

AS DELIVERED

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

21 March 2024

Thank you, Mr. President (Amb. Yamazaki Kazuyuki, Japan). First, Ramadan Mubarak to all those observing.

Mr. President,

1. After thirteen years of conflict in Syria, and despite a year of new diplomatic avenues, the tragic reality is that developments are all going in the wrong direction – including in the security, humanitarian, human rights, economic and political spheres. I am alarmed at the trajectory of events, and the lack of progress in reversing them.
2. Take security. After thirteen years, conflict continues, with acute violence on many fronts, and continued regional spillover. Just this month alone we have seen:
 - Further Israeli strikes, including one that Iran says killed a member of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Israel says it has conducted more than 50 strikes in Syria since 7 October.
 - Further rocket fire from southern Syria into the occupied Syrian Golan.
 - An uptick in violence in Idlib, where pro-Government airstrikes and now drone strikes resumed after a relative hiatus, and where listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham launched drone strikes and crossline raids into Government areas.
 - Further Turkish drone strikes in northeast Syria, with exchanges of shelling and rocket fire between armed opposition groups and Syrian Democratic Forces.
 - The Jordanian Airforce mobilizing on its border with Syria, where there were reports of drones about to enter Jordanian territory.
 - Shelling exchanges between Government and Syrian Democratic Forces along the Euphrates.
 - And, Mr. President, new attacks by ISIL which killed civilians, including, once again, large numbers of civilians searching for truffles in the desert.
3. The conflict in Gaza and its regional ramifications remain an acute source of concern, and de-escalation is essential starting with an immediate humanitarian ceasefire there. De-escalation of the conflict in Syria itself is equally urgent– building on existing ceasefire arrangements and towards a nationwide ceasefire in line with Security Council resolution 2254. Civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected, and actions against Security-Council listed terrorist groups must be firmly in line with international humanitarian law.
4. On the humanitarian front: Joyce will brief you in details but let me just highlight a few facts. It is staggering that 16.7 million people need humanitarian assistance – the highest number at any point during the thirteen years of conflict. Those in need must be reached through all modalities, including cross-border and cross-line. We urge donors, both traditional and non-traditional, to give generously to the humanitarian response, including for early recovery. It can't be that when humanitarian needs are increasing the funding is decreasing. The effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians must be mitigated and avoided, in particular concerns that overcompliance continues to impact humanitarian operations.
5. More broadly, Mr. President, we are seeing massive challenges to basic state services across Syria – in areas such as health, education and energy – against a backdrop of

economic collapse and institutional degradation. This is already affecting millions. And long-term implications of these trends for state functioning, and indeed on efforts to reach a political solution, should concern all of us.

6. Meanwhile, and as I have been repeatedly reporting to the Council, more than 100,000 people are estimated as arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared, or missing. Releases at scale, information about the fate and whereabouts of the missing, access to all places of detention – we are not seeing progress on any of these points. Worrying reports continue of arbitrary arrests and abductions, as well as torture, including sexual violence, in places of detention across several parts of Syria.
7. Half the pre-war population continues to languish in displacement or exile, for over a decade in many cases. They are not returning in large numbers and when asked why, they cite both protection and livelihood concerns – and plainly these are not being sufficiently addressed.

Mr. President,

8. Women’s activists in Syria are reporting increased harassment and threats of physical violence. Syrian women across the spectrum have shared with us their deep concerns after a local council member in northwest Syria was reportedly murdered after months of threats and harassment. We continue to call for the protection of Syrian women and their rightful and essential place in political and civic life, especially as we mark International Women’s Day in March.

Mr. President,

9. After thirteen years, protestors are still taking to the streets in some areas expressing unaddressed grievances – including this month in northern Syria and Deraa. In Sweida too, an eight-month protest movement continues. This month saw a General Strike, with some protestors entering and ransacking Government buildings. The first protestor was killed with later reports of unclaimed retaliatory attacks by anonymous armed groups on Government security installations. Separately, we have also seen protests erupt in Idlib against abuses by listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Mr. President,

10. I used to say five foreign armies are active and present in Syria. But now in the conflict’s fourteenth year, we can now say *six*. There is also a multitude of armed actors as well as Security Council listed terrorist groups. Millions of Syrians are split across these areas of control. The longer this status quo persists, the more I fear that different areas will drift further apart, deepening the challenge to restore Syria’s sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity.
11. We hear a loud and clear sense of dismay at all of these trend lines in our continued exchanges with a wide range of Syrian civil society actors -- including this month in my Deputy Najat Rochdi’s engagements in Istanbul through the Civil Society Support Room. There is deep concern among Syrians about the impact of Syria being divided under different authorities for almost a generation. We hear strong demands for an end to hostilities and for civilian protection, stabilization, livelihood and education opportunities.

Mr. President,

12. There is no military route to resolving these myriad challenges – only a comprehensive political solution can do that. This month, I discussed the depth of the crisis with Syrian Foreign Minister Mekdad, as well as with Syrian Negotiations Commission President Jamous, and with Russian, Iranian, Turkish, Chinese, Arab, American and European counterparts. My message was clear: the political track, blocked and dormant, needs to be unstuck.
13. On the Constitutional Committee: last month, I reported that, having tried many options, and as a bridging proposal, I invited the Constitutional Committee members to hold the ninth session of the Small Body of the Committee in Geneva in April. The SNC accepted that invitation. The Government did not. I went through this issue in some detail in Damascus. I have since had further contacts with the SNC. As I have repeated throughout, I remain open to any alternative venue that attracts consensus of both the Syrian parties and the host, and I am continuing my engagement. But, Mr. President, unless and until that consensus is reached, I continue to appeal for the Committee to reconvene in Geneva in a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process. I have also appealed to the parties to prepare on substance and be ready to put forward Constitutional proposals once the Committee resumes.
14. On step-for-step confidence-building, to remind you: there are concrete ideas on the table. In Damascus I urged the Syrian Government to engage in a deepened and concrete dialogue, which would be essential to developing joint reciprocal and parallel steps from different parties. It is more urgent than ever that this starts – otherwise the trend lines that I have outlined will only continue to move in the wrong directions, rather than towards a safe, calm and neutral environment.

Mr. President,

15. I have also stressed that, ultimately, a more comprehensive approach is needed – one where the full range of issues are addressed – one that can see Syria's sovereignty restored and its people's legitimate aspirations addressed. These issues are not all in Syrian hands. Yes, the political future of Syria is for the Syrians to determine. But a way out of the crisis also needs the contributions of international actors who play an outsized role in Syria today. And it needs compromises from all Syrian and international players.
16. We need preparatory talks for the day when all these key players are ready to work on a comprehensive compromise across a whole range of inter-linked tracks. This will need the contribution of the Syrian parties and of all existing groupings – such as the Astana format, the Arab Contact Group, the Western Quad, as well as this Council. I will engage all key players in this regard. Because the last years of diplomacy show that no existing actor or group of actors *alone* can come close to resolving this crisis. Mr. President, the sooner all players accept this and are ready to come to the table, the better for the tired and long-suffering Syrian people, and the closer we will be to the realization of Security Council resolution 2254.

Thank you, Mr. President.