

UNITED NATIONS DEPUTY SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA NAJAT ROCHDI
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
28 November 2023

Mr. President, (Ambassador Zhang Jun, China)

1. It is an honour to brief this Council once again. Special Envoy Pedersen is currently in the region, in Muscat, Oman.
2. Let me start with the ongoing and urgent need for de-escalation in Syria and across the region, which remains the most pressing matter at hand. We remain deeply concerned about the prospect of a potentially wider escalation in Syria. The effects of the tragic developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel continue to be felt inside Syria.
3. Just this weekend, Israeli airstrikes once again hit Damascus airport, once again temporarily halting the UN's Humanitarian Air Service which operates from this airport and services Syria's humanitarian programs. Targeting civilian infrastructure is prohibited under international law. This came after several other airstrikes attributed to Israel on other locations across Syria – Al Qunaitra, Deraa, Damascus, Sweida and Homs – with Israeli artillery fire reported into southern Syria. Syrian state media says that these strikes caused material damage and killed a civilian airport worker.
4. These airstrikes have coincided with reports of rocket and missile launches from southern Syria over the Occupied Syrian Golan towards Israel. The IDF claims that a drone strike in Eilat in southern Israel came from an organization in Syria, against which the IDF says it carried out airstrikes in response.
5. Near-daily reports of attacks on US forces in northeast Syria continue, mostly claimed by the so-called Islamic Resistance in Iraq – though none have been reported in the last few days. The US, who claims that groups behind these attacks are backed by Iran, have carried out two more rounds of what they say are retaliatory strikes on facilities in Syria which it claims are used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and groups that it backs. Iran denies claims that these groups are affiliated with it.
6. Meanwhile, the Syrian conflict continues in all its other dimensions, with this reporting period seeing significant military activity and further civilian casualties. It included:
 - Pro-Government airstrikes on northwest Syria;
 - Artillery exchanges and clashes between Government forces and listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham;
 - Drone attacks on Government areas attributed to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or other actors based in Idlib, with several reportedly intercepted by Government forces;
 - Turkish drone strikes on northeast Syria, with further artillery exchanges between Turkish and armed opposition forces on one side, and Syrian Democratic Forces on the other;
 - Further attempts by some members of Arab tribes to attack SDF positions in Deir-ez-Zor;
 - Ongoing attacks by ISIL – particularly against Government forces in the desert;
 - And multiple security incidents in the southwest, including assassination attempts.

Mr President,

7. Let me reiterate the four messages the Special Envoy conveyed to you last month:
 - first, we need to de-escalate within Syria, towards a nationwide ceasefire and cooperative approach to countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups, in line with international law;
 - second, for all actors – Syrian and non-Syrian – to exercise maximum restraint;
 - third, for all actors to operate in full compliance with international humanitarian law;
 - and fourth, for international cooperation to refocus on the neglected political process.
8. In the regrettable absence of a common forum for all key stakeholders on Syria to speak frankly, the Special Envoy has been pursuing every occasion and every channel to press these messages – in meetings in Geneva with the Iranian Foreign Minister, with key members of the Ceasefire Task Force from Russia, Türkiye and the United States, and with senior officials from the United Kingdom and European Union member states; and in the region with senior Arab ministers; the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; and senior Chinese and US officials.
9. We hear from all concerned parties a clear message that they do not seek escalation. But this is simply not enough. Violence continues in Syria, including spillover from Gaza and Israel. To continue such violence is to play with fire. Just one miscalculation – one stray artillery shell or misjudged airstrike - could ignite a dozen different powder kegs that lie within Syrian borders. We need more than just good intentions: we need sustained de-escalation operationalized through robust channels between all stakeholders. We need the killing, injuring and displacement of civilians, and the destruction of infrastructure, not just to decrease, but to end.

Mr President,

10. Such a de-escalation of violent conflict would be a vital start. But it is not enough. The situation remains simply unsustainable in so many other ways.
11. The humanitarian situation is ever more alarming, as we will shortly hear from my OCHA colleague. We can only guess it will worsen, not least with winter and funding cuts looming and a disastrous economic situation. We of course welcome Syria's extension of its authorization for the UN to use the Bab al-Salam and Al-Ra'ee border crossings for an additional three months.
12. We have not seen verified, concrete progress on the ongoing unlawful detentions of tens of thousands of individuals in relation to the conflict. We continue to seek information from the Syrian Government on all amnesties that they issue, including the latest decree issued earlier this month. We continue to call for the release of all arbitrarily-detained individuals, especially vulnerable categories.
13. Refugees and the internally displaced still do not see conditions emerging for them to return in safety, dignity and voluntarily. The protection and livelihoods concerns central to this issue still need to be fundamentally addressed, and we continue to hope to see action on them.

14. And against this backdrop, it is no surprise that popular frustrations remain extremely high, as we see in continuing protests in Sweida.

Mr President,

15. The only way to tackle this unsustainable status quo is through a credible and comprehensive approach to a political solution, that puts all of the issues of concern to stakeholders on the table, allowing Syrians to realize their legitimate aspirations and chart a path to restoring Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, in line with Security Council resolution 2254.
16. One dimension of this is resuming the Constitutional Committee and enabling it to proceed at pace and make progress on substance. The Special Envoy is consulting in the region for the second time this month to ensure that no stone is left unturned regarding possibilities for a regional venue. There is nothing new to report on the search for consensus on a venue. Venues that have been floated are not currently on offer or are not the subject of consensus. The Special Envoy is continuing to speak with all concerned about how, in these circumstances, the non-Syrian issues that have so far prevented reconvening the Committee in Geneva should be put aside in the interest of the process. These issues should not take priority over a UN-facilitated, Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process resuming.
17. We also continue to seek further engagement with all relevant stakeholders on the proposals for step-for-step confidence building measures already aired, as well as further ideas in that regard.
18. The Special Envoy was pleased to discuss in detail all of these issues with the Syrian Negotiations Commission earlier this month in Geneva, as well as the broader political process to implement Resolution 2254. He looks forward to continuing to engage the Government on the same sets of issues.

Mr President,

19. Today, we meet at the half-way mark of the annual campaign to end violence against women and girls. I want to echo the words of the Deputy Secretary-General last week, who called for creating conditions where women and girls can thrive. In Syria, a political process to end a thirteen-year conflict is an obvious place to start in that regard – one that takes note of the conflict's consequences for women and girls – and which lays the foundations for women and girls to leave behind the horrors of war and rebuild their lives and their country.
20. We look forward to continuing to engage with Syrian women - from the parties to the political process, from civil society, from academia, from the private sector, and from the Syrian Women's Advisory Board. We remain grateful to all of these women for their active commitment to all dimensions of the political [process] required to end this conflict. They too are alarmed by the potential of regional spillover into Syria and hope that the broader regional crisis does not reduce the attention needed to find a diplomatic resolution to the conflict in Syria.

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21. The Special Envoy and I also continue our constant engagement with Syrian civil society. This month the Special Envoy met with the leadership of Madaniya – a Syrian civic initiative.

Mr President.

22. To conclude, I ask this Council and all stakeholders – Syrian and non-Syrian - to exercise maximum restraint and urgently make efforts to de-escalate the tense and dangerous situation in Syria. And in tandem, we need your full and unified support in getting the political process back up and running – in terms of the Constitutional Committee, step-for-step confidence building measures and a broader process on all issues of resolution 2254. Attention on Syria has ebbed somewhat given the terrible crisis in the region. But Syria is a piece of that puzzle too. And the situation in Syria is too dangerous to be left unattended. If we do not give the Syrian parties and people a horizon of hope and a political path to resolving their conflict, I fear that the situation will boil over again and again, spilling across a region that is already in a moment of historical crisis.

Thank you, Mr President.