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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
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Mr President (Ambassador Christoph Heusgen, Germany),

1. Thank you for this opportunity to brief this Council for the second time. I have spent the last eight weeks shuttling between the Syrian Government and opposition and consulting key players.
2. I am doing everything I can to move forward on rebuilding trust and confidence, opening the door to a political process, in Geneva, between the Syrian government and the opposition– a process that can begin to build a new future for all Syrians - women and men - and between Syria and the international community.
3. After eight years of conflict, this process will be long and difficult – but I think it is possible to move forward step by step. To this end, I have been seeking to advance the five priorities I outlined to this Council in February. These are grounded in a comprehensive approach to my mandate in Security Council resolution 2254.

Mr President,

4. I remain absolutely committed to engaging the Syrian Government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission in a sustained comprehensive dialogue. This is the very foundation of a Syrian-led and owned process, in line with resolution 2254 and in full respect for Syria’s sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity.
5. In March and April I engaged in positive shuttle consultations between them. Foreign Minister Moallem hosted me twice in Damascus. He showed positive spirit and we were able to move certain subjects along.
6. I also met twice with the Syrian Negotiations Commission leadership, in Riyadh and Geneva. They too showed positive spirit and this enabled us to advance the issues.
7. In both sets of interactions, I stressed the importance of working on the full range of issues in resolution 2254. I stressed the need to make a tangible difference to Syrians’ lives. Both the government and opposition remained open to discussing a broader range of issues.
8. It is my hope that this regular engagement can continue to build trust and confidence. I hope it can evolve into a sustained dialogue towards building a safe, calm and neutral environment and “win the peace”.

9. This has also been my message to international stakeholders in recent weeks.
10. But let me reiterate: *action and tangible progress* not just dialogue is needed. I need not remind you: the situation for Syrians remains dire.
11. We have seen a very troubling surge of violence in recent weeks, in and around the Idlib de-escalation zone, including causing civilian casualties and further displacement. I welcome the recommitment of the Astana players to fully implement the Idlib memorandum, including through coordinated patrols.
12. But more must be done. De-escalation must be cemented. Idlib is not the only part of Syria that remains heavily militarized, or where Syrians continue to suffer.
13. The situation in the north-east is calmer, for now, but underlying dynamics remain unresolved. We have also received reports of growing tensions and violence in the south-west.
14. Syria still contains many threats for renewed escalation or even threats to international peace and security. Let me recall that resolution 2254 speaks of a nationwide *ceasefire*.
15. Terrorist groups listed by this Council remain a major threat: only last week, ISIL claimed attacks on Syrian government forces in the desert. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham still controls large swathes of territory.
16. I stress, however, the Secretary-General's reminder that counter-terrorism operations cannot override the responsibilities to protect civilians.
17. Even where violence has abated, the toll of suffering remains staggering. There is a desperate need to meet the humanitarian and protection needs of Syrians across the country.
18. And suffering is not limited to refugees and displaced people. Millions of Syrians inside face a critical lack of commodities, including fuel, approaching crisis-levels.
19. Let me highlight the terrible situation for the 73 000 people in al Hol, 92% of which are women and children. Humanitarian needs and protection concerns remain acute.
20. I remain deeply concerned about the situation in Rukban. We continue to pursue principled and durable solutions, in coordination with all stakeholders. Most civilians who have recently left have been able to relocate from temporary shelters.
21. Most residents of Rukban remain in the settlement and are, indeed, in dire need of assistance, including food and essential medicines.
22. The deployment of a third humanitarian convoy to Rukban remains urgent in order to avoid further suffering of more people in the camp.

23. As I have remarked to all stakeholders the more we can see steps to address these issues I speak of, in coordination with the United Nations, the more this can help to build confidence within Syria and internationally.

Mr President,

24. I have particularly raised the need, in-depth, for concrete action on the release of detainees/abductees and the clarification of the fate of missing persons, with the Syrian Government and indeed the opposition.

25. Meaningful progress on this key humanitarian file would send a positive signal to Syrians. It would be an important confidence building measure. I appreciated the openness to consider more meaningful action.

26. In parallel with my bilateral engagements, my office participated in Moscow and Nur-Sultan in two further meetings of the Working Group on the subject, the Working Group consisting of Iran, Russia, Turkey and the UN, with the ICRC also in attendance. I am ready to host the next meeting of the Working Group in Geneva.

27. The Working Group was able to bring about the release of a small group of detainees and abductees in northern Syria on 22 April. For the first time, members of my team were present on the ground as observers. This enabled us to make an assessment of how the operation was conducted and to share recommendations with the Working Group.

28. My team's observations contained some positive elements. However, there is considerable room for improvement in terms of procedures to be followed during future release operations, consistent with International Humanitarian Law.

Mr President,

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

30. The fate of tens of thousands of persons who have gone missing since the beginning of the conflict must be clarified. My Office, in close coordination with the ICRC, is elaborating procedures for compiling, consolidating, safeguarding, and exchanging information, as well as undertaking searches for missing persons.

31. The scale of this issue is of unprecedented proportions. It obliges us to continue our collective attempt to make progress. It will require months, if not years of meticulous and committed work.

Mr President,

32. For any political solution to be durable it must meet the aspirations of the Syrian people. I have made it a priority to engage a wide spectrum of Syrians in recent weeks. In calling for concrete action, I have in mind these many Syrian voices - from refugees in neighbouring countries, to people living in shelters in Homs.
33. The terrible scale of Syrians' suffering and the uncertain future of millions, weighs heavily on me, as it should on us all. And I believe that most will judge a political process on its ability to deliver improvements on the ground and take into consideration the needs and priorities of all Syrians, men and women.
34. I strongly believe in the importance of engaging a wide range of Syrian interlocutors. I intend to further my outreach and engagement with Syrian refugees, civil society, women organisations and other Syrian actors, including through the Civil Society Support Room.
35. The Women's Advisory Board continues to remind us of the specific security, economic and human rights concerns of Syrian women - women who bring diverse experiences and views to the table and share the right to have a voice at the table.

Mr President,

36. Clearly, much hope is placed on finally convening a constitutional committee. It could be a first sign of real movement. It could, if approached in the right spirit, help unlock a broader political process - towards UN-supervised elections, in a safe calm and neutral environment.
37. I continue to work towards a final agreement on the composition and terms of reference of a credible, balanced, inclusive and viable constitutional committee. Many earlier differences have indeed been narrowed down.
38. While nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, we have a clear understanding on: balanced co-chairing arrangements; a formula for decision-making; a shared acceptance of the UN facilitation role; and a political commitment to the safety and security of all who will be involved.
39. Both the Syrian Government and opposition have been constructive on these points, and I thank them. I believe the final terms of the mandate can be agreed with a modicum of goodwill.
40. It is now agreed that six specific names, on the earlier so-called civil society list, need to be removed. Work continues to identify a set of names that, when viewed in totality, can have the support of all concerned, that can enhance the quality and credibility of the list, while striving to achieve the objective of at least 30% female participants.

41. These are all elements that I believe are now possible. I have expended a lot of effort to build buy in for the way forward on this. If everyone is prepared to compromise just a little, this can move.

Mr President,

42. For my fifth priority, I spoke of deepening international dialogue on Syria. Yes, a credible and sustainable political settlement must be Syrian-led and owned. Yet the process and its outcome must enjoy international support and legitimacy.

43. And this conflict is highly internationalized. External intervention is a hard reality of the conflict. Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, must be respected and restored – but saying so will not make it so.

44. In this context, let me reiterate, that the UN's position regarding the occupied Syrian Golan, will continue to be determined by the Security Council and General Assembly resolutions on this issue. I will discharge my mandate in full respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, as per resolution 2254.

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

Mr President,

46. Different formats exist at present, as expressions of international cooperation, on resolving the Syrian conflict. I had useful conversations with the Astana guarantors in Nur-Sultan on 25-26 April. I will hold formal consultations with them in May in Geneva. This Friday I will also consult with the members of the Small Group in Geneva.

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

48. As we approach agreement on the constitutional committee, I want to use the opportunity to see revitalized broad-based international cooperation. To realise my mandate, a common forum supporting Geneva must be found.

Mr President,

49. I believe we are making progress. I hope that next time I brief you, I will be able to report tangible achievements on the long road to a political settlement of the conflict in Syria.