

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN

BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

19 August 2020

Thank you so much Mr. President (Amb. Dian Triansyah Djani, Indonesia)

1. As I brief you today, I remain acutely conscious of the deep suffering of the Syrian people, who in this decade experienced death, injury, displacement, destruction, detention, torture, terror, indignities, instability, de-development and destitution on a massive scale – and who are now also grappling with COVID-19 and economic collapse.
2. It was with a heavy heart that I learned that many Syrians were among those killed or injured in the tragic explosion in Beirut. Many more Syrians in Lebanon have lost their livelihoods, or been left homeless and hungry. And the ramifications for Syria's humanitarian and economic supply chains and revenue from transit trade will doubtless be significant, given the already collapsing Syrian economy.
3. Let me take this opportunity to inform you with deep sorrow that, among the UN personnel injured in the explosion was Deputy Special Envoy Khawla Mattar, who was on her way to Damascus as part of consultations to prepare the upcoming session of the Constitutional Committee. However, I am pleased to say she is on the road to recovery and I am sure you all join with me in extending to her our sincere good wishes for her full return to health and to vigorous pursuit of our shared mission.

Mr President,

4. As I brief you today, preparations are being made to convene this Monday, 24 August, the third session of the Small Body of the Syrian-owned, Syrian-led, UN-facilitated Constitutional Committee in Geneva.
5. Convening the Small Body is obviously challenging, given the global COVID-19 pandemic. We have been closely monitoring the spread of the virus in Syria, in Geneva, and indeed across the globe. And we have been following the health advice of our host country, Switzerland – whose generous support I deeply appreciate -- and the guidance from the United Nations Office at Geneva, where the committee meetings take place.
6. In light of all the information and expert advice available to us, and barring any further developments in the coming days related to the pandemic, and with the agreement of the Co-Chairs and the positive response of Committee members, we are planning to move ahead. We are in contact with the Co-Chair nominated by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Co-Chair nominated by the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission, as well as members of the Middle Third, to make the necessary arrangements. And we will of course be implementing strict health and safety protocols to mitigate risks.
7. After a hiatus of nine months – caused by differences over the agenda until March this year and then by COVID restrictions – it is worth reminding ourselves that the Constitutional Committee meets on the basis of an agreement between the government and the opposition that guides its work. This was, let us recall, the first political

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agreement between the parties to begin to implement a key aspect of Security Council resolution 2254, which called for setting a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution.

8. That agreement reflects some key principles – including respect for the United Nations charter, Security Council resolutions, Syria’s sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, the Syrian-led and owned nature of the process and the role of the United Nations as a facilitator. The agreement calls on the Co-Chairs to promote gender mainstreaming in the work of the Constitutional Committee, which builds on the achievement of the representation of women at nearly 30%. The agreement also recalls wider objectives. Let me remind you UN supervised elections as envisaged in resolution 2254 based on a new constitution, and the need for a broader political process to implement resolution 2254. And the agreement mandates the Committee, within the context of the UN-facilitated Geneva process, to, and I quote: “*prepare and draft for popular approval a constitutional reform as a contribution to the political settlement in Syria and the implementation of resolution 2254.*”
9. This is a momentous task - to establish a foundational act, a social contract for Syrians - after a decade of conflict and amidst deep divisions and mistrust.

Mr President,

10. As you know, constitutions express the sovereignty of the nation and concern fundamental rights, political, cultural, social and economic rights; rule of law and good governance; the people’s relation with their government; how political representatives are elected and what their powers and responsibilities are.
11. During and between sessions I have been ready to support the Co-Chairs and Committee members to help bridge differences by exercising my good offices, and I have sought to facilitate in a manner that ensures the Committee’s continuing credibility, balance and inclusivity, in accordance with my mandate and the agreement that brought the Committee to life.
12. This forthcoming session has been made possible by the Co-Chairs agreeing an agenda, which is, and I quote: “*In line with the mandate, the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure of the Constitutional Committee, discussing the national foundations and principles.*” Let me reiterate my appreciation to the Co-Chairs for reaching this agreement. I recall the pragmatic and business-like way in which they chaired proceedings, particularly during the first session when there also was an agreed agenda. I therefore look forward to meeting them on arrival in Geneva and to their positive chairing of the next session.

Mr President,

13. In the same spirit, I continue to encourage all committee members to come to Geneva ready to engage in earnest on the substance, on the basis of the agenda that the Co-Chairs have agreed, without of course any preconditions.
14. And, consistent with prudent mitigation measures relevant to the pandemic, I believe we should work together now to move this process forwards in a business-like manner, with

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a series of regular meetings in the months ahead, including an agenda for the next meeting.

Mr President,

15. This is important, because millions of Syrians continue to face immense suffering and do not have the luxury of time to await a political breakthrough of some kind.
16. Civil society interlocutors often tell us that they know a single meeting of the Constitutional Committee will not bring immediate changes on the ground. But substantial and serious engagement by all parties would give them hope that a meaningful process is on the horizon, that could have a long lasting and positive impact on the lives of the Syrian people.
17. Frustration with the lack of progress on the political process has been continuously impressed upon me by members of the Women's Advisory Board, who continue to meet virtually, and I will be consulting with them later this week, on Friday and again next week during the Constitutional Committee's work. The WAB themselves are working together to support the constitutional process and promote gender and women's rights. And they continue to draw attention to the spread of COVID-19 in already vulnerable communities, the economic suffering of Syrians and the urgent humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable of society – female-headed households, Syrian refugees and internally displaced, and families struggling to cope with extreme poverty.

Mr President,

18. Our concern for the impact of the pandemic on the Syrian people remains acute and is growing. As of 18 August, the total number of COVID-19 cases in Syria is 2114, including 1844 confirmed by the Ministry of Health in Government-held areas, 51 cases in northwest Syria – including the first cases in two IDP camps - and 219 in the northeast.
19. Of course, overall testing capacity has increased but remains vastly insufficient. Therefore, as Under-Secretary-General Lowcock told this Council late last month, the true number of cases is probably much higher and the pandemic's impact may be far more serious than these numbers suggest. We already see that all areas are experiencing significant shortages of medical and personal protective equipment and there are concerns about the effect of COVID-19 on health workers.
20. The UN family is leading preparedness and mitigation measures across the country, but the needs are immense and resources insufficient. We need your continued support, including in securing humanitarian access for all those in need of relief, in accordance with international humanitarian law. And we need to sustain the provision of waivers 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,

21. We also need a complete, immediate nationwide ceasefire – as called for in resolution 2254, and to enable an all-out effort to combat the pandemic.

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22. In the northwest, the calm brought about by Russian and Turkish efforts continues to largely hold. But the last month has seen reports of sustained mutual rocket attacks, artillery strikes, ground clashes and sporadic airstrikes, including reports of civilians being injured and killed in these incidents. Meanwhile, earlier this week the Turkish Ministry of Defense stated that an IED targeted a joint Russian-Turkish patrol, damaging a Turkish vehicle. Subsequently, yesterday there was a brief uptick in pro-government airstrikes in northern Idlib. Throughout August we have heard of both sides reinforcing, or even establishing new military positions along front-lines. We urge in particular Turkey and Russia to contain all escalatory incidents and dynamics, restore the calm, and continue cooperation. And we appeal for all relevant actors to ensure that any actions taken to address Security Council-listed terrorist groups are effective, targeted and in line with international humanitarian law, ensuring the protection of civilians.
23. Meanwhile, ISIL attacks continue to grow in frequency and impact.
24. The northeast has seen ongoing skirmishes and security incidents in and around Tell Abiad and Ras al-Ain, resulting in civilian casualties, as well as protests in Deir-ez-Zor, following the killing of prominent tribal figures there. Yesterday an IED targeted Russian forces in Deir-ez-Zor, killing a Russian General and injuring two officers. Earlier this week we also saw reports of an altercation between Syrian Government and United States forces: Syrian state media accused the United States of opening fire, from the air and ground, on a Syrian Government checkpoint, killing one soldier and injuring two others. The US-led coalition says it had come under fire from individuals in the vicinity, responded in self-defence and denies that aircraft were used.

Mr. President,

25. This incident is another 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.
26. The southwest has seen recurring tensions as well as protests and several violent incidents, some resulting in fatalities. Geopolitical tensions remain acute too. Earlier this month, Israel stated that it carried out airstrikes on military targets, killing four men who Israel claims were planting explosives at the perimeter of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. The Syrian Government stated that these missiles caused "material damage."

Mr. President,

27. Some of these developments remind us that many of the tensions and incidents taking place across Syria are international in scope, that Syria's sovereignty remains compromised, and that the presence of five foreign armies creates a serious risk of threats to international peace and security.
28. This is one reason why the Constitutional Committee's work can be a door opener, but it cannot in and of itself resolve the conflict. There is a real need for constructive diplomacy among key international players if all aspects of my mandate, as enshrined in resolution 2254, are to be moved forward.

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29. I hope that forthcoming opportunities for direct contacts among key players will enable them to deepen their conversations and bridge the often-significant gaps between their stated positions, and also enable united support behind the UN effort. I see ample scope for key international players to make a difference, working together and with Syrians, step by step, on a range of issues critical to realising my mandate, resolution 2254: ensuring the release of detainees, abductees and clarifying the fate of missing persons; creating a safe, calm and neutral environment in which refugees can return safely, voluntarily and with dignity, reaching a final political settlement that meets the Syrian people's legitimate aspirations, built around a new constitution and inclusive, free and fair elections under UN supervision; addressing the presence of the five foreign armies and fully restoring Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence, territorial integrity. There are also other issues where there remains ample room for constructive diplomacy, such as sanctions and working towards Syria's economic recovery and prosperity.
30. But for now, for next week, let us focus on supporting the members of the Constitutional Committee to deepen their work, and to build some confidence in a political route out of the Syrian conflict.

Thank you, Mr. President.