

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY GEIR O. PEDERSEN

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN NORTH-WESTERN SYRIA**

6 February 2020

Mr. President,

1. Thank you for the opportunity to brief on the alarming situation in north-west Syria, which has further escalated since last week's briefings. Heavy strikes from both air and ground are causing massive waves of civilian displacement and major loss of civilian life. We are witnessing the humanitarian catastrophe that the Secretary-General has warned of, and which the Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock will brief you about, very shortly. This is causing totally unacceptable human suffering -- and endangering international peace and security. And yet it can -- and therefore must -- stop now.
2. On 12 January, Russia and Turkey announced that they agreed on a fresh ceasefire for the north-west. Yet heavy clashes and mutual shelling continued despite the ceasefire. Two days later, airstrikes by the Syrian government and their allies resumed.
3. Syrian Government forces have since launched a ground offensive in southeastern areas of the Idlib de-escalation zone. They have made significant advances, most recently establishing control over the major town of Maarat al-Numan, whose population had fled from earlier attacks. Maarat al Numan lies on the strategic M5 highway and pro-Government forces have continued to push north, reaching the city of Saraqeb, the junction of the M4 and M5 highways and close to Idlib city.
4. In Idlib city, there are already reports of deep fear and of civilians fleeing or preparing to flee. Aerial bombardment in support of the government's offensive reportedly continues. Hostilities have also intensified on other fronts, especially in western Aleppo, where Government forces have advanced.
5. During the same period, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham -- a terrorist organization designated by this Council -- and armed opposition groups, launched several attacks and counterattacks along these fronts, including western Aleppo and al-Bab in northern Aleppo. There were reports of intensified shelling on civilian areas of western Aleppo and of civilian casualties. There are reports of weaponized drones being launched on Syrian and Russian military installations southwest of Idlib. The Russian Foreign Ministry has stated that Russian military personnel have been killed.
6. Turkish forces and Syrian government forces have directly clashed inside Syria. On 3 February, Syrian Government artillery reportedly hit a Turkish observation post near Saraqeb. Seven Turkish soldiers were killed and several more injured, according to the

Turkish Ministry of Defense. We have since seen differing reports of dozens of Syrian government forces killed in Turkish strikes on Syrian Government positions.

7. Statements from Russian and Turkish leadership in recent days have shown deep differences between the sponsors of the Idlib de-escalation arrangements. Two days ago, the Secretary-General noted his “enormous concern” that the most recent developments constituted a “change in the nature of the conflict” and reiterated his strong appeal for a cessation of hostilities.
8. So far these calls have not been heeded. In the last two months, hundreds of civilians have been killed, more than half a million civilians have been displaced, and most are fleeing into ever-shrinking areas where they still hope to find relative safety. Further mass displacement seems inevitable if fighting continues.
9. We appear to have lost sight of the principle of proportionality. Let me be very clear and remind all parties that attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including on healthcare and educational facilities, are unacceptable. All military operations -- including those against and by terrorist groups designated by the Security Council -- must respect the requirements of international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and civilian objects.

Mr. President,

10. Ordinary people in Idlib are conveying to me their grave fears for their lives and safety. They feel totally voiceless. Civil society actors inside Idlib, the best antidote and counterweight to radicalism, feel dismayed and abandoned. Syrian women have shared with me their fears of continued insecurity, including increased violence targeting women fleeing and living in displacement.
11. Idlib is the place that became a refuge for hundreds of thousands of civilians from other parts of Syria who fled violence. As a result, the population of the Idlib de-escalation area has now swollen to an estimated 3 million, the vast majority of whom are civilians.
12. Idlib is also the place that fighters and civilians who refused to “settle their status” earlier also sought refuge. And HTS and other Security Council-proscribed terrorist groups, including foreign fighters, are a major force in Idlib. Their presence and influence in the area is unacceptable and a major challenge – first and foremost to the civilian population of Idlib itself, and also in a wider sense for Syria and for regional and international security.
13. But we know from bitter experience that a continued all-out military approach will not solve this problem. And it will come at a completely unacceptable price. What we are now seeing creates the very real prospect of a bloody and protracted last stand on the Turkish border, with grave consequences for civilians -- and the risk of dispersal of foreign terrorist fighters and ongoing insurgency afterwards. We know that the continuation of the military approach will only entrench and further harden the deep

international divisions over Syria and lead to more and more pressure – weakening prospects for a step-by-step dynamic to build trust and confidence. And the events of the last few days in which the armies of two UN member states – Syria and Turkey – have clashed inside Syria suggest the very real prospect of conflagration in the immediate region -- and far beyond too.

14. But we also know something else, Mr. President: we know that it is possible via agreement to stabilize parts of Syria and work on ways out. Idlib is a de-escalation area established by agreement in May 2017, and was the subject of a further Russian-Turkish stabilization memorandum in September 2018. These agreements do not have third party monitoring, and thus we are not in a position to comment on their terms or their observance.
15. But what we do know is that these agreements can enable prolonged periods of calm. So why can we not make this happen once again? This is the message that I have impressed in my meetings recently in Moscow and Damascus, and with high-level Turkish officials, and with the co-Chairs of the Humanitarian Task Force meeting today in Geneva. I will take this message to Tehran in the coming days, and I will continue to press on the most important actors their responsibility to take a different path.
16. I do not pretend to have a magical solution for Idlib. But I am convinced that with a serious attempt at international cooperation a solution can be found, building on earlier agreements, but also augmenting them.
 - There is an urgent need for a sustained ceasefire and immediate unfettered humanitarian access to the civilian population.
 - There is a need to contain the situation to give additional time to enable solutions to be found.
 - There must be strengthened engagement with the civilian population.
 - The question of foreign fighters needs to be squarely tackled.
 - The provision of support to internationally proscribed terrorist groups needs to be further restricted.
 - Any use of force against internationally proscribed groups should be carefully targeted.
 - There could be serious exploration of a strengthened international presence with the consent, of course, of the Syrian authorities.
 - The combined resources of the international community need to come together.

Mr. President:

17. I appeal for an end to the hostilities. And I appeal to all for a serious international effort to cooperate on Idlib. It is a humanitarian imperative. It is the way to have effective counter-terrorism. It is in the interest of regional and international peace and security. And it is an essential foundation for a sustainable path out of the Syrian conflict which is now approaching its tenth year.

18. This Council recognized this when you unanimously agreed on Security Council resolution 2254, which stipulated a nationwide ceasefire alongside a cooperative approach to combatting terrorism, and for full respect of Syria's sovereignty and a credible and inclusive UN-facilitated political process. This remains the only path to end this conflict. The major players and the Members of this Council need to put their full weight behind this logic.

Thank you, Mr President.