

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY GEIR O. PEDERSEN**

---

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**

**19 February 2020**

Thank you, Mr. President,

1. Since my briefing two weeks ago, I cannot report any progress in ending the current violence in the northwest or in reconvening the political process.
2. Yesterday, the Secretary-General called for an immediate ceasefire in northwest Syria and for international humanitarian law to be upheld, and I repeat that call here today. However, I regret to report to this Council that hostilities, including heavy strikes from both air and ground, continue.
3. As the Secretary-General has stressed, and as Mark will brief you in more detail today, we are alarmed by the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria and the tragic suffering of civilians. The ongoing offensive has displaced nearly 900,000 civilians since 1 December 2019, often multiple times. Hundreds have been killed during the same period.
4. Hostilities are now approaching densely populated areas - such as Idlib city and Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which has among the highest concentration of displaced civilians in northwest Syria and also serves as a humanitarian lifeline. People are on the move in freezing temperatures in search of safety which has become ever more difficult. More than four of every five of the newly displaced civilians are women and children, and they face specific vulnerabilities and threats to their security. Young children are dying from cold. The potential for further mass displacement and even more catastrophic human suffering is apparent, as an increasing number of people are hemmed into an ever-shrinking space.
5. Syrian Government forces and their allies have now regained control of the entire eastern side of the M5 highway and several territories west of the highway, including western rural Aleppo. Residential areas of Aleppo that previously had been subject of attacks from the de-escalation area, appear no longer to be in firing range.
6. The Turkish Ministry of Defense has announced that further reinforcements were deployed inside Syrian territory in the Idlib de-escalation zone. These forces have reportedly deployed close to front-lines, in armored vehicles and tanks. We have witnessed repeated, violent confrontations between Turkish and Syrian Government forces. For its part, the Russian Federation is actively engaged in support of the Syrian Government's military operations.
7. HTS and other proscribed terrorist groups remain a major presence inside Idlib. Resolutions such as 2253 and 2254 called for Member States to prevent and suppress terrorist acts

committed by such groups and to eradicate safe havens they have established. However, military operations of all parties, including actions against and by designated terrorist groups, must respect the rules and obligations of international humanitarian law, which include the protection of civilians and civilian objects. The principles of proportionality must be respected.

8. I stressed this in high-level contacts with senior officials of Russia and Turkey at the Munich Security Conference last weekend, as well as with senior Iranian officials in Tehran. Turkey and Russia, as sponsors of the Idlib de-escalation arrangements, can and must play a key role in finding a way to de-escalate the situation now. Russian and Turkish delegations have met intensively in recent days – in Ankara, Munich and Moscow – and there have been presidential contacts too. But no understanding has yet emerged. To the contrary public statements from different quarters, Syrian and international, suggest an imminent danger of further escalation.
9. I also believe, as I stated in my last briefing, that through serious international cooperation, building on and enhancing previous agreements and in the spirit of Security Council resolutions and respect for international law and Syria's sovereignty, it would be possible to find a solution for Idlib that addresses the serious, ongoing threat posed by internationally-proscribed terrorist groups, without causing unacceptable humanitarian suffering. For this to be possible the combined resources of the international community need to come together.

Mr. President,

10. There are worrying developments elsewhere on the ground as well. The situation in southern Syria remains of concern. Northern rural Aleppo has seen renewed hostilities, in particular, in and around Afrin, Tell Rifaat and Nubul and al-Zahra, with reports of civilian casualties.
11. ISIL resurgence is very worrying - with frequent attacks registered in the northeast, the desert region and around Homs and other areas.
12. Last week, a Syrian military statement reported that Syrian Government air defenses responded to "enemy missiles", coming from the occupied Syrian Golan.
13. In the northeast, there are unresolved tensions with the presence of multiple actors. A US-led coalition spokesperson stated that a US patrol came under small-arms fire from "local militia members" and killed a combatant. Syrian state media says the person was a Syrian civilian. This episode stands as a stark reminder of the need for a sustainable arrangement for the northeast, inclusive of all actors, that respects and ultimately restores Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, in line with resolution 2254.
14. The devastating scale of humanitarian suffering is primarily caused by violent conflict. More broadly, the Syrian economy continues to face serious challenges, the result of a variety of factors, developments and measures.

AS DELIVERED

Mr. President,

15. *All* of these developments, across the country, remind us that Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence remains seriously compromised by the continuing conflict, and also that we are a long way from finding a way to ensure that the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people for peace, security and a better future are realized. And that is a reminder that there is no military solution to the conflict and that a political process is required to move towards a political solution.

Mr. President,

16. I had hoped that the launch of the Constitutional Committee on the basis of a composition and the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure formally agreed with the Syrian Government and the Syrian opposition, could be a door opener to building some trust and confidence and to a wider positive dynamic for such a process. So far, this has not been the case. But as I continue to press all with influence to work for an immediate calm, I also remain fully engaged in the effort to try to unlock progress on the political track.

17. I have continued to engage the Syrian parties to narrow differences on the agenda for a third session of the Constitutional Committee, based on a strict observance of the agreed Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure something that Foreign Minister Muallem and I confirmed was vital when we met in Damascus late last month. I have continued to communicate with the Co-Chairs nominated by the Government of Syria and the Syrian Negotiations Commission who have been submitting and reacting to proposals from the other on a possible agenda. The Co-Chair nominated by the Opposition was in Geneva for further consultations, and Deputy Special Envoy Matar met with the Government-nominated Co-Chair in Damascus last week. Differences remain but I hope that we will soon be in a position to reconvene the Constitutional Committee in Geneva.

Mr. President,

18. My team hosted the Working Group on the Release of Detainees, Abductees, the Handover of Bodies and the Identification of Missing Persons in Geneva as part of a rotation between locations chosen by its members – Iran, Russia, Turkey and the United Nations. ICRC also participates as observers. This file is immensely important on humanitarian grounds. Progress would also be essential to build trust and confidence. The discussions were constructive, particularly on processes related to the core issue of missing persons. However, efforts on this file have not yet produced meaningful progress in a scale or pace with regards to releasing detainees and clarifying the fate of tens of thousands of Syrians unaccounted for. I reiterate my plea for unilateral releases, particularly of women and children. I also urge the parties, to improve access to information for families about their detained or missing relatives.

Mr. President,

AS DELIVERED

19. Ultimately, a lasting political settlement, in line with resolution 2254, needs a broader process. This needs to build trust and confidence, and one way of pursuing this is through a step-by-step process. With the levels of violence on the ground, human suffering and heightened international tensions in Syria, an immediate priority is to reverse a set of dynamics that could further undermine trust, entrench divisions and render any political process even more difficult. But beyond that, a way forward should be explored based on reciprocal and mutually reinforcing actions, undertaken by Syrians and international partners. I intend to continue to pursue discussion with the Syrian Government and the Syrian opposition and all international stakeholders – and I believe that the profound instability and suffering that Syrians experience today reminds us that such a political approach is the only sustainable way forward.

Mr. President,

20. Much more needs to be done to advance such a broader process in line with Security Council resolution 2254. But today my first concern is for the Syrian civilians caught in the fighting, who continue to relay the urgency of their situation and their desperate need for safety. They feel they are not being heard. I appeal once again for full respect for international humanitarian law and for an immediate ceasefire in Idlib, ultimately towards a nationwide ceasefire. I urge key international players to continue and intensify their contacts to restore calm. I urge all members of this Council to put their weight firmly behind the search for a political way forward. As the Secretary-General reminded us yesterday, only in this way can we truly serve the interests of the Syrian people.

Thank you, Mr. President.