

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

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
23 July 2020**

Mr. President, Minister Annen,

1. Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on Syria and my effort to facilitate the political process pursuant to Security Council resolution 2254. I am joining you today from Geneva, where I look forward to reconvening the Constitutional Committee next month.
2. The issue of detainees, abductees and the missing is one that I have put at the heart of my efforts since I began my tenure. We have regularly met with the families of those detained and missing, whose experiences have made a very deep impression on me.
3. This is a humanitarian and indeed human rights issue that demands sustained and meaningful action, in line with international law. And meaningful action on this file, which touches all Syrian families, could also build significant confidence within society, as well as between the parties and international stakeholders.
4. My Deputy and I have engaged directly with the parties, and our team continues also to participate in a working group together with Iran, Russia and Turkey, though this has not met now for many months due to COVID-19.

Mr. President,

5. Frankly, progress on this file has been vastly insufficient, to the frustration of many Syrians, inside and outside Syria. So many Syrians remain detained, abducted or missing, and so many families still desperately seek information on the fate of their loved ones.
6. The lack of progress is a pity because this is a cause that we can all get behind. Let me remind you that, a little over a year ago, this Council unanimously adopted resolution 2474 (2019) on “Missing persons in armed conflict”. It is indeed unfortunate that today in Syria the scale of the problem remains unchanged.
7. And so today, Mr. President, I want to begin with a loud and clear appeal for the Syrian government and all other Syrian parties to carry out unilateral releases of detainees and abductees, and meaningful actions on missing persons - at a scale that is commensurate with the scope of this tragic issue. Without addressing this issue, true reconciliation, the healing of society’s wounds, credible justice and sustainable peace will remain elusive. Let us make the upcoming Eid al-Adha an occasion that sees more Syrian families welcome their loved ones home.

Mr. President,

8. Of course, the tragedy of detainees, abductees and missing persons represents only a single layer of the humanitarian catastrophe that has engulfed Syria – the greatest of this century.
9. Syrians are now being hit by yet another tsunami of suffering - economic collapse. Over the last month, Syria's currency has regained some of its lost value, but still remains significantly depreciated relative to last year. And by almost any measure we see a downward spiral: rampant inflation, rising unemployment, weakened demand, more businesses shutting down, increased food insecurity with families skipping meals, and shortages of medicine.
10. We also now see a rise in reported cases of COVID-19, exacerbating Syria's economic malaise and further constraining the humanitarian response. Testing remains extremely limited, particularly in areas outside government control. As of yesterday (22 July), the Syrian Ministry of Health has confirmed 561 cases – a relatively low figure, but still more than double the cases since my last briefing. And the geographical spread of the virus is increasing, penetrating more areas outside Damascus, including the first 22 cases in northwest Syria, as well as six cases in the northeast.
11. Humanitarian access is ever more imperative. Echoing the Secretary General, I want to “call on all parties to the conflict to ensure humanitarian access to all people in need in accordance with international humanitarian law”. I take note of this Council's decision to extend the UN cross-border mechanism in northwest Syria via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for twelve months.
12. And here let me also re-echo the Secretary General's appeal from earlier this year, 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.

Mr. President,

13. To end Syrians' suffering we must end the violent conflict, through a nationwide ceasefire, in line with resolution 2254, as well as an effective, targeted, cooperative approach to Security Council-listed terrorist groups in line with international humanitarian law.
14. There has been some progress towards this goal. In recent months, we have seen relative calm throughout Syria, with no major escalation and front-lines mostly frozen. But we continue to see flares of violence within and across those front-lines, which gives us cause for concern.
15. Southwest Syria remains tense. In late June, we saw reports of clashes followed by further protests, assassinations and other security incidents. The Russian Federation has been working to help contain the situation. And I have been messaging to this effect as well. Meanwhile, underlying geopolitical tensions persist in the southwest. And I note fresh reports of Israeli airstrikes across a broad range of targets in Syria.

16. In the northwest, the calm brought about by Russian and Turkish efforts continues to largely hold. I note further progress in Russian-Turkish cooperation inside the de-escalation area, including the first joint patrols across the entire M4 route. I also note that the extremist wa-Harid al- Mu'minin operations room, which had launched cross-line attacks against the Syrian government earlier this year, was forcibly dismantled by listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, following sustained clashes between the two groups. Last week, we then saw an attack on a joint patrol near Ariha, injuring Russian and Turkish soldiers. Subsequently, there was a brief uptick in pro-government airstrikes south of the M4 and shelling on northwest Syria as well as airstrikes on al-Bab city near the Turkish border. I hope that Russia and Turkey can help contain the situation and sustain calm across northwest Syria.
17. Northeast Syria remains broadly stable but has seen some concerning incidents: most notably, fatal car bombings around Tell Abiad and Ras al-Ayn; a drone strike resulting in fatalities near the town of Ayn al-Arab; another drone strike near al-Derbassiya and recurring disruptions to the Allouk water station. We appeal to all stakeholders there, local and international, to exercise restraint and uphold existing arrangements that have provided calm throughout this year.
18. Meanwhile, ISIL's continuing activity remains a serious concern – in southern, central and eastern Syria - with reported riots among ISIL detainees in al-Hasakeh.
19. Let me here recall once again that all parties to the conflict remain bound by international humanitarian law, including the rules of distinction, proportionality and precautions in order to avoid civilian harm.

Mr. President,

20. We have now firmed up plans to convene the third session of the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned Constitutional Committee. Earlier this week, I was able to confirm with the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian government and the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian opposition that we will begin in Geneva on 24 August – provided that travel conditions do not change. I was also able to inform the Middle Third members of this as well. I have encouraged all to prepare for a productive session on the agenda. And I hope that thereafter we will be able to proceed in subsequent sessions in a regular, business-like and substantive manner.
21. I hope that the Syrian parties can count on the support of key international players with influence, in ensuring the success of the upcoming session. In this regard, I appreciated the expressions of support for reconvening and advancing the work of the Constitutional Committee, and for the implementation of resolution 2254, by the Presidents of the Astana guarantor countries, and by the many countries who participated in the Brussels IV Conference.

Mr. President,

22. I also hope that those key international players will work to unlock progress on the broader political process. Only through international dialogue can we begin to address many of the myriad challenges that Syria and Syrians face from humanitarian need,

detention, displacement, violence and terror, to economic destitution and the violation of Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. We continue to see starkly different views on the nature of these challenges – the debate on sanctions is just one example. There is no sign that this or any of these issues will be resolved by entrenched positioning and rhetoric, in the hope that the other side eventually caves in. Serious and consequential international diplomacy is needed, to bridge significant gaps, including through reciprocal measures.

23. I believe that this is indeed possible and that common interest exists for such a dialogue. I have been encouraged by continuing dialogue between the Russian Federation and United States and will continue to engage them and all the relevant countries on how to build a constructive Syria diplomacy that can support a Syrian-led, Syria-owned political process facilitated by the United Nations. Mr. President, if this path is not taken, all the other paths would lead to further loss and suffering for everyone – inside and outside Syria. This cannot be in anyone's interest.

Mr. President,

24. That is why, guided by resolution 2254 and with the support of the key international players and this Council, I hope that, step by step, we can chart a path forwards to end the Syrian people's suffering and allow them to shape their future – that is: the release of those detained and abducted; a nationwide ceasefire to end violent conflict; a safe, calm and neutral environment that enables the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees; and a final political settlement built around a new constitution and inclusive free and fair elections under UN supervision, one that meets the Syrian people's legitimate aspirations, that fully restores Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence, territorial integrity and economic prosperity.

Thank you, Mr. President.