

AS DELIVERED

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

28 February 2023

Madam President (Malta, H.E. Vanessa Frazier)

1. The earthquakes that recently struck Turkiye and Syria have caused unspeakable suffering for millions of people. The Syrians affected - in both countries - were already deep into one of the greatest humanitarian crises of this century, after 12 merciless years of war and conflict. To then be battered by one of the biggest natural disasters of our times is almost beyond belief. The earthquakes struck when their needs were highest, when services were scarcest, when the economy was lowest, and when their infrastructure was already heavily damaged. It hit many areas where refugees and IDPs live, and in areas with heavy war damage or where conflict conditions remain acute.
2. I extend once again my deepest condolences and sympathies to those in Syria and Turkiye who lost family members and loved ones. I grieve for the Syrians who were participants in the political process in Geneva and who were killed or lost family members and friends. I grieve for all who have suffered pain and loss, who are witness to trauma upon trauma, and who are now asking themselves how they will rebuild any kind of future. I also pay tribute to the heroic Syrians, across different parts of Syria, as well as the countless NGO workers, emergency responders and UN staff too, who made and are continuing to make tireless efforts under severe conditions in the disaster-stricken areas.

Madam President,

3. The immediate priority is the emergency humanitarian response to the earthquake to Syrians wherever they are. My humanitarian colleagues have been working day and night to scale up the response. Martin has briefed you more than once in recent days and he will do so again today.
4. In support of the humanitarian imperative, I have urged all to depoliticize the humanitarian response. This means access: this is not the time to play politics with crossings across borders or frontlines. This means resources: this is the time for everybody to give quickly and generously to Syria and remove all hindrances to relief reaching Syrians in all affected areas. And this means calm: this is not the time for military action or violence.
5. I have carried this message to all interlocutors. To the Humanitarian Task Force here in Geneva. To Beirut where I saw key donors convened by the European Union. To Damascus where I saw Foreign Minister Mekdad. To Amman where I saw Foreign Minister Safadi. To Istanbul where I saw the head of the Syrian Negotiations Commission Jamous. I have been in contact with Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu, and engaged senior officials from the Arab region, Iran, the United States, and Europe. And I have just returned from Moscow where I saw Foreign Minister Lavrov yesterday.

Madam President,

6. Syrians in the northwest, in particular in areas outside Government control, have expressed strong frustrations at the international community's inability to provide urgent assistance to them in the days after the earthquakes - something I have heard from many in civil society, and from the SNC leadership in Istanbul.
7. The tragic reality is that an effective response was hampered in part by challenges that relate directly to the unresolved issues at the heart of the conflict. I have long said that the situation in Syria is unsustainable, that the status quo is totally unacceptable, and that the Syrian people are acutely vulnerable to issues not solely in their hands. It has taken tragic earthquakes to reveal this clearly. And the Syrian people, again, are the ones who pay a heavy price.
8. But, Madam President, the earthquakes are revealing another reality, too. We are seeing that it is possible to work for the common good. Notwithstanding the challenges and failures in the early days, the steps taken in response to the earthquakes – all temporary, all humanitarian, but all important – have sent a clear message: yes, it is possible to make positive moves, and it is possible to cooperate over Syria. I see several signals in this regard.
9. First, we have seen remarkable goodwill among many Syrians themselves, in both words and actions, to organize and send relief to their fellow citizens across frontlines irrespective of the challenges and hardships they also face. I am humbled by their willingness to put politics aside. One Syrian interlocutor rightly told us that Syrian civil society “has been on the ground, been present in every house and in every family.”
10. Let me pause here to note here that Syrian women have been at the forefront of these efforts. And upon their shoulders lies the additional burdens of calling out the particular dangers now faced by women especially – living in public spaces that do not afford them the needed privacy, dignity and security – and overcoming perceptions that women's needs are luxuries that can be put aside at a time of humanitarian crisis. At a time of real vulnerability, I hear reports of women being raped, beaten and harassed. Women requiring post-partum care are denied necessary care and appropriate places to shelter. Girls and boys are especially vulnerable during such distressing and confusing events, and have their own protection needs when adults are occupied elsewhere and many schools shut or out of service.
11. Second, I welcome the recent introduction of earthquake-related exemptions in several unilateral sanctions regimes—including by the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union and their efforts to ensure their sanctions do not interfere with the response, in particular due to overcompliance. We have also seen a significant amount of goodwill and diplomatic energy on Syria, in terms of providing assistance directly or via the United Nations and other relief agencies, and gestures of condolence. Continued donor generosity with pledges and quick disbursements in response to the Flash Appeal will be vital.
12. Third, I welcome the decision by the Syrian Government to open the two crossing points of Bab Al-Salam and Al Ra'ee from Türkiye to northwest Syria. Also notable have been the blanket approval for crossline operations into northwest Syria until July, as well as other

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measures to cut red tape for humanitarian actors and facilitate humanitarian financial transactions in relation to the earthquake response at a preferential exchange rate.

13. Fourth, let me note for the record that we saw a relative lull in violence after the earthquake which can facilitate relief operations – and which proves that calm can be achieved and maintained with political will. This, too, was something that I stressed during my visit to Damascus.

Madam President,

14. I want, however, to add that I am worried that we have seen this calm punctuated with reports of concerning incidents: exchanges of shelling and mortar fire between areas under Syrian Government, Syrian Democratic Forces, armed opposition or listed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham control; an HTS cross-line attack; reported Turkish drone strikes; an airstrike in central Damascus attributed to Israel; assassinations in the south-west; terrible attacks attributed to ISIL in the desert. Seeing reports of civilian casualties from military action is even more shocking at a time of natural disaster. We continue to stress the importance of calm throughout Syria. And we particularly and urgently stress to all parties with influence that, in all earthquake affected areas, all violence should stop immediately to enable relief and respite for the civilian population.

Madam President,

15. This is a mixed picture, but the four elements, involving action from different sides, are the kinds of elements which we will need to build on if we are to move beyond responding to the emergency the earthquake has wrought and confront the challenges of resolving the conflict itself, and address the deep crisis in Syria.

16. As we move from emergency response to recovery after the earthquake, the unresolved political challenges will pose bigger obstacles and bigger dilemmas. It will require navigating through one of the most complex political landscapes on the planet – a territory split into several zones of control; a Government under sanctions from key donors; de facto authorities elsewhere; more than one listed terrorist group; five foreign armies; interlocking violent conflicts; mass displacement; systemic human rights violations and abuses; institutions that are degraded, corrupted, or absent; destroyed infrastructure; a collapsed economy; growing illicit drug trafficking; grinding poverty; and skyrocketing needs. And indeed it will require navigating these complexities in a context where the international community is itself deeply divided.

Madam President,

17. Let us take inspiration from the Syrian people on the ground who have come together against the odds during this time to deal with their enormous challenges. The situation today is so unprecedented that it calls for leadership, bold ideas and a cooperative spirit. A serious political way forward will require a serious conversation among key stakeholders to make progress on some of the unresolved political issues of the conflict, that could block much-needed recovery after this disaster.

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18. This will require less posturing, less rhetoric, and more pragmatism. It will require realism and frankness from the Syrian Government and the Syrian opposition, and all key outside actors. It will require firewalling Syria from wider geopolitical disputes among key players. It calls for a coordinated process.

Madam President,

19. I am coordinating closely with senior UN colleagues regarding engagement with the Syrian authorities and external stakeholders. I am continuing outreach to those stakeholders too – because we will need all key Arab players, all key European players, and of course, the Astana players, and the United States – to work in a coherent effort. If all – and I really mean all – can envisage compromise from previous positions, all will gain. This can only be done at the political level.

20. I assess that the approach of seeking reciprocal and verifiable confidence-building measures – the so-called steps-for-steps – is more relevant now than ever before. This dialogue was already deepening, and its tenets of parallelism and verifiability, and the issues it was seeking to advance, will be critical if we are to make progress.

21. Because let's be honest: the earthquakes have exposed, and aggravated, many of the core issues related to Security Council resolution 2254: issues of governance, sovereignty, territorial integrity; nationwide ceasefire; building a safe, calm and neutral environment; the file of the detained, disappeared and missing; the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs, many of whom have been displaced again by the earthquakes and have nowhere to go; and post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation, for which the earthquakes have only created new needs.

Madam President,

22. My message to all is the same: let's respond generously and work together to support the earthquake emergency response; let all with influence work to ensure full calm, especially in areas affected by the earthquake; let's build on steps so far from all sides with further moves from all sides; let's in that spirit identify and move on additional confidence-building steps from all parties to confront the challenges of recovery after the disaster and address unresolved political issues; and let's ensure a fully coordinated engagement in the period ahead to chart a political way forward. I am continuing to consult widely, including with Arab countries and all other key players. I am ready to use my good offices, develop proposals, and convene necessary players in an effort to help find the way forward, consistent with my mandate in Security Council resolution 2254. Madam President, this we owe all those Syrians living a compounded nightmare, and are desperate for a glimmer of hope.

Thank you, Madam President.