

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN

BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Monday, 18 May 2020

Thank you, Mr. President,

1. Since my last report, I have engaged widely among Syrians from all parts of the country, who have been keen to communicate with the United Nations at this time when all of us are finding new ways to be in touch. I have been struck by how deep their concerns are about the current state and future of their beloved country, Syria.
2. I have heard relief that the COVID-19 pandemic has so far not hit Syria at the scale initially feared – but also fears that it still could do so. I sense deep anxiety over the fact that, even if violence has for the moment somewhat abated, it does continue, and it can escalate at any moment. I have heard immediate concerns at the further decline of the economy and the suffering this is causing. There is a profound apprehension and worry about the fate and wellbeing of detainees, abductees and missing persons. There is, frankly, disappointment that the political process has not really delivered tangible improvements in the lives of Syrians. And there is a widespread sense that international competition is more prominent than cooperation, with Syrians paying the price.
3. I share these concerns. And I take them as a strong reminder to the international community of the importance of building a constructive Syria diplomacy to support a political solution. It is hard, but it is not impossible, and we must try.

Mr. President,

4. We have elements to build on. In the northwest, this month saw further progress in Russian-Turkish cooperation on the ground, pursuant to their March agreement that brought relative calm to Idlib. We all hope that this bodes well for sustaining calm there.
5. But this calm has been punctuated by violent incidents and mutual attempts at cross-line offensives - most notably, one by the extremist wa-Harid al-Mu'minin operations room. A number of Syrian soldiers were killed during this attack. This prompted an escalation, including increased artillery strikes on areas inside Idlib, as well as rocket fire towards Hmeimim airbase in Latakia, before the episode was contained.
6. Meanwhile, there have also been further incidents of mutual shelling, IED attacks around Afrin and the northeast; further tensions, targeted killings, military build-up and clashes in the southwest; further reports of Israeli airstrikes in Deir-ez-Zor and Aleppo; as well as further incidents pointing to an ISIL resurgence in the eastern desert.
7. In short, Mr. President, violence continues and there is a constant risk of escalation which could unravel existing arrangement. We see such dangers right now in Daraa. We must at all costs avoid reversion to the all-out fighting and abuses and violations we have seen before.

8. Let us also remember that Syria's instability reverberates elsewhere too – including as far as Libya, given reports of fighters being recruited in Syria in large numbers and sent to fight on both sides of that conflict.
9. This Council has called on all parties to ensure a sustained period of calm throughout the country. Key players should be working together – and I stand ready to assist in that -- so that significant calm in many areas is sustained, enhanced and expanded into a nationwide ceasefire, as called for in resolution 2254. Let me reiterate my belief that the presence of listed terrorist groups only underlines the need for a cooperative approach in countering them – one that ensures stability, protects civilians and fully respects international humanitarian law.

Mr. President,

10. Syria has thankfully not to date experienced mass COVID-19 outbreaks that have been the fate of many other countries. Bearing in mind testing limitations, the officially reported caseload is 64, of which 58 are in Government-controlled areas and 6 are in the northeast. No cases have yet been reported in the northwest. We note the early measures enacted by the Syrian Government and other *de facto* authorities to address the pandemic – some of which are now being eased. Of course, as in all countries, the risk of broader outbreak remains – and given the Syrian context, any such development could have devastating consequences in the country and beyond it too.
11. Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock will update you on the humanitarian issues when he briefs you tomorrow. Let me note the importance of full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access, using all modalities, including scaled-up cross line and cross border access, to deliver assistance. As we scale up prevention and protection against COVID-19 in Government-controlled areas and in the northwest, such access is absolutely critical elsewhere too, including in the northeast, where gaps in medical supplies have widened.
12. Further to the Secretary-General's global call for the waiver of sanctions that can undermine the capacity of countries to ensure access to food, essential health supplies and medical support to respond to the pandemic, let me note the public assurances by relevant States that their sanctions programs relating to Syria neither ban the flow of humanitarian supplies nor target medicine and medical devices. I welcome their commitments to fully and expeditiously apply humanitarian exemptions. I continue to closely follow this issue.

Mr. President,

13. We are still awaiting concrete news on the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons. Large-scale and unilateral releases as well as more meaningful actions on missing persons have never been more needed. I continue to urge the Syrian government and all other Syrian parties to step up their efforts in this regard. I believe they could follow the example of those governments in the region and elsewhere who have already carried out large-scale releases on an exceptional basis as part of their pandemic response.
14. The COVID-19 crisis has added a new layer to Syria's grave and worsening economic predicament, the result of many internal and external factors and measures over a decade of conflict. The Syrian Pound has continued to depreciate in recent weeks, with

implications on the purchasing power of ordinary Syrians. Significant price increases and shortages in basic commodities are widespread across the country, with implications for food security.

Mr. President,

15. We know that the crisis in Syria will not be resolved by a new constitution alone. But if the Constitutional Committee could work seriously, it could build trust, make an important contribution to a political settlement, and be a door-opener. I am ready to convene a third session of the Small Body of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva as soon as global travel conditions allow. We do not know, of course, when that will be. But let me stress, as both co-chairs have affirmed to me, the importance of a substantive third session on the agreed agenda and the equal importance of there being no preconditions to moving on to other items of the constitution in subsequent sessions, consistent with the mandate and Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure.
16. We remain in contact with both co-chairs as we assess when the next session will be possible. I also recently offered a briefing to the civil society members of the Small Body. Those who wished to attend and could do so were updated on the agenda agreed between the co-chairs. I believe that all three components of the Committee have been offered the information they need to prepare themselves for a substantive and forward-looking session when conditions permit.

Mr. President,

17. I have remained in close contact with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, whose members have been meeting virtually for the past several weeks. They emphasize the active leadership role that Syrian women are assuming in their communities, in a context of the severe economic crisis and humanitarian needs of Syrians across the country and beyond its borders. They have asked for special priority to help and protect the most vulnerable Syrians including refugees and internally displaced; children and the elderly; women who suffer from violence and abuse; and detainees and abductees who are now at greater risk because of the pandemic. They reiterate to me that a political process within the framework of resolution 2254 is the only way forward, with Syrian women as full partners at the table.
18. I have also heard from a wide range of Syrian men and women, including civil society interlocutors across Syria and the region, via our Civil Society Support Room. Many continue to impress upon me their ability and desire to build bridges within Syrian society. Almost all of them perceive that the political process, and not limited to the Constitutional Committee, has stalled. All of them continue to highlight the critical importance of real progress on the file of detainees, abductees and the missing. Calls for accountability for serious offenses and violations of international law are often raised. All are concerned about the declining economic reality across Syria. Debates continue on the issue of sanctions. Many noted also that COVID-19 has created new stresses for Syrian refugees – and for the countries hosting them. All seek the emergence of tangible steps towards the creation of a safe, calm and neutral environment across Syria upon which a comprehensive and credible political solution can be built. These are the same conditions that would allow the safe, dignified, voluntary and well-informed return of refugees and internally displaced Syrians.

Mr. President,

19. Many civil society interlocutors also raised the issue of elections. We take note that parliamentary elections have been postponed, as one of the precautionary measures against the transmission of COVID-19 announced by the Syrian Government. I take this opportunity to note that these elections would be under the current constitutional framework. The United Nations is not specifically mandated nor have we been requested to engage on these elections. I remain focused, in the context of the UN-facilitated political process pursuant to resolution 2254, on working towards free and fair elections pursuant to a new constitution that are administered under UN supervision in accordance with the highest international standards of accountability and transparency and are inclusive of all eligible Syrians, including the diaspora.

Mr. President,

20. In conclusion, let us recall that there have been too many episodes in the past decade where fleeting opportunities to turn dynamics towards a political path were lost. Those missed moments were followed by renewed violence and a hardening of positions among regional and international actors. We must not repeat this pattern. With some calm, with the common threats of COVID and ISIS, and with the Syrian people continuing to suffer, I want to stress that renewed and meaningful international cooperation, building trust and confidence between international stakeholders and with Syrians, including through reciprocal measures, is essential -- and could unlock progress.

21. I believe that Russian-American dialogue has a key role to play here, and I encourage them to pursue it. The states that discuss Syria in the Astana and Small Group formats are key players too, as are you the Members of this Council. Ultimately there is a need to come together to support a renewed effort in a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated political process guided by Security Council resolution 2254, towards a political settlement that can meet the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians and fully restore Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity.

Thank you, Mr. President.