



Security Council

Seventy-fifth year

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Thursday, 27 February 2020, 10 a.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Mr. De Croo (Belgium)

Members:

China	Mr. Wu Haitao
Dominican Republic	Mrs. Cedano
Estonia	Mr. Jürgenson
France	Mr. De Rivière
Germany	Mr. Maas
Indonesia	Mr. Syihab
Niger	Mr. A Barry
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Ms. Prince
South Africa	Ms. Goolab
Tunisia	Mr. Ladeb
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Allen
United States of America	Mrs. Craft
Viet Nam	Mr. Dang

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Ya'rubiyah (S/2020/139)

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) and 2504 (2020) (S/2020/141)

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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 review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Ya'rubiyah (S/2020/139)

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) and 2504 (2020) (S/2020/141)

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey 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: Ms. Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; and Ms. Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director.

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/2020/139, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Ya'rubiyah; and document S/2020/141, 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) and 2504 (2020).

I now give the floor to Ms. Mueller.

Ms. Mueller: I will begin my briefing today with the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in north-western Syria, which continues to demand the Council's attention and action. I will also speak to the importance of the cross-border operation — a critical lifeline into the north-west.

Secondly, I will brief the Council on the delivery of assistance to north-eastern Syria following the adoption of resolution 2504 (2020), including the Secretary-General's report on the feasibility of alternatives to the use of the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing.

Finally, I will touch on the humanitarian situation in Rukban and deepening humanitarian needs in many other parts of the country. UNICEF Executive Director Fore will further brief on the impact of the crisis on families in Syria.

Last week I spoke via video link with 14 Syrian women in Idlib and northern Aleppo. All are humanitarian workers helping their own communities; almost all have been displaced with their families from other parts of Syria, some multiple times. What is happening in north-western Syria, they said, is beyond imagination. It is not humanly tolerable. They told me of children so traumatized they no longer speak. One of the women, who works as a midwife in Idlib city, told me she can see how the intensely stressful situation is affecting her patients. Early deliveries, miscarriages and low-weight births are on the rise. Pregnant women are asking her for caesarean deliveries out of fear of going into labour while on the move and without medical care.

Our latest available data indicate that almost 950,000 people have fled the advancing front lines in north-western Syria since 1 December. Most have moved into the north-west of Idlib governorate, a small area along Syria's border with Turkey that already hosts hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Many of these exhausted families have moved over and over and over again — all amid freezing conditions. The women from Idlib described to me the day-to-day reality of living in this overcrowded environment. One had found shelter in a basement with 15 other adults and 20 children. There was no privacy. Some women told me they could not change their clothes for weeks. Violence against women, they said, had become routine.

The Secretary-General has stated that international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians have been systematically ignored. He warned that fighting is now advancing into areas with the highest concentrations of people. Hospitals, schools, camps and other sites where displaced families have sought shelter are not being spared. In the last 10 days, a camp hosting more than 800 people was hit by shelling in Dana, which is now the most crowded of the sub-districts of Idlib

governorate. Idlib Central Hospital was among several facilities struck this week, causing multiple casualties. Operations at the facility had to be suspended, except for emergency medical treatment.

A massive humanitarian operation is under way in north-western Syria. In January, food assistance for some 1.4 million people was delivered via the cross-border mechanism, as were health supplies for almost half a million people and non-food items for more than 230,000 people. That is more than in any other month since the cross-border operation was authorized in 2014. Despite these immense efforts, the women in Idlib told me that simply getting food, clean water and heating is a daily struggle.

The cross-border modality is absolutely essential to our response in north-western Syria. People in need in Idlib cannot currently be reached at this scale in such a timely and direct manner through any other means. As the Secretary-General has stated, the Security Council has a critical role to play in support of these humanitarian efforts.

I thank donors for generously contributing over \$100 million this month alone towards our \$500 million appeal for the humanitarian response in north-western Syria over the next five months. This amount includes the release of \$42 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund.

I would now like to turn to the situation in north-eastern Syria. In north-eastern Syria, civilians remain extremely vulnerable. Over the past weeks, renewed hostilities in and around Tall Tamr sub-district have displaced an additional 1,600 civilians to Qamishli, while another 800 people have arrived in Raqqa. This displacement adds to the hundreds of thousands of people already displaced in north-eastern Syria. Across the north-east, an estimated 1.9 million people require humanitarian assistance. The majority — 1.34 million people — are in areas outside of Syrian Government control.

In the second half of 2019, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners scaled up the response in north-eastern Syria, reaching hundreds of thousands of people with supplies from within Syria and through the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing, via the cross-border modality. Nonetheless, significant gaps remained. Until 10 January, the United Nations provided cross-border assistance into north-eastern Syria via Al-Yarubiyah crossing — mainly health and medical items that could

not otherwise be consistently delivered to people in need. We briefed the Security Council on the importance of renewing Al-Yarubiyah as an authorized crossing point, warning that any reduction in humanitarian access would cause further suffering.

With the adoption of resolution 2504 (2020) and the removal of Al-Ramtha and Al-Yarubiyah as authorized crossing points, the Council requested the Secretary-General to report on the feasibility of using alternative modalities to the Al-Yarubiyah crossing

“to ensure that humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reaches people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes, and in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence” (*resolution 2504 (2020), para. 6*).

The Secretary-General’s report concludes that,

“[i]n order for all humanitarian needs to be met, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic would need to facilitate greater cross-line access to the north-east of the country, in particular for medical assistance. The Government would also need to consent to the delivery of humanitarian assistance through cross-border operations into the north-east, at safe and logistically feasible border crossings, using the most direct routes” (*S/2020/139, para. 46*).

Should the required steps to enable the delivery of aid from Damascus not be taken, and in the absence of consent from the Syrian Government and neighbouring countries to use border crossings into north-eastern Syria, the report further concludes that

“the Security Council would need to authorize the United Nations and its implementing partners to use additional crossings” (*ibid., para. 48*).

Of the alternatives, in the current context, the Tall Abyad crossing is deemed the most feasible option.

The report lists four requirements for the cross-line modalities to work effectively. First, there must be timely approval by the Government of Syria to import all necessary medical supplies into the country. The report highlights that expedited approval for some imports has already taken place, with the recent approval of 11 of 36 requests submitted by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Secondly, a simplified, expedited and reliable approval process by the Government of Syria to enable

regular and predictable deliveries from Damascus into the north-east by land is necessary. The United Nations Population Fund reports that a first road delivery of medical items has been sent to Qamishli. Approval of a specific request by the WHO for delivery by land remains pending.

Thirdly, approval by the Government of Syria to allow access all areas and facilities within north-eastern Syria to ensure assistance reaches all people in need, impartially and without discrimination is required. While aid has been delivered to north-eastern Syria, this assistance needs to actually reach all people in need, regardless of where they live or who is operating the medical facilities they use.

Fourthly, aid deliveries by local authorities in north-eastern Syria should be facilitated to all locations without delay. It is also the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that aid is not impeded.

Yesterday, in response to our requests for overland access to north-eastern Syria, we received general approval from the Government of Syria to transfer medical assistance by land to all parts of the country. This is a welcome development and one that we hope will indeed translate into all types of required medical supplies and equipment reaching all people in need in the north-east, wherever they are located.

If viable alternatives to Al-Yarubiyah are not found for medical items, the gap between the humanitarian response and humanitarian needs will increase further. If medicine runs out and medical facilities are unable to carry out life-saving procedures, deaths will occur. The first shortages are expected as early as March for medical facilities providing reproductive health care, which were previously supported by cross-border operations. A larger gap in medical items could occur by May.

A shipment of essential medical items intended for transport to north-eastern Syria via Al-Yarubiyah remains in Iraq. The World Health Organization is engaging actively with the Government of Syria to bring that assistance into Syria by air and ensure that that vital medical assistance urgently reaches all Syrians in need in the north-east. The shipment process was initiated today.

I now turn to the situation in Rukban. More than 19,400 people, almost half of the population, have now left the Rukban area — the vast majority through self-

organized departures. In January, the United Nations conducted four inter-agency assessment missions to areas of return in Homs, hosting around 10,000 people who were formerly in Rukban. Those families are living in extremely difficult conditions. Almost all are living in makeshift tents. Many are struggling to meet their immediate food needs. Our information indicates that thousands still wish to leave Rukban. Planning is ongoing to support informed and voluntary departures. I call on all parties to facilitate those efforts, as well as to assist those who remain, until durable solutions can be found for all people in Rukban.

Humanitarian needs across the country remain immense and are worsening. The number of people assessed as food insecure has increased in 2019 by 1.3 million, reaching 7.9 million people in 2020. As I said at the start of my briefing, the terrible human toll of the situation in north-western Syria demands the Council's attention and action.

I would like to close with a message from the Syrian women in Idlib with whom I spoke last week. They said to me:

“We are Syrian women, mothers and humanitarian workers. We are doing all we can to keep working, in spite of the conditions; in spite of what is happening here. We do not want to leave for Europe. We want to stay here in Idlib and rebuild our lives. All we are asking is for the misery to stop; for the killing to stop. We want the right to live.”

I echo the Secretary-General's renewed call for an immediate ceasefire to end the humanitarian catastrophe and avoid an uncontrollable escalation.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Mueller for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Fore.

Ms. Fore: Another year, another decade — another grim chapter in the Syrian catastrophe that has left the country and its people reeling from the decimation and destruction of a seemingly endless war. The year 2020 is barely two months old and, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, some 300 people have been killed in Idlib and Aleppo since the start of the year.

The situation is worsening by the day. The escalation of fighting in the north-west since December has pushed more than 900,000 people, including more

than half a million children, away from their homes and into danger — a staggering mass movement of people in such a short time. For some, this is the sixth or seventh time they have been displaced. Many have fled to north-western Idlib, while others have scattered to Afrin, A'zaz and Al-Bab, near Aleppo and the Turkish border. Tens of thousands now live in makeshift tents, public buildings, in the open air, huddled under trees — exposed to the rain, snow and the sub-zero cold of the harsh Syrian winter.

The recent strikes on those makeshift camps in Idlib and on the children and teachers horrifically killed just two days ago as 10 schools were attacked are both reprehensible and morally repugnant. Those acts also clearly demonstrate the terrifying daily conditions of those living through that nightmare. We have heard and read reports of children freezing to death. When wood runs out, families burn whatever they can find — plastic bags, garbage and discarded furniture — just to provide a flicker of heat against the cold, or a simple fire to cook whatever food they can find.

In those informal settlements, children and women are at particular risk of violence and exploitation. Makeshift toilets offer no safety or privacy. Landmines and improvised explosive devices dot the landscape. Every step people take is a risk. In the north-west, 280,000 children have had their education cruelly snatched away. An estimated 180 schools are out of operation — destroyed, damaged or being used for shelters; another blow to children's hopes and futures. Access to health care is almost non-existent or financially out-of-reach. Hospitals continue to be targeted. Seventy-two have suspended services because of the fighting.

But the situation in the north-west is just the latest entry in the war's devastation. Across the country, the nine-year war has decimated public services. More than half of all health services and facilities and three out of 10 schools are non-functional. The economy is in free fall, with the destruction of physical capital costing an estimated \$120 billion and half a trillion dollars in economic losses. The Syrian pound has lost nearly 50 per cent of its value over the past year.

But the true cost of the carnage is not measured in lost infrastructure or economic devastation. It is measured in the daily lives of the people — of the 11 million people across Syria who still require urgent humanitarian assistance, almost half of whom are

children; of the 6.5 million Syrians going hungry every day because of food insecurity. The price of essential food items has risen 20 times since the war began, which is devastating for a country in which 80 per cent of the people already live below the poverty line.

Families are forced to sell off their household assets or send their children to work, just to meet basic necessities. Children are going without vital immunizations, medical treatments or other health services because of high costs or gaps in service. One in three Syrian children is out of school. A total of 6.7 million refugees have fled Syria since the war began, and 6.2 million — and counting — are internally displaced. Almost a decade of war has forced nearly half of the country's population from their homes.

Most of all, we measure that global failure in the innocent lives lost and broken by the conflict. In 2018, more than 1,100 children were killed in the fighting — the highest number of children killed in a single year since the start of the war.

Last year was scarcely better; 900 were killed and hundreds maimed. And these are only those we could verify; the true number is much higher.

As the Council learned last week from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, children have been detained and used as bargaining chips. Thousands, Syrian and foreign alike, are confined to camps that are not fit for children. Armed groups have recruited and used boys to fight on the front lines. Girls as young as 9 have been raped, and one in four children is at risk of severe mental disorders.

The horrific scale and speed of the crisis has multiplied the humanitarian needs. UNICEF, our sister agencies and our partners are doing all we can. Last year we screened 1.8 million mothers and children for malnutrition and delivered health consultations to more than 2 million. More than 7.4 million people across Syria received water and sanitation services, including improved access to water, hygiene kits and purifying tablets.

We provided almost 400,000 women and children with psychological counselling to help them cope with the trauma that they have endured. We helped 1.8 million children continue their education. We provided winter clothing and blankets to more than 37,000 children, and

we vaccinated almost 600,000 children under the age of 1.

This is on top of the thousands of children whom we have reached, and continue to reach, across Syria over the last nine years. But the needs are overwhelming and rapidly outpacing our resources. I will be travelling to Syria and the region this weekend to meet with officials and our humanitarian teams on the ground to see what more must be done to meet these urgent needs. We know that we need more funding and more resources to support these lives and give Syrian society even a chance at a better, more peaceful future.

But we also need the Council and its members to stand up for the children of Syria and to speak with one united voice.

First, we call on parties all over Syria to protect children and the essential civilian infrastructure that they and their families need so desperately, such as schools, hospitals and water systems, which Syria will need to rebuild when the fighting stops and a political settlement is under way.

Secondly, we desperately need a cessation of hostilities in north-west Syria. In the meantime, we need regular humanitarian pauses to allow civilians to move safely out of harm's way if they can and wish to do so. This would also give aid workers the room that they need to provide urgent care for people in need and conduct impartial assessments, including across borders.

Thirdly, we need greater humanitarian access across the board to reach people in the most effective and timely manner, from within Syria and from neighbouring countries. That includes allowing road access for humanitarian convoys delivering medical supplies from Damascus or cross-border into north-east Syria, as well as visas and travel permits.

Fourthly, we urge all Member States to honour their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to repatriate children in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner. The conditions under which many children are living, in particular children formerly living in territory held by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, do not provide the necessary care and protection to every child. When in the best interest of the child, family unity must be maintained so that children can be repatriated with their siblings and primary caregiver, usually their mother. We also call

on authorities to remove all children from detention and place them in appropriate care.

Fifthly, we renew our call to the Council to lend its support and influence to a negotiated political solution that ends this war once and for all. As the Secretary-General said last week, there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis; the only possible solution remains political.

Investing in the children of Syria is the best investment that any one of us can make — an investment in the future and an investment in peace. Yet we are letting this opportunity slip through our fingers as another year begins. The longer the war continues, the more children are going to die on the world's watch. More will be forced from their homes to make long, perilous journeys to safety. More neighbouring countries will be under pressure to accept more refugees when they have already been so generous in hosting them. And with each passing month, prospects for the ability of Syria and the region to recover grow more hopeless.

Schools bombed, communities flattened, bodies broken, minds shattered, families torn apart, futures and hopes stolen — and still the fighting continues. The message is clear: we cannot afford to greet another year with the same carnage, the same flouting of international humanitarian law, the same inhumanity with which we began 2020.

A child born at the start of this war is now 9 years old. Are we forced to admit to her that peace is beyond our grasp? That we are unable, or unwilling, to stop this destructive war?

Next year we will mark the tenth anniversary of the Syrian conflict, an anniversary that none of us wants to see. Millions of Syrian children are crying tonight, from hunger and cold, from wounds and pain, from fear, loss and heartbreak. They and their families face a brutal winter and an uncertain year ahead. We must stand with them. We must tell them that we choose peace. History will judge us harshly — and justly — if we do not.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Fore for her statement.

I shall now make a statement in my capacity as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Development of Belgium.

(spoke in English)

I am delivering this statement on behalf of the two co-penholders, Germany and Belgium, and I welcome the presence here of Minister Maas of Germany.

I thank Assistant Secretary-General Mueller and Executive Director Fore for their briefings. Their statements helped to shed light on the ongoing tragedy in Syria, as they were illustrated with concrete examples that they have encountered in Idlib in the vital work that UNICEF and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) are undertaking to alleviate the unspeakable suffering there. Both briefings recalled once again that after nine years of war, 11 million Syrians, in particular children, continue to be in need of humanitarian help and protection. These numbers need to prompt us to take action. They are a dire reminder of the fact that the humanitarian situation in Syria must remain at the top of the Council's agenda and that the Council needs to act.

Now more than ever before, the situation in Idlib requires our common attention and common action: 950,000 people have fled the violence since the beginning of December, and OCHA foresees that another 200,000 men, women and children may have to take the same decision shortly. The conditions that these people are experiencing are dire. If they decide to stay behind, they risk being hit by indiscriminate bombings. If they decide to leave, they have no other option but to join those who have already found refuge in overpacked camps, in unfinished housing, in tents, or, for the most unfortunate, under the open sky, in freezing temperatures.

Let us make no mistake: all of those people face serious protection risks. The situation in Idlib goes to the very core of why we all committed to the principles of international humanitarian law. Those principles must not be neglected; they must be put into practice.

We would like to echo the Secretary-General's statement last week in which he called for an immediate ceasefire, adding:

“There is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. The only possible solution remains political. This man-made humanitarian nightmare for the long-suffering Syrian people must stop. It must stop now”.

In the wake of the adoption of resolution 2504 (2020), on the cross-border mechanism, we the co-penholders

thank the Secretary-General for his report concerning alternative modalities to the Al-Yarubiyah crossing, which, regrettably, could not be extended along with the two other crossings into Idlib last month. We the co-penholders will continue to consult with all members of the Council in a transparent and inclusive way in order to consider how best to take forward the options outlined in the report. The Council has to guarantee that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners can continue to deliver vital humanitarian assistance to all those in need in a timely, safe, sustained and unimpeded manner. The Syrian people need our commitment; their humanitarian needs should be our constant guideline. We will address that further in our national statement.

I will now make an intervention in my national capacity.

I would like to start by paying tribute to all the humanitarian workers in Syria — many of whom are Syrians — especially those who provide support to the north-west of the country. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Belgium has provided more than €230 million to alleviate the humanitarian needs of the Syrian population. We intend to approve an additional €4 million in humanitarian aid to the Syrian people via the cross-border pooled fund and the Syria humanitarian fund.

In my remarks, I would like to focus on two points: first, the situation in Idlib, and secondly, the question of humanitarian access.

On the situation in Idlib, the Council has the mandate and the responsibility to maintain peace and international security. The situation in Idlib requires the full attention of the Council. I support the Secretary-General's call for an immediate and sustainable ceasefire. We call on all parties concerned to show a maximum level of restraint. The front lines have progressed towards the most densely populated areas. There is a risk of all humanitarian action being suffocated. Moreover, the direct confrontation between Turkey, on the one hand, and Syria and Russia, on the other, constitutes a dangerous escalation that could have unpredictable consequences.

Belgium repeats its unequivocal condemnation of the attacks perpetrated by groups the Council has designated as terrorist groups. But efforts to fight terrorism never relieves parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law. Those grave violations of international humanitarian law cannot

remain unpunished. I want to reiterate the political and financial support of Belgium to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. We fully support the United Nations board of inquiry.

On the question of humanitarian access, since 2014 the humanitarian needs in Syria have all but decreased. Regrettably, no agreement was reached in January to renew the crossing point of Al-Yarubiyah, which offered access, through the most direct route, to people in need in the north-east, in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. We thank the Secretary-General for his report (S/2020/139) on the alternative modalities for the border crossing. The report shows clearly that this gap will be hard to fill. It offers two venues.

On the one hand, it clearly states that cross-line access can work only if four conditions are fulfilled. In view of past experiences, the international community needs verifiable, unquestionable guarantees that the Syrian authorities will implement the conditions, as outlined by Ms. Mueller, in full and without delay. The United Nations needs to closely monitor the process and deliver full and detailed data that would allow the Security Council to fully understand the how those conditions are to be implemented and, specifically, where gaps in humanitarian access remain. The Syrian authorities' track record on humanitarian access raises a number of questions. Their good faith will be systematically evaluated based on their ability to fully and sustainably implement those conditions. A partial or conditional implementation is unacceptable.

The second venue mentioned in the report is the crossing point of Tall Abyad as the most feasible alternative to the Al-Yarubiyah crossing when it comes to cross-border options. As such, that option must be actively considered by all Council members, in conjunction with the necessary prerequisites and guarantees. As mentioned before, the co-penholders will continue to see how to best advance the options outlined in the report. We must focus on access to humanitarian aid for all those in need. Today, more than ever, it is time for action.

(spoke in French)

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I now give the floor to those other members of the Council that wish to make statements.

I call on the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany.

Mr. Maas (Germany): "I wish for a life without war and shelling. I wish I could be successful at school." Ten-year-old Amina said that to an Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs team a few days ago. She is one of more than 500,000 children in Idlib who are displaced, many of them for the second or third time. Children like Amina have never experienced peace; they have never gone to school, and now some of them are freezing to death.

It is becoming more and more difficult to put the human suffering in Idlib into words, but we all heard the shocking facts and figures that our briefers just presented. We owe them and all humanitarian workers our gratitude and full support and respect. Mr. Lowcock recently called the situation in Idlib the biggest humanitarian horror story of the twenty-first century. The Executive Director of UNICEF spoke of a child-protection crisis of unprecedented scale, and Ms. Bachelet called the current attacks on civilians cruel beyond belief.

Germany calls on the Syrian regime and on Russia to listen to those voices and to stop ignoring the facts. As parties to the conflict, they have an obligation to protect civilians. Instead, they are bombing civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools. Let me be clear — conducting counter-terrorism measures does not absolve anyone, especially the countries represented in this Chamber, from respecting international humanitarian law, and indiscriminate attacks against civilians are war crimes. Those responsible must be held accountable.

There is more that the Council can and must do to stop the suffering. First and foremost, we must ensure full humanitarian access. The Secretary-General's report (S/2020/139) on alternative access routes leaves no doubt that cross-border aid remains of vital importance. The Council needs to look at every possibility to meet all humanitarian needs in accordance with humanitarian principles. As co-penholders, we are committed to ensuring just that. Aid must reach those

in need, including in north-eastern Syria. The cold is a threat to thousands of people. Germany has stepped up its assistance by €25 million to provide shelter for those in need, and last week the European Union also decided to increase its humanitarian support. But all of us need to do more.

Secondly, a humanitarian ceasefire is essential. I discussed that a few days ago with my Turkish and Russian colleagues at the Munich Security Conference, and together with France we stand ready to continue working towards such a ceasefire, at the highest level, with Russia and Turkey. We heard from our briefers that civilians need a break from the horrors of war and they need it now.

Finally, we must step up our efforts to find a political solution. A regime that has been killing and torturing its own people cannot bring lasting peace and stability to Syria, and reconciliation without accountability for the terrible crimes committed will not work. Those who continue to fight in this war should finally realize that. A political solution overseen by the United Nations and in line with resolution 2254 (2015) is the only way to resolve this conflict.

While we are sitting here, 3 million civilians in Idlib are in fear of their lives; 80 per cent of them are women and children. We have failed them for far too long. We owe them a better future — a future in which children like Amina are going to school instead of hiding in bomb shelters.

Mrs. Craft (United States of America): It is a human-made humanitarian nightmare.

“There is nothing that will protect a baby against the bombs being dropped on the tent they are sleeping in.”

Those are the words of Mark Lowcock two days ago when he was asked what could be done to end the catastrophe in Idlib. It is a wretched image. But for so many Syrians, tragically, he is describing what has become a daily reality. Shelter, food and medicine are desperately needed. But they are no match for Russian air strikes. If we are to end the humanitarian crisis in north-west Syria, we must concentrate all our efforts on immediately establishing a durable and verifiable ceasefire, brokered by a fully empowered United Nations. That will require Russia to ground its planes at once and to tell the regime to pull back its forces.

Reports from Idlib in the most recent days are stomach-turning. According to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Syrian boys and girls are being killed in regime attacks on schools. Aid workers cannot reach affected areas with food or water. Parents are burning their own clothes to keep their children warm. Families are digging out caves for shelter. Babies are freezing to death. Yet, as Lowcock noted on Tuesday, the members of the Security Council cannot agree on how to deal with this problem. But what is the source of our disagreement? Is it that nearly all Council members object to handing down death sentences to thousands of innocent Syrians, while our Russian and Chinese colleagues, whether explicitly or implicitly, do not?

In the light of the Al-Assad regime’s relentless and escalating pursuit of a military solution with the aid of Russia and Iran, United Nations humanitarian operations are more important than ever. The Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salam border crossings authorized by resolution 2504 (2020) are now the only humanitarian lifelines for millions of Syrians trapped in the north-west. They are the only lifelines because they are all that Russia would accept in negotiations without shutting down the entire mechanism.

With the closing of the Al-Yarubiyah crossing, it is imperative that the two crossings still operating be renewed by July. The consequences of closing Al-Yarubiyah are grim and mounting, as the Secretary-General’s report (S/2020/139) details. Barring further Council action, medical supplies will run out for the 1.9 million civilians in north-east Syria left stranded by Russian and Chinese vetoes. These individuals now count among Syria’s most vulnerable, and most are children. They have been courageously served by UNICEF throughout the conflict but it is critical that UNICEF be allowed to continue providing vital aid to young Syrians who are starving, freezing, sick and displaced.

The Secretary-General’s report names alternatives to the cross-border mechanism that would rely on the Al-Assad regime to manage and distribute vital resources. But we know better. The truth is that we cannot depend on the Al-Assad regime to deliver any cross-line assistance regardless of what roads or airports it may now control. The most feasible alternative crossing location identified by the Secretary-General’s report is Tall Abyad. That is the exact same crossing that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs recommended, and that the United States supported,

just a few months ago. We encourage the Council to explore this alternative from a principled humanitarian position, as it has the potential to save thousands of innocent lives.

In all of this, we cannot forget that the crisis did not simply happen. It was imposed on the Syrian people by two of our members. The now closed Al-Yarubiyah crossing was fully functional. It did not need an alternative. It remains the best, most direct option to provide cross-border aid to north-east Syria. The shameful fact is that Russia and China have knowingly rejected the most effective means of saving the most lives in favour of unreliable or specious options. There is no reason to believe that the Al-Assad regime will responsibly manage humanitarian assistance funding, and we should not put a single dollar of that funding in its hands. Having killed hundreds of thousands of its own people, the regime cannot be expected to consent to rapid, impartial and unhindered deliveries of cross-border and cross-line aid. That is why we all must be prepared to renew United Nations cross-border operations throughout Syria, which is precisely what the Secretary-General has recommended to the Council.

President Trump and I want the Syrian people to know that the United States continues to stand with them, but I want to close today by addressing my 14 colleagues. One day, maybe soon, maybe years from now, there will be a time of reckoning for those who knew that babies were freezing to death in Syria and did nothing, for those who knew children were dying in air strikes on schools and did nothing and for those who knew millions faced a shortage of critical medicines and did nothing. But the Council can act, which means that each country represented here has a choice. They can feed the hungry, shelter the weary and heal the sick or they can sit back and watch them suffer and die and be forever remembered for doing so. Which will it be?

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Mueller and Ms. Fore for their briefings. I welcome the presence of the German Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs and your own, Sir.

There is an urgent need to silence the arms in Idlib and to establish an immediate cessation of hostilities. France condemns in the strongest possible terms the intense bombardments being carried out by the regime's air force and its allies, in particular Russia. Those bombardments indiscriminately target the population and civilian infrastructure in the north-west, including

hospitals, schools and displaced persons camps. These crimes — for they are crimes, if words have any meaning — must not go unpunished. We will continue to support all the mechanisms put in place by the United Nations and we will maintain our commitment within the framework of our national jurisdictions.

We are very well aware of the presence of terrorist groups in Idlib. We will never take the problem of terrorism lightly. We fight it with resolve and France is engaged on the front line in the fight against Da'esh and other such groups. In Idlib, as elsewhere in Syria, the fight against terrorism means fighting the groups that are under Council sanctions and not, as Syria and Russia do, indiscriminately striking all opponents, be they terrorists or not, and any civilians in the way.

But the fight against terrorism cannot justify violations of international humanitarian law. War has rules and respect for international humanitarian law is binding on all. The protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel, as well as civilian infrastructure, must remain a top priority. In Idlib and elsewhere in Syria, children are dying under the bombs or in the cold. That must end. The Executive Director of UNICEF will back me up on that.

Today we must join efforts to achieve an immediate and lasting ceasefire in Idlib. Fourteen Foreign Ministers of States members of the European Union, including Mr. Le Drian and Mr. Maas, expressed that view yesterday.

We call on Russia to continue negotiations with Turkey to achieve immediate de-escalation. However, the Astana format has proven incapable of preventing humanitarian catastrophe and escalation. We therefore have a responsibility to mobilize collectively to silence the guns. France and Germany are working towards that end. The United Nations has a central role to play here, as provided for in resolution 2254 (2015). France reiterates its full support for the efforts of the Secretary-General and the Special Envoy, from whom we await cease-fire proposals.

At the same time, everything must be done to ensure humanitarian access to those in need of assistance. It is essential that the parties, in particular the Syrian regime, ensure humanitarian actors safe and unhindered access to populations in need. We call on Russia to engage to that end.

The figures Ms. Mueller cited speak for themselves. There is no alternative to the cross-border mechanism for delivering assistance in the north-west. It must be safeguarded and we are determined to do so. It is a matter of life or death for millions of Syrians.

With regard to the north-east, we thank the Secretary-General for his report on the review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah (S/2020/139), which highlights the lack of progress in delivering cross-line medical aid from Damascus. We condemn the Syrian regime's obstruction. Its recent statements must be reflected in lasting action and we will be vigilant: we are not fooled by its strategy of instrumentalizing humanitarian aid. We further condemn the fact that the Security Council did not extend its authorization for the use of the Al-Yarubiyah crossing point. It is essential that solutions be reached without delay to allow for the sustainable transportation of medical equipment in the north-east.

The Secretary-General's recommendations are clear. It is necessary to combine cross-border and cross-line aid. It is therefore up to the Security Council to assume its responsibilities and act accordingly. For our part, we will remain highly vigilant regarding the delivery of humanitarian aid to the north-east, where the stakes are crucially high. We are talking about relief for an area where poverty and exclusion fuelled the emergence of Da'esh.

The tragedy unfolding before our eyes makes a political solution more necessary than ever. The offensive in Idlib leaves no doubt about the intentions of the Syrian regime, aided by its external supporters, principally Russia: to regain control of Syria by force, without negotiating anything, and to make a show of seeking a political solution while working towards a total and bloody military victory.

It is more urgent than ever to get the political process back on track with a view to implementing all provisions of resolution 2254 (2015), in particular through confidence-building measures and the holding of free and transparent elections supervised by the United Nations in which all Syrians can take part. Only a political solution will, moreover, enable the 6 million Syrian refugees to return to their country in safe and dignified conditions. We regret that such conditions are not yet in place.

Finally, France, as well as its European Union partners, stands ready to finance reconstruction and lift the sanctions as soon as a political settlement is firmly and irreversibly under way, and not before. The key for overcoming the deadlock is thus in the hands of the regime and its allies. Faced with the tragedy unfolding before our eyes in Idlib, we must today unite our efforts to put an end to the continuing humanitarian, political and security disaster.

Ms. Prince (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines): I would like to welcome the Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium, Mr. Alexander De Croo, and Mr. Heiko Maas, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany. I would also like to thank Assistant Secretary-General Mueller and Executive Director Fore for their briefings.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines remains extremely concerned by the humanitarian situation affecting millions of Syrians. The latest reports of aggression are alarming and continue to compound an already dire humanitarian crisis. We yet again implore all parties to the conflict to exercise maximum restraint and to recommit to a cease-fire. We must also applaud the willingness of the members of the international community to engage in dialogue on the escalating situation in the north-west.

The humanitarian emergency in Syria necessitates immediate action, as underscored in the Secretary-General's bimonthly report on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020) (S/2020/141). All parties must therefore facilitate the work of humanitarian actors so as to ensure timely, safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all those in need, wherever they may be.

The crisis underscores the vital importance of the cross-border mechanism in maintaining the humanitarian response. We welcome the Secretary-General's report on the review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah (S/2020/139). We take note that, after careful consideration, the Tall Abyad border crossing has been designated as the most feasible alternative. It is our hope that that crossing will indeed be utilized and be able to effectively assist in addressing the existing humanitarian deficits. We once again reiterate our support for resolution 2504 (2020) and will continue to remain in favour of the most advantageous access arrangements.

We acknowledge that there is a need for counter-terrorism operations to protect Syria's people and sovereignty. However, we must once again remind all parties that those operations do not discharge them of their responsibilities under international law. Military operations should never be placed above the well-being of citizens. The protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure is paramount and all activities must respect the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution.

The reconstruction of Syria, especially of its medical and education facilities, is integral to the improvement of the humanitarian situation. We therefore encourage members of the international community to contribute to Syria's rebuilding. Without that critical infrastructure, internally displaced persons are forced to remain in overcrowded camps and bombed-out buildings and access to basic necessities will continue to be a far-off luxury.

Furthermore, reconstruction is a necessary precondition for the safe, dignified and voluntary return of millions of refugees. We also appeal to those countries that have imposed unilateral sanctions on Syria to engage in dialogue with the Syrian Government on that issue to aid the country in meeting its most urgent humanitarian needs. The current humanitarian crisis will only continue to deteriorate in the absence of a political resolution of the conflict. It is for the Syrian people to determine their own destiny, without interference, through an inclusive process that meets their legitimate aspirations.

The humanitarian situation is at its worst. Too many people are consistently going without necessary services and children continue to be robbed of their childhoods. There is nothing left for them to do and nowhere else left for them to go. The international community must reinforce the hope of the Syrian people by taking positive action to end the conflict and bring peace and stability back to Syria.

Mr. Ladeb (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I thank Ms. Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and Ms. Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director, for their briefings. I also welcome the ministers participating in the meeting.

Tunisia has been following with concern the military escalation in the north-west of Syria, as well as the ongoing communication and the repeated appeals by many Security Council members and the Secretary-

General to stop the fighting and restore calm. We are also concerned at the reports of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in and around Idlib and the continuing violence and acts of terrorism. Casualties among civilians, including children, are on the rise. There have also been consecutive waves of displaced persons against a backdrop of insufficient shelter capacity and aid for meeting urgent humanitarian needs.

We stress once again that an immediate ceasefire and a commitment of all parties to exercising self-restraint must remain the highest priorities. We reiterate our condemnation of attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including those attacks launched by groups designated as terrorists by the Security Council. We emphasize the importance of combating those terrorist organizations. We call on all parties to fulfil their obligations under international law and international humanitarian law to protect civilians at all times and to ensure the safe and sustained delivery of aid.

We have been following the latest efforts aimed at reaching a ceasefire in north-western Syria through bilateral and multilateral negotiations. Tunisia welcomes all efforts made to this end. We also believe that an international umbrella could help to advance these efforts and initiatives and ensure their effectiveness, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), since such efforts become more effective when the Council is united. We recall once again that any initiatives undertaken to ensure a ceasefire in Syria are mere temporary solutions as long as they do not address finding a joint practical solution that counters the such terrorist organizations listed by the Security Council as Al-Qaida, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and Da'esh. These groups must be eradicated completely from the region.

Tunisia has reviewed the recommendations set forth in the report of the Secretary-General (S/2020/139) on ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid, including medical supplies, to those in need in an expeditious and safe manner. This result could be reached by adopting an approach that combines the delivery of relief items across borders and conflict lines to north-eastern Syria. We believe that ending cross-border aid deliveries requires a smooth and progressive approach that takes into consideration Syria's unity, independence and territorial integrity, while ensuring the safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid in line with international law and the principles of humanitarian action and ensuring the

Syrian Government's full ownership over coordinating relief efforts. To overcome outstanding issues related to meeting humanitarian needs in areas receiving aid, including delays in obtaining approval and other practical and administrative roadblocks, various parties need to facilitate the work of the United Nations and its partners on the ground.

The dialogue and cooperation between the United Nations and the Government of Syria must be enhanced in order to ensure an effective and coordinated humanitarian response. My country's delegation welcomes the fact that, according to the letter of the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the President of the Security Council, dated 26 February 2020, the Syrian Government is ready to make progress in relief efforts in cooperation with the United Nations. We look forward to resolving the issue relating to the delivery of surgical and medical supplies to the north-east of Syria that has arisen between the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Syrian Government through further discussions about alternative routes by land, sea and air proposed by the Syrian Government.

My country stresses that the only sustainable solution to the situation in Syria — and the only way to restore peace and security in the country — is a political settlement in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). To that end, the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process in Geneva must resume under the auspices of the United Nations, paving the way for the drafting of a constitution by consensus of Syrian civil society representatives and political parties, preparing the ground for free and fair elections under the supervision of the United Nations, preserving the unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and contributing to peace and security in the region.

In conclusion, we once again commend the tireless humanitarian efforts of the United Nations in Syria, despite the difficulties and challenges on the ground. We support the noble work of the United Nations to protect lives and alleviate the humanitarian suffering in Syria and other conflict areas.

Mrs. Cedano (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Ms. Henrietta Fore and Ms. Mueller for their briefings.

We once again address the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic where — with great regret — we have to witness a bleak picture for so many

people with humanitarian needs. For the Dominican Republic, what has been described by the representative of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs today and in the days preceding this meeting is a cause for deep concern, not only because of the deterioration of the situation, which is regrettable, but also because of the inability of the international community — of all of us — to stop the violence and suffering in the north-west of the country. Women and children continue to pay the highest price in this conflict at the mercy of violence for which they are not responsible but are its victims.

We appreciate the efforts of the Secretary-General and the Special Envoy for Syria to get the relevant parties to recommit to the ceasefire agreements and to implement them fully. This must be the priority at the present juncture. We are resolutely accompanying these efforts because we are convinced that there is no military solution, but rather one derived from political negotiation, with a view to a future based on peace and reconciliation and respect for the fundamental rights of all Syrians.

Having said that, the Dominican Republic would like to highlight a few points in the context of humanitarian assistance, which is the subject of today's meeting, and to try to be as constructive as possible. We reiterate that attacks against civilians and such civilian infrastructure as hospitals, schools and camps for displaced persons are serious violations of international humanitarian law. They are unacceptable and must stop immediately.

We appreciate the efforts of both international and Syrian humanitarian organizations to meet the needs on the ground. We advocate for full funding of the humanitarian response plan for Syria, including the provisions necessary to cover the needs of the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons in the north-west, many of them housed in makeshift tents in the cold, rain and snow. But all of this must be accompanied by safe and unhindered humanitarian access, including for the United Nations. In this regard, we would like to welcome the report of the Secretary-General on modalities and alternatives for the Al-Yarubiyah crossing in the north-east of the country (S/2020/139). The Dominican Republic recognizes the enormous challenges on the ground in reaching the affected populations, and we therefore believe that this remains the best option.

Even so, and given the circumstances, we understand that any decision must respond only to the level of existing needs, in the most direct manner possible and in accordance with humanitarian principles. Guarantees to facilitate a humanitarian response must precede any decision by the Council. In the absence of such guarantees, and without the direct and extended assistance of the United Nations, we believe that there is still a long way to go. We welcome the recent authorization of air and land deliveries of medical supplies to the north-east — and by land to all of Syria — as Ms. Mueller has announced.

In conclusion, we reiterate the need to make further progress on — and obtain better results with regard to — the release of arbitrarily detained persons, in particular women, children, the elderly and the disabled, and to provide credible information on missing persons to their families. Family reunification reaches the deepest fibres of any society and is at the heart of building trust and reconciliation. That is why my country calls for even more progress in that area, while advocating the commitment and political will needed to advance the political process — the only credible way to bring peace to the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Dang (Viet Nam): I join others in welcoming you, Mr. President, to today's briefing. I would also like to welcome the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany to today's briefing.

We would like to express our thanks to Assistant Secretary-General Mueller and UNICEF Executive Director Fore for their briefings.

We remain deeply concerned about the increasing level of human suffering in the north-west of Syria since the beginning of December 2019 due to tensions and hostilities, as highlighted by the Secretary-General in his report (S/2020/141). The surge of displaced persons — 300,000, 500,000, 700,000 and now nearly 1 million persons, 80 per cent of them women and children — only increases the risk of civilians falling victim to attacks, cold, hunger, disease and so on. We are particularly concerned about the number of civilians killed by weapons, of whom more than 31 per cent are children. That is simply unacceptable.

We are also concerned that the humanitarian situation remains dire in other parts of the country, especially in the north-east. Health-care and education services have either been heavily affected or have collapsed, leaving the majority of the Syrian population

in the most vulnerable conditions. We therefore urge all concerned parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and ensure that the protection of civilians and the delivery of humanitarian assistance are a top priority.

On this occasion, we would like to commend the tireless efforts of United Nations agencies, working with their partners, to bring much needed humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, providing them with shelter, food and medical and health services. Their important work should not be interrupted or impeded, so that the humanitarian crisis can be contained and alleviated.

Secondly, we thank the Secretary-General for his recent report on the review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah. It will serve as an important tool for the Security Council to evaluate the situation and work to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches the right destination at the right time. We are particularly concerned about the information indicating severe disruptions to medical and nutritional supplies for civilians in north-eastern Syria.

Moving forward, we strongly urge the countries concerned and the United Nations to work closely together to find the most effective and feasible ways and means to deliver assistance to people in need, when they need it most. All suggestions on cross-border and cross-line options are on the table. We welcome all efforts aimed at facilitating the more expeditious delivery of humanitarian assistance.

The only way to end the humanitarian crisis and bring stability to Syria is by achieving sustainable peace. We join the other members of the Council in reiterating our support for the Secretary-General's call for an immediate ceasefire and urge parties to engage in dialogue and negotiations to find a lasting solution, in accordance with the principles of international law and international humanitarian law, as well as relevant Security Council resolutions.

Mr. Syihab (Indonesia): Let me begin by joining others in welcoming you, Mr. President, and the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany to the Chamber.

We thank Assistant Secretary-General Mueller and UNICEF Executive Director Fore for their important briefings.

My delegation welcomes the most recent report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020) (S/2020/141), as well as the report of the Secretary-General on the review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah (S/2020/139).

We share the Secretary-General's call for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Idlib. Indonesia would like to highlight, in that regard, the existing request from the Council to the Secretary-General, in resolution 2254 (2015), to lead the effort, through the office of his Special Envoy and in consultation with relevant parties, to determine the modalities and requirements of a ceasefire, as well as to continue planning for the support of ceasefire implementation. While acknowledging the close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel political process, Indonesia would like to reaffirm its strong support to the ongoing work of the Special Envoy. I wish to underline three points.

First, Indonesia urges all parties to the conflict to immediately cease hostilities. The humanitarian situation in the north-west is extremely disturbing, with approximately 950,000 people displaced since 1 December 2019. That number has increased significantly in a short period of time. The number of civilians killed as a result of hostilities is also increasing. We condemn any targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure and camps for internally displaced persons. We urge all parties to take the necessary steps to protect civilians and to ensure respect for international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction and proportionality. Once again, Indonesia appeals to all relevant parties in the conflict to stop the violence, especially their military operations in densely populated areas.

Secondly, my delegation notes that the cross-border operation remains a key mechanism for providing live-saving humanitarian assistance to people in need. The increased demand in the north-west should be immediately addressed. When humanitarian responses are overwhelmed, the international community must redouble its efforts to support humanitarian operations in north-western Syria.

Thirdly, we take note of the observations made in the report of the Secretary-General on the review

of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah. A combination of more cross-border and cross-line access is indeed necessary to maintain the levels of humanitarian assistance in north-eastern Syria. We also believe that it is crucial for the Syrian Government to facilitate more cross-line access to north-eastern Syria, especially to allow medical distribution, in a timely manner, to all civilians in need.

We therefore appreciate the Syrian Government's cooperation in its decision to authorize the delivery of cross-line humanitarian aid and the transportation of medical aid via land routes, as indicated in the letter received yesterday from the Syrian Permanent Representative. Indonesia sincerely hopes that humanitarian operations in targeted areas can be enhanced and sustained as a result. My delegation reiterates the importance for all parties to allow safe, unimpeded and sustained access for the United Nations humanitarian response to all requested areas, based on the United Nations assessment of needs in all parts of Syria.

Let me stress one important last point. The issue of humanitarian assistance should not be politicized by anyone. It is crucial for us, the members of the Security Council, to lead by example.

In conclusion, my delegation commends the tireless efforts of all humanitarian workers on the ground, in spite of the security situation, in responding to the increasing needs in the north-west. They are our real heroes.

Mr. Abarry (Niger) (*spoke in French*): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium for presiding over today's debate. I also thank the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany for being here with us today.

I would like to thank the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator and the UNICEF Executive Director for their briefings. The information they have provided us paints an alarming picture of the humanitarian situation, which is claiming the lives of women and children. This can no longer be tolerated. We must respond to the moving call made by the Executive Director of UNICEF to the Council.

The Niger condemns the recent attacks on schools and hospitals, which have resulted in the deaths of several civilians, including students, teachers and

doctors. We welcome the Secretary-General's report (S/2020/139) and his analysis of the situation related to the crossing points, which will help the Council to better assess their importance.

The report of the Secretary-General confirms what we already knew about the humanitarian situation in Syria: that instead of improving, as we had so strongly hoped, it is, unfortunately, constantly deteriorating. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, from February 1 to February 20, more than 100 civilians were killed.

Since the most recent consultation on the humanitarian situation in Syria, the Syrian regime forces have registered gains in their fight against terrorism. The price of that confrontation continues to be paid by civilians, including many women and children, who are exposed to dangers of all kinds during this period of extreme cold. It cannot be said often enough: the fight against terrorism, legitimate as it may be, must be waged within a framework of respect for human rights.

In this context of armed conflict, the delivery of humanitarian aid has been gravely imperilled. We commend the decision of the Syrian authorities to authorize certain agencies to deliver humanitarian aid. That process must continue, especially when it involves medical products and equipment.

Resolution 2504 (2020), which allowed the continued use of humanitarian corridors, was beneficial; however, coordination between aid workers and the Syrian Government needs substantial improvement.

Today more than ever, the situation in Idlib demands our attention. It must move us to an outpouring of solidarity and commitment to doing everything in our power to stop the ongoing military escalation, which will only worsen the already catastrophic humanitarian situation. I commend the Secretary-General on his efforts to obtain a ceasefire as soon as possible between the parties in open conflict in Idlib. If the hostilities do not cease, the meagre but hard-won gains registered will be wiped out.

In conclusion, while we in this Chamber have taken the floor, three women have spoken from the heart in the face of the suffering of the weakest: the children of Idlib. Let us listen to them. Let us work to put an end to the tragedy in Syria, which has lasted for far too long.

Ms. Goolab (South Africa): Allow me to join others in thanking Ms. Ursula Mueller and Ms. Henrietta Fore for their briefings on the humanitarian situation in Syria. I wish also to welcome Deputy Prime Minister De Croo and Minister Maas to the Council.

As we have heard today, the humanitarian situation in north-east Syria continues to deteriorate, with women and children the worst affected by this crisis. The increase in violence in the region has seen hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced.

South Africa particularly emphasizes its grave concern regarding the attacks on civilian infrastructure and basic services, including health and education facilities. The continual violence will have long-term effects on the people, particularly the children, of Syria.

South Africa reiterates that all parties to the conflict must adhere to their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

South Africa once again urges all parties to seek a non-military solution to the conflict. This would require a cessation of hostilities and a solution that upholds Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity. In that regard, we wish to stress that external support for armed groups and United Nations-designated terrorist groups must cease immediately. External role-players should not be allowed to use the conflict in Syria as a proxy for their own interests.

In view of the rising tensions and the potential of a direct military confrontation between Syria and Turkey, we look towards various forums, including the Astana process and bilateral engagements between the stakeholders, to contribute to the lowering of these tensions.

As the humanitarian crisis worsens, those providing essential assistance have had to work harder to meet the needs of those requiring aid. We deeply appreciate their commitment in these changing and challenging circumstances.

My delegation has taken note of the Secretary-General's report on alternative modalities for the Al-Yarubiyah crossing point, as requested by the Council in resolution 2504 (2020) (S/2020/139). We note the observations of the Secretary-General and support his view that all parties to the conflict and the Security Council itself must live up to their responsibilities

to ensure that the people of north-east Syria receive the assistance they so desperately need. It is vital for there to be safe, unimpeded and impartial delivery of humanitarian assistance to all those who require it.

We have also taken note of the letter from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic regarding authorization for a World Health Organization convoy and for the transportation of medical aid via land routes. That is a positive step in addressing the humanitarian situation. We note from the Secretary-General's report that crossline operations have improved since the Syrian Government approved the use of land deliveries. As challenges remain for crossline deliveries of aid, particularly for medical assistance, we encourage the Government of Syria to heed the recommendations of the Secretary-General to facilitate a simplified, expedited and reliable approval process to enable regular and predictable deliveries from Damascus into the north-east by land.

As we have stated before, the only sustainable solution to the conflict in Syria remains an inclusive Syrian-owned and Syrian-led dialogue aimed at a political solution that is reflective of the will of the Syrian people. In that regard, South Africa fully supports and appreciates the hard work of Special Envoy Geir Pedersen in working towards achieving that goal.

Mr. Jürgenson (Estonia): Estonians all over the world celebrated their independence day earlier this week — 102 years. However, in the light of what we have just heard in the briefings delivered by Assistant Secretary-General Mueller and Executive Director, it is hard to remain joyful today.

We are all witnessing a tragedy unfolding in Syria. More than 900,000 people have been displaced during the past three months and at least 300 others are dead. Our Syrian colleagues tell us that it is a fight against terrorism, but actually they are turning the cradle of civilization into a graveyard. To date it is mostly ordinary people who have continued to suffer.

Only two days ago the Syrian army, assisted by the Russian armed forces, targeted 10 schools in Idlib governorate. According to eyewitnesses, at least four people were killed and 15 injured in one of those attacks because the school building served as a makeshift refuge for the fleeing people.

In addition to the human suffering, we remain extremely worried about the escalating military conflict between the Turkish, Syrian and Russian forces operating in the area. Turkey offers shelter to more than 3 million Syrian refugees and is determined to de-escalate the situation in Idlib. The attacks carried out by the Syrian army threaten both of those important Turkish efforts.

Looking at the humanitarian disaster in Idlib, 14 foreign ministers of the European Union yesterday highlighted their strong concern over the situation. We reiterate here their call on the Syrian regime and its allies to end this offensive and to resume the ceasefire established in 2018.

The Astana format has failed. It might have worked as a short-term remedy for some, but it is now certainly falling short in protecting and helping civilians in Syria. That means that we must once again consider a stronger Security Council role for Syria.

Regarding the situation in the north-east of the country, the Secretary-General's report on the review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah (S/2020/139) indicates that the region faces a serious lack of medical supplies in the coming months. However, there are alternatives to substitute for the closing of the Al-Yarubiyah crossing point in the cross-border aid mechanism, including Tall Abyad in Turkey or even Damascus itself.

For the Syrian regime to fill the gap, Syria will need to ease bureaucratic restrictions for aid organizations and grant unimpeded humanitarian access everywhere to those in need. Unfortunately, as reported by the United Nations, the Syrian regime has so far largely decided to neglect those requirements, giving access only in a sporadic manner. The international community will not normalize its relationship with the Syrian regime unless Damascus decides to abide by international humanitarian law and Security Council resolution 2254 (2015).

That is the position of both Estonia and, more broadly, the European Union. In short — there must be investigation before rehabilitation, responsibility before availability and justice before any kind of recognition.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China welcomes the visit to New York of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Development Cooperation of Belgium in order to preside over

today's meeting. We thank Under-Secretary-General Mueller and UNICEF Executive Director Fore for their briefings.

China supports the United Nations in continuing its effective delivery of aid to Syrian civilians. The political, economic and security situations in Syria are complicated and its humanitarian situation remains dire. The international community should increase its humanitarian aid to Syria. The United Nations and the Security Council must apply integrated measures to handle the Syrian humanitarian crisis in a comprehensive and impartial manner. In that connection, I would like to emphasize the following points.

First, the international community should provide the United Nations with adequate funding and supplies and continue to deliver humanitarian aid to civilians throughout Syria. Years of war have led to harsh living conditions for the Syrian people, who do not have the means to buy fuel, food and medicine. The international community should continue to provide Syria with necessary assistance. In addition, efforts must be made to stabilize the country's economy in order to secure the Syrian people's basic livelihoods. In areas with relatively stable security, the Syrian Government is rebuilding houses and medical and educational facilities and clearing the explosive remnants of war. Those efforts are conducive to addressing the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Secondly, terrorist forces must be eliminated if we are to put an end to the Syrian conflict. The international community should fully cooperate in a joint effort to bring terrorists to justice. The occupation of Idlib by terrorist forces and their systematic attacks on civilians, journalists and medical workers, as well as the acute problem of foreign terrorist fighters, are major obstacles to the restoration of peace and stability in Syria. We should work to eliminate the entrenched terrorist safe havens in Syria, in accordance with the relevant Council resolutions and international law. China supports all parties in their continued efforts to seek a comprehensive and long-term solution to the Idlib problem through dialogue and negotiation.

Thirdly, the Syrian Government has the primary responsibility for improving the humanitarian situation in Syria. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other humanitarian agencies must strengthen coordination and cooperation with the Syrian Government; abide by the Charter of

the United Nations; observe the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence; and fully respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. The cross-border humanitarian aid delivery mechanism is a special modality for relief in certain situations and should be adjusted to developments on the ground.

In a letter to the President of the Council and the Secretary-General, the Permanent Representative of Syria expressed his willingness to accept the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The Syrian Government agreed to the World Health Organization's use of border crossings and multiple airports under Government control for shipping supplies. It also authorized the use, by the Syrian Red Cross and other United Nations humanitarian agencies, of roadways for transporting medical supplies in Syrian territory for the purpose of delivering aid. OCHA should accept that Syrian proposal.

China is closely monitoring the humanitarian situation in Syria. Since the start of the Syria crisis, China has delivered multiple batches of food aid to Syria and has provided medical services, power equipment, office facilities, public transportation and personnel training in various areas relating to the delivery of humanitarian aid. China has also cooperated to that end with eight agencies, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, and has done all it can to help Syria's neighbours to manage their refugees. China intends to continue helping the Syrian people, including Syrian refugees outside of Syria.

China categorically rejects the accusation made by the United States. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, China has been committed to diplomatic efforts to push for an early conclusion to the conflict and a political solution to the Syrian issue. China has no ulterior motives with regard to the Syrian issue. We are guided by the best interests of the Syrian people. We have made judgments and established our positions based solely on the merits of the case. China resolutely supports the efforts of the legitimate Syrian Government to maintain its sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. That is also conducive to peace and stability in the Middle East.

China has consistently supported the comprehensive and impartial management of the Syrian humanitarian issue. It has consistently advocated the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and non-interference with regard to the delivery

of humanitarian aid to Syria. Those principles are widely accepted by the international community and are indisputable. China has consistently played a constructive role in the Council's discussions of the Syrian humanitarian issue.

All countries are entitled to voice their opinions, make recommendations on issues and determine their voting positions independently, in accordance with their own principled positions. China rejects the levelling of frivolous accusations against other countries, which constitutes an abuse of the Security Council platform.

A political solution is essential for improving the humanitarian situation in Syria and must be based on safeguarding the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. China supports Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts to reach a Syrian-led and -owned solution and to use the platform of the Constitutional Committee in the search for a political solution that addresses the concerns of all parties in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We are happy to see you preside over the Security Council, Mr. President, and we are grateful to Ms. Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, and Ms. Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for their briefings. Ms. Mueller has done a great deal in her position, especially with regard to managing so-called forgotten crises. In general, she has demonstrated talent and a principled approach as a humanitarian and I thank her for her work.

Since Council meetings take place regularly — perhaps too regularly — I imagine that many members of the Council can write each other's statements. We, for example, knew in advance what our colleagues from the troika, the humanitarian penholders, would say. We have heard those ideas more than once. Our colleagues can also probably imagine our remarks although they prefer to ignore them. That is more convenient.

But I propose that today we do something a little different and focus on two recent reports of the Secretary-General — on alternatives to the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah (S/2020/139), closed earlier by a decision of the Security Council, and on the humanitarian situation in Syria (S/2020/141). They contain quite a few disturbing points, over which, together with United Nations colleagues, we express our concern.

Among those issues is the humanitarian situation in Idlib. We are convinced that it is not a normal situation when, in an area of a large-scale humanitarian operation with a budget of hundreds of millions of dollars, for several days, or even weeks, people have to spend the night in the open air. We believe that such a situation could have been predicted and prepared for in advance, particularly given the risks associated with the winter period. The Turkish side is not impeding the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Idlib and humanitarian workers have plenty of resources so why has this problem still not been resolved?

Moreover, from the reports of humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), we know that among the displaced persons there are people who died as a result of heaters in tents catching fire. Those reasons, not the cold, as many colleagues try to portray, account for the majority of the victims. We believe that humanitarian workers and companies supplying such devices must address such incidents and prevent their recurrence.

Let us now return to the reports of the Secretary-General. During previous meetings, colleagues from other delegations have repeatedly criticized us for the fact that the Russian position, as they put it, is never supported by facts and that we stand alone in the Council. Today is an opportunity to provide some facts.

First, as we have noted, the only long-term solution to the issue of Idlib, and frankly of Syria as a whole, is the definitive and irreversible expulsion of terrorists from the country. We urge members not to say that we are exaggerating the problem and not to try to whitewash Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

The report of the Secretary General (S/2020/141) clearly describes those with whom some Council members are trying to flirt. They are guilty of killings, abductions, arbitrary detention, torture and public executions of civilians, journalists, public figures and health service providers, bans on peaceful assembly and preventing civilians from entering safe zones. That is in paragraph 15. As for the issue of the ratio of civilians to fighters, even if, as members claim, there are not many fighters, they are nevertheless capable of carrying out their atrocities across the entire province. The number of them therefore does not really matter, so we do not accept that argument.

Secondly, at every meeting we are told that Damascus does not cooperate. The purpose is

clear — to create the illusion that there is no progress on humanitarian access, from which can be drawn the well-worn conclusion, namely, that it is not possible to reach an agreement with the Government. Even today we have heard similar statements.

In the meantime, the Syrian Government has increased the number of approvals for humanitarian operations to 600 a month. All United Nations agencies and 28 international NGOs are registered and working in the country. That is in paragraph 38 of the report.

Furthermore, the vast majority of the aforementioned approvals — 95 per cent, to be exact — are so-called “blanket” approvals, which gives humanitarian actors flexibility compared to other kinds of approvals. In principle, they do not limit the number of humanitarian operations in authorized areas and are therefore particularly valued by the humanitarian community. I repeat, in the past two months the Syrian side has issued 1,193 such approvals, as stated in paragraph 32. The number of people receiving such assistance is 4.4 million in just two months.

I would also like to recall that, according to paragraph 31 of the report, there are 1,700 United Nations staff members in the country, and these are only the United Nations staff members, not including local personnel and staff of humanitarian partners, who are even more numerous. They are all somehow in Syria, which means they have been granted visas; they are all working there. That was almost entirely ignored today. We have the impression that some of our colleagues simply do not read the reports of the Secretary-General.

We are not trying to say that there are no problems. There are, and the report highlights that. We are simply asking members not to describe the world in black and white, not to disregard the other side of the issue, not to increase political pressure and not to rush to bury the Astana format.

Like many other countries, we are working with the Syrian side to resolve existing difficulties. The country is at war with terrorists. A number of natural resources have been cut off. Production chains have been disrupted and illegal unilateral sanctions seek precisely to undermine the effectiveness of State governance. There are active terrorist cells in the country that do not hesitate to use the humanitarian element in their grim media and armed struggle. That applies to the reports of bombings of schools and hospitals. There is no United Nations presence in Idlib. To affirm such

bombardments, it is enough just to make two telephone calls. We have often identified such fake reports based on supposedly reliable information.

Today, our American colleagues spoke of bombardments of internally displaced persons camps. As Ms. Mueller said in her briefing, in this period there has been only one example of shelling of an internally displaced persons camp, the Dana camp. It was not a bombardment but artillery shelling. I would ask that our colleagues be more exact when speaking about such issues.

Thirdly, since the Secretary General’s report on alternative modalities for the border crossing of Al-Yarubiyah has been issued, let us be clear here and give an alternative point of view, with references, of course, to the text. I would recall that the entire information campaign in support of that border crossing served one purpose — to prevent any changes in the cross-border mechanism. Since it has always been presented as a legal precedent in the context of international humanitarian law, year after year colleagues have insisted that it remain unchanged. We understood such considerations but did not share them. I would recall that the arguments regarding Al-Yarubiyah were based on two points: there are no alternatives to Al-Yarubiyah and the only way to reach north-east Syria from Damascus is through Iraq. All other points of view were considered nonsense, including the Russian and Syrian proposals.

Let us now turn to the report contained in document S/2020/139. The first fact is that, except for some medical supplies, all deliveries — I repeat, everything, that is, food, equipment and sanitary supplies — were delivered to the region beyond the Euphrates from within Syria, not from Iraq, as set out in paragraphs 12, 13 and 41 of the report. They are still being delivered. On 18 February, a convoy of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) travelled from Damascus to Qamishli. That is in paragraph 40. Earlier, a World Food Programme convoy passed through the same route.

Next, with regard to there being no alternatives to Al-Yarubiyah, the whole final part of the report outlines those very alternatives, the main and most feasible of which is to obtain approval from Damascus for the only kind of humanitarian aid that is not covered by regular deliveries from within Syria, namely, medical supplies.

At the last meeting on this issue (see S/PV.8727), I cited a Syrian note addressed to the United Nations Resident Coordinator, approving the delivery of a

shipment that had been delayed in Iraq. Damascus issued that approval in one day, although it proved impossible to execute the delivery for security reasons, which we understand. Yesterday, the Government approved the delivery of medical supplies from warehouses in Damascus to the north-east of the country. The February UNFPA convoy, which I mentioned earlier, covered that route in four and a half days. It is therefore acceptable from a security standpoint, since the United Nations Department for Safety and Security agreed to it. Syrian troops are clearing the key Damascus-Aleppo route to make that possible. I believe that if my colleagues were to allow the Syrian Permanent Representative Bashar Ja'afari to speak without a time limit and not ignore his words, he would lay out in detail the humanitarian efforts being made by the legitimate Syrian Government, at a time when the Western countries are basically choking his country with sanctions.

The report also refutes the complaints of some Security Council members about the acute lack of medical supplies in the provinces of north-eastern Syria. Paragraph 5 of the report notes the opposite — the fact that hospitals have stocks that will last until May. The only sphere in which a shortage may be felt is reproductive health, but even there we still have a month, as noted in the report. I recall that the Syrian side has already agreed to a one-time air delivery of supplies from Erbil, in Iraq. That approval is also contained in the aforementioned note.

No matter how certain members of the Security Council seek to dramatize the situation, substantial progress has been made, as the Secretary-General has acknowledged. He has also called on the sides to provide support until all medical supplies have been successfully delivered to the hospitals. For our part, we are ready to continue to assist this process and call on everyone to do the same. We reiterate that the more we approach this issue with calm and professionalism, the better will be the chances for its successful resolution.

Mr. Allen (United Kingdom): I would like to welcome you, Sir, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany to the Council today. I thought he was totally right. As he said, it is ever more difficult to put the human suffering in Idlib into words. It is so true, as we see the terrible human consequences of the escalating violence committed by the Syrian regime and Russia in Idlib province.

The representative of Russia asked why humanitarian agencies were finding it so difficult to protect the desperate people out in the open air at the moment. The answer is because they are being bombed, they are being shelled, they are being attacked. It is extremely difficult indeed to provide assistance to people in those circumstances. The intensity and pace of the Syrian and Russian campaign mean that civilians who are able to get out of the way in time have nowhere to go. They have no shelter. They are forced to sleep in the open air. Children are literally freezing to death.

At the last humanitarian session, we said that over 358,000 people had been displaced since the first of December. That number is now over 948,000, 80 per cent of whom are women and children. I say to my fellow Council members that we should be under no illusion that this is the worst humanitarian situation thus far in this terrible conflict. The continued attacks not only directly cause civilian suffering, but they also hamper the aid effort, amplifying the scale of this disaster.

The representative of Russia also talked about terrorism, and he urged us in a different context not to exaggerate problems. I would simply note that yesterday the Russian Ambassador to London stated in a media interview that terrorists made up 1 per cent of the population of Idlib. Even were that the case, I would simply say that international law does not permit anyone to attack the 99 per cent to handle 1 per cent.

We remain appalled that civilian infrastructure continues to be attacked. On Sunday, the White Helmets reported that Russian warplanes hit a children's and women's hospital in Balyoun, in Idlib. As the United Kingdom's Minister for the Middle East said on Monday,

“The United Kingdom has condemned and continues to condemn these flagrant violations of international law and basic human decency”.

Let me remind all military forces on the ground, especially their commanders, that following political orders is no defence against war crimes. Accountability will come, no matter how long it takes. I also wish to say as well that we look forward to the report of the Secretary-General's board of inquiry, and we urge Secretary-General to make those findings public.

We need there to be an immediate cessation of hostilities. We strongly support the Turkish Government's efforts to re-establish the ceasefire agreed in 2018. We also stand behind the Secretary-

General and his Special Envoy for Syria in their efforts to stop the violence and save those many lives now in peril.

Turning to the north-east, I thank the Secretary-General for his report (S/2020/139) on the implementation of resolution 2504 (2020) and on alternatives to the Al-Yarubiyah crossing, as requested in that resolution. The report makes clear that there is no alternative. Since the loss of the Al-Yarubiyah crossing in the cross-border mandate, those living in areas of north-eastern Syria not under the control of the Syrian authorities have been denied the medicines and medical items they so desperately require. Without access through Al-Yarubiyah or the provision of a credible alternative, medical facilities will see their stocks of vital medicines dwindle, putting their continued operation and the Syrian patients who depend upon them at risk. As many have said, a particular area of concern is reproductive health stocks. We note with great concern the forecast that stocks in the north-east could be depleted by the end of March, preventing vital procedures such as caesarean sections — a preventable tragedy for Syrian women — and, more widely, supplies will run out by May.

The Russian Federation has said that we can trust the authorities in Damascus to deliver aid throughout Syria. Well, let us examine that claim. It is, of course, welcome that, in recent hours and days, the Syrian authorities have granted authorization for humanitarian delivery. But we have heard promises before; what matters is what actually happens on the ground, and in that respect we need the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to provide regular and granular data to the Security Council on the Syrian regime's performance when it comes both to cross-line humanitarian aid and that within the areas controlled by the authorities.

The Secretary-General's report makes clear that responses to requests are delayed for months; even when approval is given, under half are permitted to proceed. Key medical supplies are routinely removed from convoys. In 2019, there were precisely zero road convoys from Damascus to the north-east of Syria. In areas controlled by Al-Assad, we see humanitarian aid withheld from towns and communities deemed insufficiently loyal to the regime. We therefore place little faith in promises by the Syrian authorities, but we do call upon them again to meet their humanitarian obligations and we call on their Russian protectors

to make them do so. For the sake of the innocent people dying in Syria, there is no alternative to cross border access.

The United Kingdom remains the third-largest donor to the United Nations-led humanitarian response across Syria. We have allocated \$152 million this financial year to projects implemented by organizations delivering cross-border aid, primarily into north-west Syria. Since the conflict began, the United Kingdom has committed over \$4 billion of humanitarian funding in response to the conflict, and we remain committed to providing help to those in need. We want to continue to provide this much-needed assistance. We must be sure that the aid is going to those who need it most, wherever they are, on a principled basis. Therefore, pending clarity about the future of cross-border operations beyond July, and given the clear interference and obstruction of aid by the authorities in Damascus, we will be looking very seriously at this question.

As set out in this Chamber before and as others have said today, we will not consider providing any reconstruction assistance until a credible, substantive and genuine political process is firmly under way. Russia's contribution to Syria has been through military hardware and bombs on his people, not development aid, and that will have to change.

We are facing the worst humanitarian crisis in the worst conflict in the world. Innocent men, women and children are dying and will die if nothing is done. It is in the hands of Syria and Russia to take or to save lives. It is their choice. The human and humane thing to do is to cease the fighting and let the aid workers and medics in to act. It is in their hands.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Let me start my statement with a piece of information that I suppose is worthy of the attention of all the participants in today's meeting, especially Ms. Mueller and Ms. Fore. The day before yesterday, the authorities of the Turkish occupation cut off the potable water supply for Al-Hasakah city and the surrounding villages supplied by a plant called Alouk, knowing full well that this plant is the sole source of potable water for Al-Hasakah, which is a city located in north-eastern Syria — and not north-western Syria. Al-Hasakah and the surrounding area are populated by 600,000 people, all of whom are civilians, mostly women and children.

That crime is similar to the crimes perpetrated by terrorist groups in the suburbs of Damascus in 2012, supported by Turkey and Qatar. However, those groups were eradicated by the Syrian Arab Republic. This most recent Turkish crime is therefore similar to those crimes that were perpetrated by armed terrorist gangs in Damascus in 2012, when they dumped diesel oil into the Ayn al-Fijah spring, the main source of potable water to Damascus, with a population of 8 million people. We just wanted the Council to keep this matter in mind.

Four noteworthy positions are discernible under this month's Belgian presidency of the Security Council, the first of which is the endeavour by certain Member States to transform the Security Council into a NATO platform for supporting the Turkish aggression and for levelling threats against my country, in violation of the provisions of the Charter. This approach will eventually undermine the role of the Security Council, whose purpose is to maintain international peace and security. This position was aired in public during the meeting that was held on 6 February (see S/PV.8715).

The second noteworthy position concerns a statement by the Permanent Representative of the Israeli occupying Power, when he said that it was necessary to physically get rid of the Palestinian President, Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, as a *sine qua non* of what he calls peace, which is a flagrant threat of liquidation of the President of the State of Palestine, made within the precinct of the Council Chamber.

The third noteworthy position is represented by the response of the Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu, to a question related to the attacks launched by his air force against my country, Syria, on 14 February. He said — and, by the way, this is very important for the President of the Council and his country — that maybe those attacks were launched by the Belgian Air Force.

The fourth noteworthy position finds its locus in Under-Secretary-General Lowcock, who has styled himself as the propagandist of misleading films and whose only aim is to undermine the Government of my country, in violation of the requirements of his mandate, taking advantage of the self-imposed isolation of some who have shut down their embassies in Damascus or the geographical distance of others or the sometimes inadequate knowledge of the external interventionist roles that have had such catastrophic consequences on our region for decades.

The representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was very right in her political analysis, notwithstanding the geographical distance between her country and mine, and the fact that her country does not have an embassy in Damascus. I invite other Council members to objectively follow her example and her logical analysis.

We are not accusing Mr. Lowcock falsely. Let me mention in this regard a simple example of the very misleading approach of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, namely, that the Under-Secretary-General — and today Ms. Mueller — failed, in his briefing to the Council on 19 February (see S/PV.8727), to mention that the two humanitarian workers of the British humanitarian organization Oxfam were Wissam Hazim and Adel Al-Halabi, who were martyred a few days ago as they pursued their humanitarian work in the Dara'a province. We again pay our heartfelt condolences to their families and colleagues. These two men were Syrian citizens killed in cold blood by armed terrorist groups that consistently impede humanitarian work, the efforts of the Syrian Government and its partners, to deliver humanitarian aid to the people who need it. These groups are but terrorist organizations that Mr. Lowcock continues to depict as non-State armed opposition or non-State actors, whereas they are considered by others to be jihadist organizations.

The Syrian Arab Army and its allies managed to exact a defeat on the terrorist groups in Idlib and their paymasters, thereby returning a sense of safety and jubilation to millions of Syrians in Aleppo thanks to the delivery of their city from the onslaught of wrath and terrorism. We have relaunched operations at the Aleppo international airport with the first flight in eight years. There is no doubt that the work of the Syrian Government and its allies in countering terrorism in Idlib is but a constitutional and national task. It is also a precise implementation of Security Council resolutions.

Out of our eagerness to protect the security and safety of our citizens and after taking a number of initiatives, including the opening of a number of humanitarian crossings, the Syrian Government calls on the Syrian citizens who recently fled their regions and homes to return to the areas liberated from terrorism in north-western Syria. The Syrian Government stresses its commitment to guaranteeing the safety, security and protection of those citizens and ensuring all their required basic needs.

My country's delegation calls on the States that have leverage over the Turkish regime and the terrorist groups affiliated with it to compel them to allow our citizens to return to their homes, as well as the 1 million Syrians whom the Turkish aggression had displaced from Manbij, Afrin, Tal Rifaat, Jarabulus, Ain Arab and other places. My country reiterates its call on United Nations entities to promptly provide humanitarian aid to those citizens instead of making statements and briefings that do not honestly reflect the reality on the ground and contribute only to giving cover to terrorist organizations and their sponsoring Governments.

We have informed the Security Council of our disappointment in the reluctance of the World Health Organization (WHO) to import the medical consignment that is being held in Iraq, notwithstanding the authorization that was given to the WHO by the Syrian Government on 29 January, almost a month ago. The Syrian Government authorized the entry of that consignment through the Bukamal border crossing. On 22 February, my country's Government sent an official letter to the WHO Regional Director, reporting its readiness to cooperate with Iraqi authorities to transfer that aid to Syria through the Bukamal border crossing or any other legal official crossing, including airports and the ports of Tartus and Latakia. On 25 February, my country's Government also informed WHO of its approval of a one-time transfer of that aid through Erbil airport in Iraq to Al-Qamishli airport, in north-eastern Syria, provided that it would be distributed under the supervision of the Syrian Red Crescent and Syrian Government authorities and in partnership with the United Nations. Yesterday, we informed the Secretary-General, the President of the Security Council and the Member States of the Council of that approval.

Regrettably and notwithstanding all this, Ms. Mueller and Ms. Fore appear not to have heard about this information. They failed to inform Council members of it in their briefings today. In her briefing, Ms. Mueller mentioned the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing 11 times although, according to the relevant Security Council resolution, that crossing was closed. Nonetheless, she mentioned it 11 times. She then said that Tall Abyad crossing is the most viable and logical option. She attributed that to the Secretary-General's report (S/2020/139). That is not true because the Secretary-General's report does not say that the Tall Abyad crossing is the most logical option. As my colleague the Ambassador of the Russian Federation

said, the report provides alternatives, based on coordination with the Syrian Government, for the delivery of aid from Damascus to anywhere in the country. That is according to the report and not as mentioned by Ms. Mueller.

My country's delegation recalls that cooperation among the Syrian Government, the United Nations and its agencies, as well as our partners from 38 foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 1,400 national societies, has enabled us, during the years of the so-called crisis, to continue to deliver humanitarian aid, social support, health care and basic services to millions of Syrians, including those who live in places classified by the United Nations as not under the control of the Syrian Government. That is reiterated in paragraph 22 of the sixty-fifth report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of humanitarian resolutions, which indicates that, together the Syrian Government and the United Nations deliver food aid to more than 3.5 million people every month in areas classified as being under the control of the Government in north-eastern Syria.

What does that mean? It means that aid delivery is viable in the north-east of the country from within the country's borders, with complete cooperation and coordination with the Syrian Government, far removed from any attempt to antagonize and politicize humanitarian aid and without the need for the crossings mentioned in resolution 2504 (2020), which are earmarked by the Erdoğan regime to become crossings for his military machinery and aggressive troops in support of terrorism, amid total silence from the Security Council.

I would like to inform the Council of the approval granted by my country to transport aid via contact lines to areas in need within Syria, provided that such aid is delivered exclusively to the Syrians who need it, so as to ensure that it will not end up in the hands of armed terrorists groups, illegitimate political organizations or proxy militias. Such aid should also be distributed under the supervision of the Syrian State, the Syrian Red Crescent and partners from relevant United Nations organizations.

Yesterday, the Government of my country sent a letter to Mr. Imran Riza, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Syria, in which we informed him of our approval to transfer medical aid via land routes throughout the country, especially following the

liberation of the highway between Damascus and Aleppo, as well as other international highways, from armed terrorist groups supported by the Erdoğan regime. The liberation of those highways is a milestone that serves to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid to the civilians in my country who need it. Anyone seeking to provide a different explanation, by calling for a ceasefire and negotiations with Da'esh and the Al-Nusra Front in Idlib, is either ignorant of the situation in Syria, directly supports terrorism or is responsible for the bloodshed of Syrians.

Why did Western countries, starting with the United States and followed by others, not negotiate ceasefires in the past with Bin Laden, Al-Zarqawi, Al-Baghdadi, Al-Julani and their terrorist entities? If the crux of the matter is a ceasefire with terrorist entities, then why did the United States and Western countries not negotiate ceasefires with Bin Laden, Al-Baghdadi, Al-Zarqawi, Al-Julani and others?

My country reiterates its categorical rejection of any Turkish or other foreign illegal presence — United States, British and French — on Syrian territory. We call on the Turkish regime to curb its aggression and unbridled support of terrorism in Syria, Libya, the Horn of Africa and other regions. We also call for an end to the Israeli acts of aggression, which are conveniently used to alleviate pressure on terrorist groups and provide support to the Turkish aggression, thus unveiling the alliance and link between the Turkish regime and the Israeli occupation of my country.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. Sinirlioglu (Turkey): First of all, I would like to thank UNICEF Executive Director Fore and Assistant Secretary-General Mueller for their very valuable briefings.

I would also like to pay tribute to all humanitarian workers who continue to risk their lives to help the Syrian people, against all odds. Each and every day, we witness another tragic new phase of the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Syria. The reports of United Nations agencies tell the story of twenty-first century-style barbarism. Such brutality and disregard for human life is beyond comprehension.

The Al-Assad regime and its supporters have a strategy that leaves civilians with two options. They can stay in the Idlib area and desperately hope to

survive the indiscriminate attacks of the regime and its supporters, or they can leave their homes and run for their lives, under very harsh winter conditions. The strategy is not new. It has been the modus operandi of the regime from the beginning. That is how it has killed innocent people in order to hold onto power. We are therefore familiar with that plan of action.

Now, the question is, what is our strategy? Will the international community stand idly by as millions of people are displaced and children continue to freeze to death? Will we continue to watch as schools and hospitals are bombed? The situation in Idlib is not just a humanitarian tragedy; we are faced with serious crimes against humanity. We have a collective responsibility to stop the massacre.

We have already made it clear that Turkey is not going to stand idly by. We are not going to just watch. We are already hosting 4 million Syrian refugees in our country and providing care and protection to 5 million people within Syria. Around 1.7 million of Syrians in Turkey are children. More than half a million Syrian babies were born in Turkey in the last nine years. Altogether, 9 million Syrians are under Turkey's protection. Our presence on the ground gives hope to millions. We will continue to help our Syrian sisters and brothers; we will not let them down.

As for the unfolding crisis, the road map is clear, and I would like to reiterate it once again. First, we need an immediate cessation of hostilities. Secondly, we need the full implementation of the Sochi memorandum. And, thirdly, we need to return to the status quo ante. These are the main messages that we have been conveying to Russia, the guarantor of the regime, at all levels. Our talks with Russia to ensure that the regime acts in compliance with existing frameworks on Idlib are continuing. The regime's deliberate attacks on our forces has been a turning point. We are now more determined than ever to preserve Idlib's de-escalation status.

As President Erdoğan stated very clearly again today, we will not withdraw our forces, and we will not abandon our observation posts. We will not allow the regime to act in a way that is contrary to the agreements on Idlib. Acting in self-defence, we have already reinforced our forces on the ground. We will continue without hesitation to take all necessary measures.

Turkey ensures the safe passage of lifeline convoys to millions of Syrians through the United Nations cross-

border mechanism. Currently, people in the north-west are fully relying on cross-border aid. We are working with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to increase the capacity of the two existing crossing points.

Today shelter continues to be the most pressing need on the ground. We urgently need temporary housing, makeshift schools and hospitals for the more than 1 million newly uprooted people, half of whom are children. We should also immediately address their needs in terms of food and medicine.

We welcome the Secretary-General's appeal to donors for an additional \$500 million to meet the needs of newly displaced people over the next six months. But funding continues to fall short. We urge the international community to step up its contributions.

The Secretary-General, in his recent report (S/2020/139), recommended the Tall Abyad border crossing as the most feasible alternative for cross-border operations in the north-east. We will take all measures necessary to operationalize that alternative, in full cooperation with the United Nations. We welcome that and will be ready to work with the members of the Security Council on the upcoming cross-border draft resolution. Cutting cross-border aid by not renewing that mechanism cannot be an option. Humanitarian assistance should not be the subject of petty negotiations. It is our joint responsibility to bring assistance to the millions of people in need in Syria. If we fail, history will not forgive us.

Here I would also condemn the representative of the regime for his attempt to intimidate United Nations humanitarian officials.

Nine years ago the Syrian people spoke out for democracy and a better future. But their legitimate demands were met with force, and they faced destruction and torture. The expectations of the Syrian people are still legitimate. The regime and its supporters continue to seek a military solution. What we understand from their actions is that they want to destroy the political process by killing each and every member of the opposition.

The Council knows better than Al-Assad's murderous regime that there is no alternative to a political solution in Syria. A Syrian-led, Syrian-owned political solution in line with resolution 2254 (2015) is still the only option. Syria can still be a democratic,

secular and stable country with secure borders and a strong economy. The Syrian people deserve nothing less. But they need our help. They need the Council to play its role to bring peace and security to Syria.

As to the previous speaker's delusional statement, I will not honour him with a response, because, I reiterate, I do not consider him a legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

The President (*spoke in French*): The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has asked for the floor to make a further statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): The Ottoman State started by invading Syria in 1516, as everyone knows. However, the Syrians, known for their patience, overthrew the Ottoman State in Syria in 1916, after 400 dark years of Ottoman occupation.

Today, as members have seen, the Turkish representative threatened us once again, very arrogantly. He deems himself to be above the law.

Our disagreement is not with the Turkish people. Our disagreement is with the Erdoğan party, which sponsors terrorism in my country. Our disagreement is with the sponsors of terrorism in Turkey, because that terrorism has destroyed our infrastructure and led to the killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians. I told the Council in my statement that the Turkish regime had cut off the water supply to Al-Hasakah province, where 600,000 civilians live.

The representative of the Turkish regime has no right to speak on behalf of the Syrian people; only the Syrian Government can speak on their behalf. Neither he, nor his leader nor his President can speak on behalf of the Syrian people. We speak on behalf of the Syrian people. We are the representatives of the Syrian people in this international Organization.

The Syrian Government has not been waging a war against its own people. We are in a legitimate war against terrorism and against the sponsors of terrorism: Turks, Qataris and Saudis. They are the proxies, but the original sponsors, in the West, are even more dangerous because they are initial sponsors of terrorism.

My country's Government is the victim of an unprecedented terrorist project to target a legitimate Government by investing in terrorism. All present have seen what happened when some invested in terrorism in Iraq; when they did so in Libya; and when they did

so in Africa, especially in the Horn of Africa, where Erdoğan's regime sponsors terrorism. Wherever we look, we find the fingerprints of the Turkish regime on the sponsoring of terrorism in those regions. Of course, I could speak about this issue at length, but in the interests of time I shall not.

We have seen clearly today that some ignore the importance of the Astana framework and say that it is no longer viable. This is not true. The Astana framework compels the Turkish regime to fight terrorism. That is why the Turkish regime does not want the Astana framework to be sustained and successful. The Astana framework compels it to combat terrorism in Idlib and to distinguish between terrorism and the so-called moderate opposition.

The Syrian Government has no problem with the civilian opposition because we deal with it in Geneva. There is a Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen, and, before him, there were Mr. De Mistura and Mr. Brahimi. We have no problem with unarmed and non-terrorist civilian opposition. We must distinguish between the two. The Syrian Government has the right to combat the terrorism sponsored by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as I said, along with other countries.

The Astana framework is what has led to the current situation of peace and safety in most Syrian territories. That is why they want to distance themselves from the Astana framework. They have a terrorist project. They want to perpetuate terrorism by exerting political pressure on the Syrian Government. This is their project.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.