, as our humanitarian co-penholders have said, to call for certain conditions to be in place beforehand, while any return or relocation must be safe, voluntary and dignified. Any effort to assist in the relocation of the population of Rukban must be in line with international protection standards. United Nations humanitarian staff should be granted access to the population before, during and after any movement. Children, women, the elderly and persons with disabilities must be afforded special protection during all phases of relocation. Screening procedures must be conducted in accordance with international law.

Concerning my second point, about the situation in regime-held areas, the United Kingdom remains deeply concerned about conditions in former opposition-held areas that the regime now controls. The Russian Ambassador spoke of steps by the regime to welcome back refugees to areas under regime control. You do not welcome back refugees by arbitrarily detaining them in conditions in which torture is systematic and rife. You do not welcome back refugees by forcing them to join the army and fight in a conflict they have fled. And you do not welcome back refugees by threatening to seize their property under Law Number 10.

All of those reasons were cited by Syrians themselves in the United Nations recent survey as reasons for why they are not returning to regime-held areas. That is clearly not an environment for safe, dignified and voluntary refugee return. It clearly falls short of the Council's call in resolution 2254 (2015) for the establishment of inclusive and non-sectarian governance in Syria. Three quarters of those communities that came under regime control in 2018 are considered hard-to-reach areas to deliver aid. Let us be clear: they are only hard to reach because the regime chooses not to allow necessary aid to reach those who need it. We therefore join our French colleagues in

calling on the regime to allow unfettered humanitarian access to all of those people in areas that it controls.

Thirdly, concerning the situation in Idlib, we remain deeply concerned about the 3 million people in north-west Syria, more than 2 million of whom are entirely reliant on cross-border aid. We should also remember that, when we talk about the threat from terrorism in Idlib, more babies than terrorists remain in Idlib. Fifty per cent of the population has been displaced from their homes — sometimes multiple times — thereby stretching scarce resources beyond their limits and putting further strain on host communities. We heard today from Ms. Ghelani that a military escalation in Idlib governorate would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences. We therefore call on all parties — but in particular the regime and Russia — to respect the ceasefire and facilitate humanitarian access to Idlib.

Finally, I would like to echo the points made by my South African colleague, the humanitarian co-penholders and almost all other speakers today about how we will tackle this humanitarian crisis in Syria in the long-term only through a political solution in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). That means, in practice, a political transition. It means the establishment of credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, which we know is so sorely absent in Syria today. As my Belgian and Polish colleagues emphasized, it also means accountability for the war crimes and crimes against humanity that have been carried out during the conflict, in particular by the regime and by Da'esh.

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

I join delegations that took the floor before me to thank Ms. Reena Ghelani and her team for their detailed briefing. The Government of Equatorial Guinea follows very closely the activities of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Syria, as well as those of all agencies of the United Nations system and other humanitarian organizations operating in the country since the beginning of the war. We reiterate our praise for the arduous and noble work they have carried out over the past two months, together with the more than 1,700 United Nations staff deployed throughout the country.

As can be seen from the briefing provided by Ms. Ghelani, the situation in Syria remains extremely

serious, not only in the Idlib de-escalation zone, which remains under the control of terrorist organizations and non-State armed opposition groups, but also in Aleppo and in the south-east of Deir ez-Zor governorate. The risk of military escalation, especially in Idlib, continues to increase, further complicating the operating environment for humanitarian organizations aimed at meeting basic needs and ensuring the protection of civilians. It should be recalled that air strikes and intense fighting between the parties continue to have a direct impact on educational and medical facilities, injuring and killing dozens of civilians. There is no doubt that, despite almost eight years of conflict and the partial easing of the intensity of the overall violence, the humanitarian crisis in Syria persists. We are talking about nearly 12 million Syrians who need humanitarian assistance, and approximately 6 million refugees still in neighbouring countries. Such statistics are appalling and require a collective awareness of the urgent need to end the hostilities in Syria and the permanent spectre of war.

Moreover, in line with the Secretary-General's remarks, Equatorial Guinea strongly condemns the ongoing serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses committed by the parties to the conflict. In that regard, we support the idea that the Syrian authorities should cooperate closely with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to protect and promote human rights on the ground in the current context of war.

Despite that bleak backdrop, we welcome the progress made on the basis of resolution 2449 (2018) and other relevant Security Council resolutions to effectively deploy the second convoy of the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to the Rukban camp for displaced persons. That humanitarian convoy, which the Council had called for repeatedly and is now referred to as the largest of all time, will help save the lives of more than 40,000 people living in appalling conditions.

The Syrians have suffered terribly because of this war — suffering that should prompt us to seek practical solutions that do not become a dead letter or end up in statements and lawsuits. In that regard, we believe that there is still a need to ensure that the Idlib de-escalation zone be maintained and protected in accordance with international humanitarian law and that diplomatic efforts be stepped up in the quest for a political

solution to the crisis in Syria, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

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

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

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank you, Mr. President, for convening today's important meeting. I also thank Ms. Ghelani for participating in it.

Five years ago, on 22 February 2014 to be precise, the Security Council adopted resolution 2139 (2014), on the humanitarian situation in my country, Syria. In that regard, I would like to recall some of what I said in this very Chamber when that resolution was adopted.

“Humanitarian support to the Syrian people cannot be effective unless it is accompanied in word and deed by an end to the efforts to politicize humanitarian issues and an end to terrorist acts. The activities of the armed terrorist groups, including those associated with Al-Qaida, are the main cause of the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people” (*S/PV.7116, p. 15*).

Today I will briefly explain why I have chosen to repeat what I said some five years ago. I will do that by addressing the following three points. First, five years ago, we said that humanitarian support to Syrians would be right and effective only if actions were aligned with words. That remains valid today. How can certain States, including permanent members of the Security Council, claim to be concerned about the humanitarian situation in Syria while the Governments of those States continue to support terrorism, maintain their own armed forces illegitimately in Syria and engage in aggression after aggression against my country? That has led to thousands of civilian martyrs, the majority of whom are women and children, and to the destruction of the infrastructure.

Colonel Francois-Regis Legrier of France, who was the leader of the French artillery unit in the illegitimate coalition that was established against my country, confirmed that point. I am citing from *National Defence Review*, in which he said few days ago:

“We have massively destroyed the infrastructure.”

The goal of the coalition was to limit its losses. That has led to a substantial increase in the number of deaths among civilians and greater destruction.

Colonel Legrier asked:

“How many Syrian villages must suffer the same fate as Al-Hajin for us to understand that we are headed the wrong direction?”

He noted that the coalition could have acted more rapidly and effectively against the terrorists by sending just 1,000 soldiers. He concluded his interview by asking,

“Why do we have an army that we do not dare to use?”

I will answer that question by recalling what former American President Barack Obama said here in the Council about the fact that the international coalition needed 30 years to eliminate terrorism in Syria. He predicted that eliminating terrorism and Da'esh would take three decades. President Obama therefore agrees with Colonel Legrier. That simply underscores what we have repeatedly said, that the goal of the illegitimate coalition was not to combat terrorism, but rather to target the resources of the Syrian State, prolong the war that was imposed on Syria and drown the countries and peoples of our region in the ongoing chaos of imaginary conflicts.

In that connection, how can some of the permanent members of the Security Council claim to be eager to resolve the humanitarian situation in Syria, given that their Governments have imposed unfair economic sanctions on the Syrian people? Those sanctions affect all aspects of daily life and impede the access of ordinary civilians to food, medicine and milk for their children, particularly in our harsh winters. The Syrians are suffering due to those barbaric measures, which affect the electricity, oil and gas sectors. This is not just political terrorism, but also economic terrorism, which is unfair, illegal and illegitimate.

Far from engaging in self-criticism, those States do not take steps to rectify the errors for which they are responsible, which would be a very noble task, as an Arab proverb goes. Nothing of this sort is being done. When we say “economic terrorism” we are not exaggerating, because the conditional assistance that certain States are offering makes us lose twice the value of that aid as a result of the damage caused by their coercive measures, which have wrought havoc on our national economy and international trade transactions.

Secondly, five years ago we said that humanitarian assistance in Syria could be delivered on a fair and effective basis only if it was free from any politicization of humanitarian issues, and that statement stands just as true today. How can the humanitarian co-penholders within the Security Council discharge their duties while ignoring the need to consult and coordinate with the Syrian Government?

We understand that States have the right to govern and manage their bilateral relations the way they choose and in accordance with their own interests. Of course, we enjoy that right and implement our foreign policies accordingly. However, membership of the Security Council imposes upon its membership the responsibility to engage and consult with the countries concerned so that the members can better understand the preoccupations, worries and challenges of those countries. That would be done if Council members carried out their duties in line with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, rather than being free to pursue their own national agendas and short-sighted political affiliations.

My colleague the Permanent Representative of Belgium, one of the humanitarian co-penholders, expressed his deep concern about what he called 25,000 Syrian refugees who have left Hajin town in Syria, not in Florida, and headed to Al-Hol camp in Syria, not in California. My Belgian colleague added that he is sad for the deaths of some 60 children and adults on the road from the Hajin Syrian town to Al-Hol Syrian camp. I remind my colleague, the Ambassador of Belgium, that many of those whom he described as Syrian refugees are not Syrians at all; in fact, they are Europeans. Many of them came from Belgium, France, Britain, Germany, Spain and Sweden. I am of course talking about thousands of terrorists and thousands of their family members. All of them are not Syrians.

I did not hear from my Belgian colleague any call on my country to participate in the third Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria. We did not receive an invitation to participate either in the first Brussels Conference or in the second. They claim that they are humanitarian pen-holders. This proves that the reasons behind the three Brussels conferences are not humanitarian at all. They are purely political reasons against my country, Syria. The aim is to prolong terrorism, while using the humanitarian factor to blackmail and promote instability among the countries of the region.

How could certain countries, some of which are members of the Council, claim that they are eager to resolve the humanitarian situation in Syria while preventing the return of Syrian refugees to their homes and villages after being liberated from the terrorists? They put up artificial barriers, while linking humanitarian and development assistance with political conditions that contradict the principles of humanitarian work.

When I talk about the politicization of the humanitarian assistance in Syria, I need to refer to what I have said scores of times — the United Nations reports depend on what is called “open sources”. Last month, I informed the Council that a reporter from *Der Spiegel*, a German magazine, fabricated information on Syria and had done so for years, simply to demonize the Syrian Government (see S/PV.8454). Today I wish to inform the Council that an employee of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Riam Dalati, confirmed that scenes filmed in the hospital of Douma in the Ghouta, near Damascus, after the alleged chemical attack there were entirely fabricated. The BBC therefore distanced itself from Dalati’s fabricated report and suspended him. I want to make it clear that if that report had confirmed the alleged attack or the use of chemical weapons in the Douma hospital, Syria would have been the target of another tripartite attack outside the framework of international legitimacy.

Thirdly, five years ago we said that humanitarian assistance in Syria could be delivered on a fair and effective basis only if terrorism were eliminated. That is true again today. How is it possible that certain States, including some members of the Security Council, can claim that they are interested in the humanitarian situation in Syria while they still provide support and protection to the remaining terrorist groups? How can certain Western countries claim that they are keen on combating terrorism and bringing its perpetrators to justice through mechanisms such as the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria while they refuse to refrain from the political exploitation of terrorism and to repatriate their own nationals who have been engaged in terrorism in Syria? The policies of certain countries have made international instruments and Council resolutions on counter-terrorism a mere cheap trade commodity like that of Da’esh.

In conclusion, what is required today is to sincerely work with the Syrian Government in accordance with resolution 46/182, with full respect for Syrian

sovereignty. A few days ago we saw the fruits of the engagement between the Syrian Government and its humanitarian partners, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the United Nations, in the absence of obstructing external factors.

By engaging with the United Nations, we were able for the second time to deliver assistance to the camp where terrorists are deployed and that is occupied by the American troops that invaded a dear part of my country. We provided life-saving assistance and medical care services to the inhabitants of the camp. In complementing that effort, the Syrian Government, in cooperation with our friendly Russian partner, has opened two humanitarian corridors to allow for the voluntary, safe and dignified exit of Syrian civilians who are besieged by the American troops and their affiliated terrorist groups. One of those terrorist groups is called Suqour Al-Sahra. It attacked the city of Al-Suwayda, where it killed 327 civilians at dawn and captivated 32 women then returned to its lair, which is under American protection. We look forward to supporting the Syrian and Russian efforts to ensure an end to the suffering of those living in the camp, where the majority would like to return to the areas that are under the control of the Government, as noted by Ms. Ghelani and according to a survey conducted recently by the United Nations. We also look forward to ending the illegitimate presence of the American troops and the terrorist gangs that they support..

My colleague the Ambassador of France said that the Syrian Government had approved only 40 per cent of requests for humanitarian assistance. That is categorically untrue. The report of the Secretary-General before the Council — that is the report of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) — and which was referred to by my colleague the representative of France, does not mention that the Syrian Government approved without exception all requests submitted by the World Food Programme, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and the non-governmental organizations, all acting under their respective mandates and within their spheres of competence. The requests were for the delivery of vital foodstuffs, medicines and vaccines. This failure to include that information in the Secretary-General’s report is the responsibility of OCHA. It should be contained in the report so that my colleague the representative of France does not make the same mistake again.

The Security Council must uphold the principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. It must prevent the noble issue of humanitarian assistance from being used as a means to destabilize States or interfere in their internal affairs. Regrettably, we see that happening flagrantly again today in the Republic of Venezuela. That would not be happening in Venezuela if some States had not succeeded in using the humanitarian issue to politically blackmail certain

Member States in exactly the same way as we have seen in Syria.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

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

The meeting rose at 12.35 p.m.