

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN

BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

30 March 2020

Mr President (Amb. Zhang Jun China),

1. We have arrived at another critical point in the Syrian conflict. After terrible violence, an uneasy calm prevails on the ground – and now, Syrians face a new potentially devastating threat in COVID-19.
2. The Secretary-General appealed to warring parties throughout the world for an immediate ceasefire to enable the human family to tackle COVID-19. Further to this, I have made a specific appeal for a complete, immediate nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria to enable an all-out-effort to counter COVID-19, which is a grave danger to all Syrians. This is both a humanitarian and a political imperative.
3. Syria is at high risk of being unable to contain the pandemic, given large scale population movements, dangerously cramped conditions in multiple IDP camps, settlements, and places of detention. Governance is weak or even absent in some areas. Years of conflict have left the healthcare system degraded or destroyed. Health professionals, medical equipment and supplies are desperately lacking. I am also acutely conscious of the risk of exposure and impact on Syrian women, who are at the forefront of health and community support systems. This virus does not care if you live in government-controlled areas or outside. It does not discriminate. It endangers all Syrians.
4. We need the kind of sustained period of calm that a nationwide ceasefire would ensure because we need cooperation to take place across the front-lines that riddle Syria's territory – and this is needed not tomorrow, but now.
5. Let me remind you that, when it comes to the northwest, on 5 March, Presidents Erdogan and Putin agreed an Additional Protocol to the Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Area. They agreed that all military actions along the contact lines would cease. Since then, there has been a significant decrease in violence, especially in aerial attacks and ground operations. Sporadic incidents continue, involving all sides.
6. The two Presidents also agreed to establish a "security corridor" along the M4 highway, with joint Turkish-Russian patrolling. The first patrols took place on 15 and 23 March – however, not on the entire stretch envisioned in the agreement. There have obviously been challenges to creating this corridor. But I appeal to all involved to not make the cessation of military activities in the northwest contingent on this aspect of the agreement. I appreciate the welcome change brought about by the Russia-Turkey agreement and actions.

7. I also appreciate the fact that arrangements between key stakeholders in the northeast, including Russia, Turkey and the United States, as well as Syrian parties, also continue to broadly hold.
8. But in both the northeast and northwest, there is a real risk of hostilities resuming. If that happened, the pre-existing dangers to civilians would be multiplied by the pandemic and the virus would spread like wildfire, with devastating effects for the Syrian people – humanitarian, societal and economic. It could rebound across international borders. All of us have a responsibility to avoid this scenario, through cementing existing arrangements into a comprehensive nationwide ceasefire.
9. And I believe it is possible and necessary in that context to discuss a more effective cooperative targeted counter-terrorism effort too, one that respects international humanitarian law and saves civilians from further all-out assaults. I note in this regard that the recent de-escalation agreement for Idlib includes specific language that “the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext.

Mr President,

10. A nationwide ceasefire is what this Council mandated in resolution 2254, and an effective nationwide response to COVID-19 demands it. But it will not be sufficient. Much more is needed.
11. The Syrian Government has taken increasingly significant steps to counter COVID-19. Large parts of the country are now under varying degrees of curfew, with public spaces closed and healthcare systems preparing to the extent possible. Meanwhile, the Syrian Opposition Coalition and other *de facto* authorities in areas outside government control have also taken steps. Syrian civil society, including women-led organisations, are also mobilizing against this threat. I note these efforts and urge the Syrian government and all de facto authorities to be transparent in their reporting on how COVID-19 is affecting all Syrians.
12. Under-Secretary-General Lowcock just briefed you on the UN’s humanitarian response. And, as I stressed in my appeal, I hope that international donors will do whatever must be done so that Syrians in all parts of the country have access to the equipment and resources needed to combat the virus and treat patients. Nothing should impede this. You will have seen the Secretary-General’s global appeal last Friday, that Mark also referred to, and I quote: “for the waiving of sanctions that can undermine countries’ capacity to respond to the pandemic.”
13. Within the framework of the Humanitarian Task Force, we are directly engaging concerned states so that all necessary humanitarian exemptions are available and fully utilized and that all hurdles are put to one side to urgently move the most critical items into Syria to combat COVID-19. I welcome the initial engagement by the United States with us in this regard, and stress the need for utmost urgency. We will engage all others as required.

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Mr. President,

14. In addition to traditional donor countries, we are also engaging countries such as China and Cuba to see what they can do to render direct assistance in Syria. And we are urging all donors and partners, as well as Syrian stakeholders, to ensure that no obstacles prevent assistance reaching Syrians across all parts of the country.
15. Let me equally stress that full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of the country will be key. And that all modalities, including cross-border, as Mark just mentioned, will be needed to deliver humanitarian assistance and scale up prevention and protection.

Mr President,

16. I have made a special appeal for the large-scale release of detainees and abductees. This is not a new call from me. But given the risk of COVID-19 racing through detainee populations, action is urgent. Other governments have already carried out releases on an exceptional basis due to this risk. Surely this can and should happen in Syria. I am engaging the Syrian government specifically on this matter, including in light of President Assad's 22 March decree outlining amnesties and sentence reductions for certain types of detainees, as well as specific exemptions.
17. Beyond releases, there must also be immediate access for relevant humanitarian organizations to all detention facilities. Adequate medical care and protective measures must also be ensured in all places of detention.

Mr President,

18. Plainly, COVID-19 makes it impossible to convene Syrians in Geneva at present. But this has not deterred us when it comes to the political track. Today, I am able to inform the Security Council that, after prolonged consultations with my active facilitation, the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Government and the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Negotiations Commission have agreed that the next session of the Constitutional Committee shall have the following agenda: *"In line with the mandate, the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure of the Constitutional Committee, discussing the national foundations and principles."*

Mr. President,

19. It is a good step, particularly at this time, that agreement on an agenda for a next session has been reached. We will consult with the parties to see if useful preparations can begin for future sessions while we wait to see when a new meeting will be possible.
20. Let me note here that, as has been clear with both co-chairs throughout, *agreement* during a next session of the Constitutional Committee on national foundations and principles is *not* a precondition to moving to other items. All three components can

during the next session suggest national foundations and principles. And the discussion will move in subsequent sessions to other items of the constitution, consistent with the mandate and the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure. I have also reminded both co-chairs to use agreed language when referring to the delegations, and to observe the agreed code of conduct when it comes to public statements, some of which have not been helpful, recently.

21. Meanwhile, we are continuing to engage, often virtually, with a wide range of Syrians, men and women, including the Women's Advisory Board and a broad spectrum of Syrian civil society inside and outside Syria.

Mr. President,

22. I have long spoken of the need to build trust and confidence, of the Constitutional Committee as a door opener, and of the need for a wider process with a dialogue on mutually reciprocal and mutually reinforcing actions by the Syrian parties and by international partners. Now we face a new element to an already grave crisis: COVID-19.

Mr. President,

For many Syrians, now in their tenth year of a conflict that still defies comprehension in the scale of suffering, brutality, and devastation, it may seem hard, even slightly abstract, to focus on a global virus pandemic. But make no mistake: COVID-19 is an enormous threat to Syrians, and it demands a complete shift in mind-set from all, now. This common threat must now focus all with new consciousness and new determination on a common agenda to save the Syrian people from a new calamity.

23. To implement a nationwide ceasefire and help Syrians respond to COVID-19, I am ready to work with the Government of Syria and the opposition and all relevant players on the ground, as well as key countries with weight and influence who can support a scaling-up of action and ensure that the ceasefire holds. I have appreciated the initial engagement from the Syrian parties and key international players. It will not be easy, and there are no guarantees. But the Syrian people desperately need everyone to focus on their welfare now. If key players come in and can engage with the Secretary-General's and my appeals, I think we can work urgently in a common effort. And this, in turn, would definitely help in the effort on the political track to implement Security Council resolution 2254. I am convinced this is the only way forward.

Thank you, Mr. President.