

Humanitarian Affairs Chief Calls on Parties in Syria to Allow Aid Delivery, as Security Council Reviews Implementation of Resolution 2401 (2018)

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SECURITY COUNCIL
8217TH MEETING (PM)

Intense fighting in besieged eastern Ghouta had claimed thousands of lives in the last few months alone, the top United Nations humanitarian official told the Security Council today, as he pressed parties to the wider conflict in Syria to implement resolution 2401 (2018) and allow unimpeded aid delivery throughout the country.

[Resolution 2401 (2018), adopted on 24 February, also outlines the Council's demands that parties to the conflict in Syria immediately cease hostilities and ensure a durable humanitarian pause to enable weekly aid deliveries and medical evacuations of the critically sick and wounded.]

Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, speaking via videoconference from Geneva, said more than 1,700 had been killed in eastern Ghouta since the passage of resolution 2401 (2018) on 24 February. Other fatalities had likewise been reported in the capital Damascus by shells fired from eastern Ghouta.

Meanwhile, nearly 52,000 civilians had taken refuge in eight shelters in rural Damascus, he said, most of them overcrowded with only limited access to food and medical assistance. It was imperative for humanitarian organizations to reach people in eastern Ghouta, particularly in Duma. The United Nations and its partners stood ready to enter Duma with food for up to 16,500 people, pending facilitation letters from the Government.

Elsewhere, he said an estimated 183,500 people in Afrin district had been displaced, the majority of them having fled to Tal Refaat where, despite the arrival of an inter-agency convoy two days ago, humanitarian partners had struggled to gain sustainable access.

Despite the violence, inter-agency convoys had reached 137,000 people in Tal Refaat, Dar Kabira and Duma, he said, "but we are essentially just given crumbs — an occasional convoy here and there, often, coincidentally, shortly before our monthly briefings to you." He called on Council members to exert influence over parties and to make resolution 2401 (2018) a reality.

In the ensuing debate, delegates decried the uptick in fighting and urged parties to immediately and fully respect resolution 2401 (2018). The Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Council President for March, said the Syrian crisis was a grave violation of the long-established norm to protect civilians and their belongings during war. It was a humiliation for the Council that it had been unable to enforce basic obligations under international humanitarian law.

The representative of the United States said siege, starvation and surrender had become the awful rhythm of the war. Currently, surrender was taking place in eastern Ghouta, where in the 30 days since the Council's demand for a ceasefire, suffering had only increased. History would not be kind when it judged the chamber's effectiveness in addressing the crisis, she said, asserting that the Russian Federation had used its Council seat to shield its allies from criticism.

In response, the Russian Federation's delegate said his country was the only Council member to have taken measures to implement resolution 2401 (2018). It was taking further steps to normalize the situation. The nearly 121,000 people evacuated from eastern Ghouta had left voluntarily, with many describing how difficult it had been to live under the repressive regime of armed groups. He accused Council members of squandering time with unfounded claims against the Russian Federation as a way to conceal their own failure to take constructive action.

Syria's delegate said his Government was in fact liberating eastern Ghouta from armed groups. It would go on to liberate all other parts of the country. Civilian suffering had not been caused by his Government, but rather, by armed terrorist groups. The testimony of tens of thousands leaving eastern Ghouta affirmed that those groups had deprived residents of their liberty and prevented them from leaving by using them as human shields.

He described "a state of hysteria" in the Council as Syria sought to exercise its sovereign right, restore stability and implement the Council's own resolutions against terrorism. He assured supporters of terrorism — some of whom were present in the chamber — that their plan had failed.

Also speaking today were representatives of Kuwait (speaking also on behalf of Sweden), France, United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, Peru, Ethiopia, Bolivia, Poland, Equatorial Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, China and Sweden.

The meeting began at 11:09 a.m. and ended at 1:15 p.m.

Briefing

MARK LOWCOCK, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, speaking via videoconference from Geneva, said the last few months had been among the worst for many civilians in Syria, where the conflict had entered its eighth year. In eastern Ghouta, since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018) on 24 February, military operations, particularly airstrikes, had reportedly killed more than 1,700 people, injured thousands and displaced tens of thousands. There had been at least 28 reported attacks on health facilities since mid-February. In Damascus alone, at least 78 people had reportedly been killed, and 230 injured, by shells fired from eastern Ghouta in recent weeks, many of them in an attack on suburban Kashkul market. Tens of thousands had been displaced from Duma, Harasta, Saqba and Kafr Batna.

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In eastern Ghouta, nearly 52,000 civilians were in eight collective shelters in rural Damascus, he said, with limited access to food and medical assistance. Most of those shelters were extremely overcrowded and severely lacking in water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. Protection concerns included the risk of gender-based violence, unaccompanied and separated children, and movement restrictions on internally displaced persons. While the United Nations was not in charge of managing those shelters, since 13 March it had mobilized the rapid provision of basic support to evacuees, in coordination with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and others.

He said it was imperative for humanitarian organizations to reach people trapped inside eastern Ghouta, particularly in Duma. The United Nations and its partners were ready to enter Duma with food for up to 16,500 people, as well as other supplies, but the Government had yet to sign facilitation letters. Reiterating the Secretary-General's call for all parties to respect international humanitarian and human rights law, ensure immediate access and guarantee the protection of civilians, he said the United Nations and its partners required unimpeded access to all those affected in eastern Ghouta, including shelters.

In Afrin district, Aleppo Governorate, he noted the displacement of an estimated 183,500 people, the majority of whom had fled to Tal Refaat where, despite the arrival of an inter-agency convoy two days ago, humanitarian partners struggled to gain sustainable access. Medical evacuations were urgently required, following reports of four deaths due to lack of health care. An estimated 50,000 to 70,000 people remained in Afrin city, where humanitarian access had been possible through Council-mandated cross-border operations. As Turkey had stated it was positively disposed to such operations, more convoys were soon expected.

More broadly, he described the situation in Idlib governorate as catastrophic, with almost 400,000 people displaced since mid-December and local capacity overstretched amid increased violence. In Raqqa, Syrian authorities had approved on 19 March an assessment mission by the United Nations Mine Action Service, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the World Health Organization (WHO). While the city was considered calm and stable, it was highly contaminated with landmines, unexploded ordnance, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. Preparations were being made for a humanitarian convoy from Damascus to Rukban, on the Syria-Jordan border, after the United Nations had received permission on 19 March to participate in that endeavour.

Describing incremental progress, he said 137,000 people in need had been reached through inter-agency convoys to Tal Refaat, Dar Kabira and Duma, "but we are essentially just given crumbs — an occasional convoy here and there, often, coincidentally, shortly before our monthly briefings to you." The 5.6 million Syrians in acute need could not live on crumbs, and three months into 2018, access was worse than it had been at the same time last year. "We need the support of all Council members and the International Syria Support Group Humanitarian Task Force to do their part — to exert their individual and collective influence over the parties," he said.

On a recent request from Syria and others for more United Nations help with humanitarian aid in eastern Ghouta, he said visa requests for a team of emergency response experts had been submitted today, while a new \$20 million allocation from the Syrian Humanitarian Fund had been confirmed for eastern Ghouta and for those displaced from Afrin.

On average, the United Nations reached 7.5 million people every month with life-saving humanitarian assistance across Syria. "The United Nations has no money of its own to do this," he said, thanking those Member States which had made voluntary contributions. He asked all Council members to make resolution 2401 (2018) a reality. Whatever the difficulty, the United Nations and its partners were determined to follow through for the sake of the Syrian people, he said.

Statements

STEPHANUS ABRAHAM BLOK, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, said that despite differences, there was as a common belief that protecting children should come first. And yet, such protection was lacking, he said, noting that the Syrian crisis was a grave violation of the long-established norm to protect civilians and their belongings during war. In eastern Ghouta, the Syrian regime and its allies, including the Russian Federation, had trapped hundreds of thousands of civilians, relentlessly continuing their offensive. Families were seeing their homes destroyed, their loved ones killed and their dignity shattered. Meanwhile, in Afrin, the Turkey-led offensive had displaced more than 160,000 people and he called on that Government to refrain from extending its military activities to other border regions in Syria or Iraq. Citing resolution 2401 (2018), he said it was humiliating that the Council had been unable to enforce basic obligations under international humanitarian law. He called on all parties to implement Council decisions, stressing the need to strengthen resolution 2401 (2018) and end the culture of impunity.

MANSOUR AYYAD SH. A. ALOTAIBI (Kuwait), speaking also on behalf of Sweden, said the Council must do its utmost to ensure full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) throughout Syria, as it was the only way to improve the humanitarian situation. All evacuations in eastern Ghouta must be voluntary, with civilian representatives participating in negotiations on civilian evacuations. Humanitarian aid convoys should continue to enter eastern Ghouta for the benefit of those who decided to stay, he said, stressing that arbitrary detention, disappearances and forced conscriptions must end.

Syrian authorities, meanwhile, should immediately grant permission for a reinforced United Nations protection presence in collective shelters and in eastern Ghouta once the security situation allowed, he said, with the Organization also registering evacuees and taking note of where they were being taken. Maximum use must be made of the United Nations to help manage increasingly crowded collective shelters for internally displaced persons. Council members, specifically influential parties, must prod Syrian authorities to implement resolution 2401 (2018). Kuwait and Sweden expected the Astana guarantors — the Russian Federation, Iran and Turkey — to make progress in delivering on their

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commitments in their March 16 statement, particularly regarding humanitarian access and observance of ceasefire agreements, he said.

NIKKI R. HALEY (United States) said that siege, starve and surrender had become the awful rhythm of the Syrian war. Currently, surrender was taking place in eastern Ghouta, where in the 30 days since the Security Council demanded a ceasefire the suffering of residents had only increased. History would not be kind when it judged the effectiveness of the Council on Syria. She questioned Moscow's responsibility for the current situation, given that it had voted for the ceasefire and negotiated resolution 2401 (2018), concluding that either Russia had been informing Syria about the content of the negotiations or taking directions from Damascus on the content of the resolution. Either way, Russia had negotiated a ceasefire that it had instantly defied. Indeed, it was supposed to facilitate humanitarian access; instead Russian and Syrian bombs continued to prevent their delivery. From the beginning, opposition groups expressed their readiness to implement the resolution and Russia's response was to call them terrorists and pummel them into submission. However, cynical accusations from Russia and blatantly false narratives would not stop her Government. Russia was using its permanent seat on the Council to shield its allies from the faintest criticism. She reiterated her condemnation for what had taken place in eastern Ghouta, where 1,700 civilians died during a ceasefire that the Council demanded. That was a travesty and should be a day of shame for the Council, as well as a lesson for when we focus on fleeting symbols of unity rather than doing what was right.

FRANÇOIS DELATTRE (France) said that one month after resolution 2401 (2018) was adopted, not only had it not been implemented, but the humanitarian situation had worsened. Hostilities had redoubled in intensity and the starved people of eastern Ghouta had been routinely shelled. Nothing could justify such a breach of international humanitarian law, he said, noting that not a single convoy had been authorized to reach eastern Ghouta since 15 March. That may have constituted crimes against humanity and war crimes. Moreover, the escalation of violence had forced 55,000 civilians to flee to nine camps near eastern Ghouta, where they were living in disastrous conditions. Gravely alarmed by their plight, they had no guarantees for protection or return. The overarching need was to protect those who could still be protected and for fighting to end so that humanitarian assistance could reach eastern Ghouta. At the same time, civilians who remained were entitled to protection and aid groups needed access to assess the needs of those people. He expressed support for the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria and the relaunch of Geneva negotiations to bring an end to the crisis, while reaffirming the importance of both the political and humanitarian track. It was never too late to save lives, he said. However, in the absence of decisive action, the worst was yet to come.

KAREN PIERCE (United Kingdom), reiterating the call to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, pressed the Council to take concerted steps so that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs could fulfil its mandate. It was "diabolical" that humanitarian access had worsened. Those supporting Bashar al-Assad had taken no steps to stop the fighting, and the violation of resolution 2401 (2018) by Syria's President and his supporters had made a mockery of the Council's authority. Welcoming United Nations plans to increase support for internally displaced persons

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camps and collective shelters, she said the Russian Federation must use its influence with the regime so that the Organization and its partners could provide assistance to civilians in eastern Ghouta, efforts that were required under international humanitarian law. It was the Council's job to uphold that law. Those siding with the regime were guilty of violating international humanitarian law, she added, calling on Moscow to use its influence to ensure, at a minimum, the provision by the United Nations of humanitarian assistance on the basis of need. The Council had a "small opportunity" to put measures in place to reduce the risk of reprisal. If it could not do so, then who could, she asked.

KAIRAT UMAROV (Kazakhstan) said implementing resolution 2401 (2018) was a collective responsibility, with each Council member playing a significant role. "We must all continue to do everything we can to ensure full implementation across Syria," he said, looking forward to further reporting in that regard. Welcoming that humanitarian convoys had reached besieged areas, he emphasized the need to create safe conditions for internally displaced persons, and for collective shelters housing civilians from eastern Ghouta to be urgently improved. He also looked forward to a new round of talks in its Astana in mid-May, stressing that dialogue between the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Government of Syria should be ongoing.

GUSTAVO MEZA-CUADRA (Peru) expressed regret that since the Council's demand for a ceasefire, violence and suffering in Syria continued unabated. Although there had been some improvement in the distribution of humanitarian aid, all assistance must be allowed. He expressed support for the protection of civilians in all humanitarian crises and called for the protection of residents in eastern Ghouta, who were particularly vulnerable. The responsibility to protect citizens must come without strings attached, he said, stressing the need to make headway towards a political solution, according to resolution 2244 (2015) and the Geneva Communiqué.

TEKEDA ALEMU (Ethiopia) condemned the increased violence in eastern Ghouta over the past month. Alleviating the suffering required urgent, coordinated action from all actors and respect for all relevant Council resolutions, especially resolution 2401 (2018), which must be implemented with utmost urgency and political will. All States with influence should exert maximum pressure on the Syrian Government, he said, expressing hope that the Astana guarantors would strengthen ceasefire conditions and facilitate humanitarian access. It was vital to ensure such access so that life-saving aid could reach all Syrians in need. Nevertheless, only a political dialogue under United Nations auspices could end the tragedy in Syria, he said.

PEDRO LUIS INCHAUSTE JORDÁN (Bolivia) regretted that obstacles were hampering full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) and called on all parties to ensure the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid as well as the evacuation of the sick and injured. Highlighting the delivery of some humanitarian aid to Duma, he hailed efforts by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, international humanitarian agencies and the Russian Federation to channel aid to eastern Ghouta and other places. That should continue with the highest possible level of security. He reiterated the need to build on the political momentum of the Syrian national dialogue, to strengthen the Geneva process and

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to swiftly implement the Sochi declaration. He emphasized that it was up to Syria's people to freely decide their political future, with an inclusive dialogue — by and for the people — being the only viable way to end the conflict.

VASSILY A. NEBENZIA (Russian Federation) said a difficult humanitarian situation persisted in several parts of Syria. The Russian Federation was taking steps to normalize the situation, including through the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). That might not be to the liking of some, but his country was the only Council member to take concrete measures to implement that text. The nearly 121,000 people evacuated from eastern Ghouta had left voluntarily, with many describing how difficult it had been to live under the repressive regime of armed groups. Russian specialists had organized the provision of hot food, drinking water and medical care, he said, going on to discuss evacuations in other parts of Syria. He said that some Council members were squandering time with unfounded claims against his country to conceal their own failure to do something constructive with resolution 2401 (2018).

He questioned the origin of some information in the Secretary-General's report, including information attributed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, who had no staff on the ground. He asked whether information was coming from anti-Government groups and terrorist henchmen such as the White Helmets and questioned why information from Damascus was cited in reports in a piecemeal way. He proposed that future reports discuss reconstruction, including in areas liberated from terrorists, adding that he was under the impression that external donors would not be interested in helping those parts of Syria under Government control. Concluding, he expressed the hope that, in close cooperation with the Syrian authorities, the United Nations would agree on an emergency humanitarian response plan for 2018, with an emphasis on assistance for liberated areas.

JOANNA WRONECKA (Poland) said it was unfortunate that resolution 2401 (2018) had not been implemented and there had been no substantial change on the ground. In consequence, human suffering was growing. No fight against terrorism could justify such actions. There was a need for accountability and urgent steps to ensure justice in the immediate and longer-term. She called for humanitarian access for women and children, to be overseen by the United Nations. Concerning evacuations, she said people must have the right to return and safe places to seek shelter. At the same time, all actors should use their influence to improve ground conditions and she called for the cessation of hostilities throughout Syria. Some positive steps had been made, with the highest number of humanitarian convoys witnessed in March. She called on the Russian Federation, Iran and Turkey to fulfil their obligations as Astana guarantors.

ANATOLIO NDONG MBA (Equatorial Guinea) said the complicated backdrop of the conflict made it increasingly difficult to ensure the protection of civilians and access to humanitarian aid. The solution to the humanitarian crisis was closely linked to the cessation of hostilities, which were stoking instability and risked spilling over to neighbouring countries. The overall goal was to end the suffering of the Syrian people, who needed a cessation of hostilities, access to humanitarian and health aid, and an end

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to the sieges. All parties must accept that they could not impose a military victory. There was no victor in the current situation, only a loser — the Syrian people. Human blood was being shed due to inflexible positions. He went on to express support for any initiative that would end the suffering.

BERNARD TANOHO-BOUTCHOUÉ (Côte d'Ivoire), emphasizing that resolution 2401 (2018) had fallen short of expectations, called for the effective implementation of that text to allow resumed humanitarian deliveries to besieged areas. Council members must set aside their differences and show unity, he said, adding that the humanitarian situation was unlikely to improve without progress on the political front.

WU HAITAO (China) said all parties in Syria must put that country's destiny, and the security of its people, first. He welcomed the Russian Federation's establishment of temporary truces and opening of humanitarian corridors, adding that implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) must continue in order to ease the situation, notably in eastern Ghouta. Further, the international community must support the United Nations mediation role while respecting Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, alongside a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process in line with resolution 2254 (2015). Concluding, he said the Council must remain united on the Syrian issue.

CARL ORRENIUS SKAU (Sweden) said there was broad agreement within the Council on several critical areas, including frustration with the lack of implementation of resolution 2401 (2018); a common concern over persistent hostilities, particularly in eastern Ghouta; and the need to better protect civilians. He asked the Under-Secretary-General if there were any more steps the United Nations could take to better protect civilians who were either inside eastern Ghouta or leaving that area. Expressing concern over Turkey's operation in Afrin, he called on all parties, especially Turkey, to ensure the protection of civilians, and to facilitate both cross-border and cross-line humanitarian aid delivery, as well as the freedom of movement among internally displaced persons.

BASHAR JA'AFARI (Syria) expressed sympathy to the Russian Federation for the lives lost in a fire incident in that country. The two Council members that had embassies in Damascus were the only ones who had been able to provide an objective assessment of the situation in Syria. At the end of 2016, the Government was on the cusp of liberating eastern Aleppo from armed groups. Today, it was liberating eastern Ghouta from those groups as well, and would liberate all parts of Syria as it rejected any armed presence or occupying Power on its territory. Such victories would not have been possible without just cause and support by the Syrian army and its allies.

Syrians' suffering had not been caused by his Government, but rather armed terrorist groups, he said. The testimony of tens of thousands leaving eastern Ghouta affirmed that such groups had deprived residents of their liberty, preventing them from leaving by using them as human shields. Yet, in recent days, there had been "a state of hysteria" in the Council, as Syria sought to exercise its sovereign right, restore stability and implement the Council's own resolutions against terrorism. He assured supporters of terrorism — some of whom were present in the chamber — that their plan had failed.

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He said this was indeed a day of shame, as the United States delegate had stated, but notably for the supporters and sponsors of terrorism. The Council had been presented with numerous reports on Syria, full of falsehoods, to serve the policy of certain Western members of the Council. They lacked professionalism and failed to note attacks by the Turkish regime, Israeli occupying force and others.

At the same time, the humanitarian crisis in Syria had resulted from the imposition of unilateral, coercive measures, he said. Despite what the Under-Secretary-General had stated, Syria was helping people in eastern Ghouta. As evidence that the report lacked objectivity, it had dedicated nine paragraphs to the suffering of people in eastern Ghouta by the Government, while allotting only one sentence to the 8 million civilians in Damascus that had been targeted by terrorists, with thousands killed and key infrastructure destroyed.

He expressed hope the United Nations would not succumb to the will of influential countries, nor repeat the same approach in eastern Ghouta it had taken in other liberated areas by not providing humanitarian support, as that would run counter to international law. Asserting that his Government had evidence, he went on to stress that State sponsors of terrorism had instructed non-State actors on the ground to use chemical weapons against civilians in Syria and falsely accuse his Government.