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**UNITED NATIONS DEPUTY SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA NAJAT ROCHDI
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**

21 November 2024

Thank you, Mr. President, (UK Deputy Permanent Representative Ambassador James Kariuki)

1. It is an honour to brief the Security Council on behalf of Special Envoy Pedersen, who is in Syria at present and will meet the Syrian Government in the coming days. Special Envoy Pedersen was in Astana last week for meetings with the interlocutors who meet in the Astana format. He has since been in the region for a wide range of high-level contacts.

Mr. President,

2. An increasing number of Syrians find themselves trapped in an unrelenting cycle of violence and suffering, forced to flee from places of refuge now under attack—both within their homeland and beyond its borders. As humanitarian aid diminishes and hostile rhetoric and actions intensify, Syrians are being driven into increasingly precarious and unsustainable conditions.
3. Clearly, the immediate priority for Syria is de-escalation. The country is being battered by the relentless storms of regional conflict and by the rising waves of conflict within its own borders. This year is well on track to be the most violent since 2020, and the potential for even greater devastation looms on the horizon. Decisive action by all with influence is needed to prevent Syria being further swept into a broader conflagration.
4. Once again Israeli airstrikes on Syria have increased significantly, both in frequency and scope. Just yesterday, we saw dozens killed in a strike near Palmyra – likely the deadliest Israeli strike in Syria to date. Israel says its strikes address targets linked to Iran, Hizbullah or Palestinian Islamic Jihad. But once again, we have seen civilian casualties, including from significant strikes that were conducted on residential areas in the heart of Damascus. Civilian infrastructure was also hit, including bridges, roads, civilian and formal and informal border crossings – in some instances for the third time.
5. This has further hindered the passage of civilians fleeing violence in Lebanon, and also caused serious disruptions to essential imports and exports - now down by 40-50%. The prices of gasoline and basic goods have risen precipitously, leaving the most vulnerable in a precarious state.
6. On the Golan as well, we are concerned about the volatile situation owing to continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement. Under-Secretary-General Lacroix will be briefing you in further detail next month. But let me echo the Secretary-General's call on the parties to respect the terms of the Agreement and prevent any further escalation across the ceasefire line.
7. We have also seen reports of a rocket and some drone attacks from Syrian territory into the Occupied Syrian Golan. Syrian state media says Syrian air defenses have also intercepted Israeli missiles in some instances.

8. In parallel, the U.S. carried out strikes against what it said are Iran-backed militias, in response to armed drone attacks on its bases in northeast Syria.
9. Meanwhile, since the last briefing, northeast Syria has seen its most serious escalation during 2024. After a terrorist attack near Ankara on 23 October resulted in civilian casualties, Türkiye carried out strikes inside Syria for several days, against what they stated were PKK/YPG targets. These strikes resulted in civilian casualties and severely impacted or damaged critical civilian infrastructure. The SDF claimed to have killed Turkish soldiers in attacks on Turkish positions in Syria, with further reports of civilian areas hit by SDF rocket strikes.
10. Violence remains at troubling levels in many other theatres too: northwest Syria faces a worrying uptick in pro-Government drone and artillery attacks, alongside many attacks involving Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. This new round of violence has also resulted in civilian casualties, new waves of displacement and damage to civilian infrastructure. In the south, Daraa too has continued to experience significant instability.
11. Moreover, attacks by Security Council listed terrorist group ISIL have been increasing in the central desert region.
12. Clearly, Mr. President, there is an urgent need for ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon, and for respect for the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and indeed all states in the region. Alongside regional de-escalation, there is an urgent need to work towards a nationwide ceasefire in Syria in line with Security Council resolution 2254, and a cooperative approach to combating Security-Council listed terrorist groups. I reiterate the Secretary-General's call on all parties to respect their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, as applicable. Let me also forcefully condemn all attacks we have seen, posing harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Mr. President,

13. UNHCR reports that over half a million people have fled Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon and crossed into Syria since late September, and there remains a steady flow of movement. Some 63% are Syrian, and most of them are women and children. We repeat our hope that all stakeholders understand that this is a critical moment to act responsibly and constructively on protection and livelihood concerns.
14. On protection: all Syrians must be protected wherever they are – those who remain outside, those recent arrivals mostly under adverse conditions, and those who remained in the country throughout the conflict. We echo, once again, High Commissioner Grandi's appreciation for the Syrian Government keeping the borders open for all and simplifying procedures, and allowing UNHCR monitoring presence on the borders. The safety and security of all of those arriving from Lebanon must be ensured, both at the crossing, and thereafter as they move throughout Syria - by *all* authorities and *de facto* authorities. We hope to see progress on the full range of protection concerns. The more the United Nations and other actors are able to be present and active on the ground, the more confidence it will instil.

15. On livelihoods, let us remember: even *before* the latest influx of half a million people, 16.7 million Syrians were *already* in need of humanitarian assistance - the highest number recorded since the conflict began. I thank all donors who have provided support and stress that donors must give more – both for the emergency humanitarian appeal and for early recovery activities, in all areas of Syria. Both approaches are essential and mutually supportive: one is not a replacement for the other. Here let me also note that the UN and its partners have just launched an Early Recovery Strategy for 2024 to 2028, to support building long-term resilience and address the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the country. And let me also flag the critical importance of the active engagement of sanctioning states to mitigate any adverse effects of sanctions, particularly in the form of overcompliance.

16. Let me also welcome the Government of Syria's decision to extend for a further 3 months permission for the UN to use the Bab al-Salam and Al Ra'i border crossings, which remains critical to reach those in need in northwest Syria.

Mr. President,

17. Syria remains in a profound and active state of war and division. Many millions of Syrians are still outside their country or struggling to survive in a complex landscape of de facto authorities, foreign armies, armed non-state actors, and listed terrorist groups. Over 100,000 remain arbitrarily detained or missing. The economy is in tatters and infrastructure is destroyed and degraded. Organized crime and illicit activities are on the rise, with negative social impact and generating even further instability.

18. After almost fourteen years of war and conflict, there are no quick-fix technocratic solutions to these challenges, which are deeply political. These challenges also speak to the direct involvement as well as security concerns of regional and international players. Tackling these issues requires a meaningful political process, in line with Security Council resolution 2254.

19. This is a pivotal moment to move the political process forward, with genuine commitment and action. Geopolitical winds may soon start shifting once again, in directions that are hard to predict. If all sides signal readiness to act constructively, responsibly, and practically, then we have the best chance to harness existing and new dynamics into opportunities for progress.

20. What does this mean in practice?

21. One signal would be the resumption of Constitutional Committee meetings. The Special Envoy had in-depth discussion on this during the Astana talks and in the region, and looks forward to consultations with the Syrian government in the coming days, and also with the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission. This would send a clear message that a framework for the political process remains alive and operational, and that there is a Syrian Government and opposition whose nominees are able to sit together and address the critical issues at the heart of the intra-Syrian conflict.

22. Another signal could be to further develop step-for-step confidence-building measures, in light of the ideas on the table, and bearing in mind the developments on the ground and diplomatically.
23. But at this moment, all Syrian and international players can and should really be thinking bigger, sending a signal that they are willing to put all the critical issues and concerns on the table: the Syrian-Syrian political issues at the heart of conflict but also the issues pertaining to protection, sovereignty, security, economy and sanctions, detainees and missing, refugees and so on – issues which can only be fully addressed with external players. The Special Envoy has been sharing ideas on how to develop a comprehensive path out of this conflict. Engagement on these ideas would be a strong signal, at a time of potential change, that a negotiated political solution on Syria, in line with resolution 2254, is not beyond our collective ingenuity and political will.

Mr. President,

24. We of course will continue our engagement Syrian civil society. As you heard from a Civil Society Support Room participant last month, on behalf of many Syrian civil society actors, and as we keep hearing from the Women’s Advisory Board too, there is a strong desire within Syrian communities for a political process that brings genuine reconciliation. Civil society must have a voice in that process. Here let me, once again, encourage all Syrian parties to ensure that Syrian women have a seat at the table. This remains a key element in building a resilient peace and sustainable future for Syria – as we heard in the recent Security Council session on *Women Building Peace in a Changing Environment*.

Mr. President,

25. In closing, let me reiterate the Special Envoy’s appeal to all parties: to de-escalate the military situation both in the region and within Syria, and prioritize the protection and support of Syrian civilians, including those crossing back. We also call on Syrian and international stakeholders to work with the Special Envoy to reinvigorate the political process and also demonstrate a readiness to engage on the full scope of issues necessary for a comprehensive resolution. This is a time of profound uncertainty and danger in the region. It is also exactly the time to shape a path to allow the Syrian people to realize their legitimate aspirations, to restore Syria’s sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, and to safeguard peace and security.

Thank you, Mr. President.