

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN  
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**

21 December 2022

Madam President (India, Amb. Ruchira Kamboj)

1. Two weeks ago, I visited Damascus to continue my discussion with the Syrian government on advancing the political process to implement resolution 2254. As I did so, conditions on the ground were pointing in worrying directions.
2. Syrians are facing an ever-deepening humanitarian and economic crisis - inside and outside the country, and in both government-controlled areas and areas outside government control, where the situation remains most dire, especially in camps for the displaced. We are dealing with a situation that is the result of more than a decade of war and conflict, corruption and mismanagement, the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID, sanctions, and, indeed, the fallout from the war in Ukraine. UN assessments tell us that parents are skipping meals so their children can eat. Electricity and fuel – including heating oil – are scarcer than ever. Many are increasingly unable to access clean water and health care or even to communicate with loved ones or colleagues, because of connectivity outages and failing infrastructure. I heard directly from UN colleagues that the needs of Syrians are rising just as resources are falling. Even those who would not normally need assistance – those who receive regular salaries for instance – are in need, given the depreciation of the lira. No doubt the situation will only get even more severe as the winter progresses.
3. The government has closed state agencies for several days as a result of energy shortages. Some civil servants are unable to travel to work because they lack fuel. In Damascus, there were tangible signs of a worsening crisis: dark streets, unlit houses and little traffic. Payments come in thick stacks of bills as the Syrian pound depreciates to new record lows.
4. This bleak humanitarian and economic picture is bad enough; add to it the continued armed conflict and the dangers of military escalation, and the potential for catastrophic deterioration is all too real. We have thankfully not seen further large-scale military operations by any one player this month. But the situation cannot be said to have improved in any way. The same dangerous dynamics exist, with impact on civilians. We have seen:
  - Reports of sporadic pro-Government airstrikes in the northwest, Turkish airstrikes in the north and strikes in Damascus and the southwest attributed to Israel;
  - Shelling, rocket fire and intermittent clashes on contact lines, involving the full spectrum of actors – the Government, the armed opposition, the SDF and Security Council listed-terrorist group HTS;
  - Continuing ISIL attacks against all of these actors, in all quarters of Syria – with reports that ISIL’s leader was killed in southern Syria in October;
  - And reports of tensions, continued protests and use of force in al-Sweida.

Madam President,

5. We need to shift these worrying dynamics – and when I briefed you last month, I flagged a number of priorities that we need to focus on. I have been working on all these priorities in my diplomatic engagements with the Syrian parties and with international stakeholders.
6. The first priority is to step back from escalation and restore relative calm on the ground. Let me remind you that a patchwork of agreements and arrangements reached bilaterally between some key actors brought about a relative reduction in violence in recent years – notably between Russian and Türkiye for Idlib in 2020, and between Russia and Türkiye and the US in 2019 for the northeast, as well as Russian-US deconfliction. But these fragile agreements and arrangements don't amount to a comprehensive nationwide ceasefire in line with Security Council resolution 2254. Violence continues, and the careful work to establish these agreements and arrangements could be undone in a moment – despite all players often acknowledging that there is no military solution and that the military phase of the conflict is over. Any escalation could reignite a conflict that in reality has not ended, endangering regional stability and creating conditions in which terrorism can thrive. Once again, it would be civilians who would pay the price. We convened a Ceasefire Task Force plenary meeting in Geneva last Friday to convey a common message to all key member states with influence on the ground: to show restraint; to protect civilians; to restore calm; to work to consolidate this patchwork of agreements and arrangements into a nationwide ceasefire; and to ensure a cooperative approach to countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups, in line with international law.
7. The second action needed is to renew the framework in this Council on the humanitarian front. Unfettered humanitarian access to all Syrians in need throughout the country, by all modalities, remains imperative. As the Secretary-General has stressed, and Martin surely will do after me today, cross-border aid continues to be indispensable. I understand important progress has been made on all of the priorities of resolution 2642, namely cross-border and crossline access as well as the implementation of early recovery projects. We should protect and build on this progress through the extension of the resolution, for the benefit of all Syrians. This is a core message to you today: please continue to support this framework; millions of Syrians depend on it. Please also be generous in responding to the UN's humanitarian appeals.
8. The third point I have stressed is the need to resume and to make more substantive the Constitutional Committee meetings in Geneva. As I told you last month, the UN stands ready to resume Constitutional Committee meetings in Geneva as soon as readiness to do so from other sides is there. On this, there is nothing new to report, particularly on the Russian position regarding Geneva. Nevertheless, I continue my efforts in that regard, including reminding Government-nominated Co-Chair Kuzbari in Damascus of the need to reply to my June letter on improving working methods, to which SNC-nominated Co-Chair al-Bahra has already responded.
9. The fourth point that I am focusing on is to prioritize work on the detained, the disappeared, and the missing. In Damascus, I underlined the importance of sharing information on detainees and releases. I also stressed the need to safeguard detainees' right to communication, as loved ones deserve to know if they are alive. I will continue my engagement with the Syrian government and all other stakeholders to push for releases and information, commensurate with the scale of the issue, while maintaining my

dialogue with family, victim and survivor associations. I also look towards 2023 with hope of seeing a missing persons' institution mandated by the General Assembly, as recommended by the Secretary-General. This would be a pathway to generate some tangible progress for the millions of Syrians affected by this file and provide adequate support to survivors and families.

10. The fifth point is to further the dialogue towards identifying and implementing initial step-for-step confidence building measures. I am convinced that it is possible that the Syrian stakeholders and international players could find a way to make some precise, concrete, reciprocal steps that could move us some way along the path of resolution 2254. If this were done, I believe it could begin to have a meaningful impact on the lives of ordinary Syrians, shift some of the negative dynamics on the ground, and build some trust and confidence between the parties and in the political process.
11. In Damascus, I had a long exchange with Foreign Minister Mekdad on this and I appreciated his willingness to engage. The dialogue has certainly deepened and I welcome the invitation to return to Damascus in the New Year for a new round of talks.
12. I also met in Geneva with Badr Jamous, the President of the Syrian Negotiations Commission and discussed a range of issues in resolution 2254, including steps that all parties could take to help build trust and confidence and bring an end to the suffering of all Syrians. And I look forward to further engagement with the SNC in the New Year as well.
13. Let me stress a sixth and final point: I will continue to rely on the insights and advice of the Women's Advisory Board; I will continue to mainstream gender in all our work; and I will continue to engage with a broad range of Syrians through the Civil Society Support Room, to strengthen dialogue on issues relevant to the political process and to ensure inclusive participation. This month Syrian women and men told us that social trust remains in short supply. The role for civil society to help rebuild Syria's social cohesion is more imperative today than it has ever been. Syrian women have been admirably resilient, enduring mounting hardships, particularly as heads of household. Their empowerment and inclusion is essential.

Madam President,

14. As 2022 draws to a close, we look back on a very difficult year. The needs of the Syrian people have reached the worst levels since the conflict began, against a backdrop of further economic collapse and ongoing violence. No tangible progress has been made in advancing the political process. And global geopolitics made a difficult situation even more complicated. This is a bleak picture.
15. But it is sometimes said that the hour is darkest before dawn. Syrians of all backgrounds tell me that the current situation is unacceptable and also unsustainable. And I do sense a growing realization in all quarters that allowing the status quo to continue and the situation to deteriorate is simply not an option.
16. That is why I appeal to you all to get behind the agenda I have laid out today. Syria needs sustained international attention, starting with unity in this Council behind the humanitarian framework, but also on all the other aspects I have highlighted.

17. I and my team will spare no effort to bring about some movement on this extremely difficult conflict in the year ahead. We must give Syrians hope for the future. Our goal remains a comprehensive political solution in line with Security Council resolution 2254, that meets the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians and restores Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. I count on your creativity, your engagement and your support.

Thank you, Madam President.