

**AS DELIVERED**

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

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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
29 April 2020**

Mr. President,

1. Last month, you, the members of the Security Council, “called on all parties to ensure a sustained period of calm throughout the country and reaffirmed the need for the full implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2254”. This signal from the Council was timely, following the Secretary-General’s call for an immediate global ceasefire, and my appeal for a nationwide ceasefire in Syria and an all-out effort to combat COVID-19. Let me appeal to you to preserve this common purpose.
2. I strongly believe that Syria needs a ceasefire arrangement that results in sustained calm and is nationwide in scope – one that does not see new assaults across lines of contact, and enables Syrians to access equipment and resources necessary to combat COVID-19. We cannot afford hostilities which would surely lead to another surge in displaced vulnerable communities – something that we witnessed in horror only two months ago. We could not afford this scenario before the pandemic; the price could only be higher now.

Mr. President,

3. This past month, I have maintained active channels with the Syrian parties. I have also spoken with foreign ministers and senior officials from a range of key players, including Russia, Turkey and Iran – whose foreign ministers recently conferred virtually; the United States; the European Union and many European states; and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States and several Arab ministers. I have appreciated the engagement of all with my efforts to facilitate progress on the political track and to sustain ceasefire arrangements. I will be continuing active engagement with these and other interlocutors in the days and weeks ahead.

Mr. President,

4. I welcome the fact that there has been significant calm in many areas of Syria – especially relative to the apexes of violence of previous years. We have not witnessed all-out offensives nor further displacements since early March. Russian-Turkish arrangements have taken hold in the northwest, and I do see a positive difference on the ground, including compared with previous arrangements. The level of incidents is low.
5. Six Russian-Turkish joint patrols have taken place. They have been challenged -- but there have been responses to those challenges too.
6. I appeal to all relevant parties to address internationally proscribed terrorist groups in a cooperative and targeted manner, so as not to compromise the existing calm and the

COVID-19 response, and so as to ensure full respect of international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians.

7. I also note that the different ceasefire arrangements between Russia, Turkey and the US in the northeast also continue to broadly hold.
8. But, Mr. President, this is an uneasy and fragile calm in both northwest and northeast Syria. And there is the constant risk of escalation in Syria.
9. Just yesterday, a bomb in a market in Afrin reportedly killed more than 40 people. Security conditions in southern Syria are concerning. A worrying resurgence by ISIL in desert areas in central and eastern Syria has continued. I am also concerned about reports of Israeli airstrikes in rural Homs and Damascus, the most recent of which was reported this past Monday.

Mr. President,

10. The Syrian Government has continued to take increasingly significant steps to combat COVID-19. So have the Syrian Opposition Coalition-and other *de facto* authorities in areas outside government control. International donors have pledged and provided financial and material support. Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock will brief you this afternoon on the UN family's efforts to help build capacity to test and treat COVID-19 in Syria.
11. While testing remains limited, the officially reported COVID-19 caseload in Syria is comparatively low: 42 reported cases in areas controlled by the Syrian Government; 1 reported case in the northeast; and no reported cases in the northwest. Mr. President, we all hope that these low numbers will continue – but as in all countries, the risk of a major COVID-19 outbreak in Syria is there. The trend lines in the coming weeks will be very important. So will a ramping up of testing and treatment capacity in all parts of Syria, along with information sharing between all parties.
12. Syria faces many challenges that can hamstring a response to the pandemic. Syria also lacks sufficient health professionals, medical equipment and supplies. The healthcare system is degraded in some areas and destroyed in others, following nine years of armed conflict. You all saw the recent findings of the Secretary-General's Board of Inquiry, a terrible reminder of what has happened in this conflict.
13. Let me reiterate the need for full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access, using all modalities, including scaled-up cross line and cross border access is important.
14. As part of the global efforts, the Secretary-General has appealed for the waiver of sanctions that can undermine the capacity of the country to ensure access to food, essential health supplies and COVID-19 medical support to respond to the pandemic. This has been affirmed in direct information to the Syrian government. The United Nations, and I personally, have directly engaged concerned States so that all humanitarian exemptions to sanctions remain available and are fully utilized to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. I note the positive response of different countries to the United Nations on this aspect.

15. Turning to the economic situation, after nine years of conflict and a wide range of factors and measures, Syria faces extremely grave economic conditions. We have recently seen price increases and shortages among other further worsening trends. The measures rightly taken by the authorities to combat COVID-19 in Syria have – as in all countries – also had an economic impact too.
16. I have long urged the parties to move to large-scale and unilateral releases of detainees and abductees and more meaningful actions on missing persons. The pandemic makes this humanitarian imperative more urgent than ever. I continue to urge the Syrian Government and all other Syrian parties to follow the lead of other governments around the world in releasing detainees. We really need to see this happening as part of all the efforts to stem the spread of the virus in Syria.
17. The need for an all-out effort to combat COVID-19 in Syria was conveyed to me on Monday in consultations with civil society actors in all different parts of Syria via our Civil Society Support Room, which included many medical NGOs and other grass-roots organisations. They are doing all they can to raise awareness and support local communities. They reflected the diversity of the challenges faced in the various parts of the country, and a common belief that more can and needs to be done to support the efforts underway.
18. The Women’s Advisory Board has been convening virtually every week since the risk of a COVID-19 crisis emerged. I spoke with them yesterday. They expressed support for a sustained ceasefire throughout the country, and support for medical staff and provision of food, medicine, medical supplies and equipment to access all regions of Syria, without delay or impediment. They emphasised that women are at the forefront of community-based initiatives to raise awareness and prevent the spread of COVID-19, and explained how they are carrying additional caregiving responsibilities at home due to the movement restrictions. They also noted heightened risks of domestic violence in isolation settings – and fears of potential marginalization of women as COVID-19 response gradually pushes some to more traditional roles. They stressed that nothing should come in the way of the furtherance of the political process in accordance with resolution 2254.
19. In that regard, I briefed you last month that the agenda for a next session of the Constitutional Committee had been agreed between the co-chairs. It will be important to build on this with a substantive discussion during a next round. The co-chairs have been clear in their dealings with me that agreement during a next session on national foundations and principles is not a precondition to moving to other items in subsequent sessions. I remain in regular contact with them on how to resume the meetings in Geneva as soon as the situation allows – and I have been in touch with the civil society members of the committee and will further that too. We continue to explore whether any preparatory work can take place in the meantime. I urge all members to be seriously preparing for renewed work.

Mr. President,

20. I reiterate my appeal for a nationwide ceasefire and an all-out effort to ensure that Syrians across the country will have access to the equipment and resources needed to combat and treat COVID-19. I stand ready to work with the government and the opposition and all relevant players on the ground, as well as key countries with weight and influence. I see

every possibility for relevant players to come together in a common effort **to** support sustained calm and scaling up of the response to the pandemic. This is the only responsible path.

21. And I believe it is the path that also could pave the way for progress on the broader political process to implement Security Council resolution 2254. We all agree: there is no military solution to the Syria crisis. We must act on our common humanity, help build trust and confidence including via reciprocal measures, and begin to move towards a political settlement that can meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and fully restore Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence.

Thank you, Mr. President.