

Addressing the pressing humanitarian need in Syria

Thank you very much, Mr President.

Let me just start, if I might, Mr President, by saying that I think it's really important that we try to keep the politics out of our humanitarian discussions. That's one reason why we separate out into political, chemical weapons and humanitarian sessions each month on Syria is to enable us to focus on the evidence and the facts as we grapple with how we keep people alive, which is surely the most vital responsibility that this Council faces. So I have to say I listened with sadness today to one delegate whose intervention was an attack on those providing aid across Syria and those paying for it. And I want to remind everybody that the biggest donors to the Syria appeal are the US, the UK, Germany and the EU, including those areas under Assad's rule.

So, Mr President, what does an evidence-based approach tell us? Well, the UK is deeply concerned about the potentially catastrophic impact of COVID-19 in Syria, as highlighted by the World Health Organization. There are 48 confirmed cases in areas controlled by the Syrian authorities, as well as confirmed cases in the north-east and reported cases in the north-west. There are probably already many more. We cannot know because of the lack of testing capacity. And as the United Nations scales up prevention and protection against COVID-19 in areas controlled by the Syrian authorities and in the north-west, it follows that it must be allowed to do the same in the north-east. So it is gravely concerning the gaps in medical supplies in the north-east have in fact widened at a time when facilities should be urgently scaling up to prepare for the virus.

The UN has confirmed that in terms of coverage or reach, cross-line access in the north-east has not improved since 2019, when the Yaroubiya crossing was still operational. It's for this reason that in his latest report, the Secretary-General said, "The pressing need to prepare for a COVID-19 outbreak in the north-east has further and starkly highlighted the gap left by the removal of the Yaroubiya authorisation."

Colleagues, this could not be clearer. There is a clear problem in the north-east and the United Nations and humanitarian organisations have told us what the answer is. We must not play politics with this virus when it's in our gift to enable aid to get through and save lives. We believe the mandate for the Yaroubiya crossing should be re-authorised as a matter of great urgency for as long as COVID-19 remains a threat to Syria.

Now, Mr President, let me turn to the north-west. If our objective is to save life, then it is absolutely necessary that this Council renews UNSCR 2504 in a timely manner. Monthly truck crossings in March and April of this year have been more than double what they were at the same time last year. This increase in aid is in response to the increased humanitarian need within the

region. So the renewal of Resolution 2504 remains essential. There is no alternative. And I'd just like to emphasise that if Resolution 2504 were not to be renewed, then no one should have any illusions that the United Kingdom's considerable humanitarian funding for the north-west would automatically transfer to delivery via Damascus – particularly, while such serious questions remain about assistance getting from Damascus to those most in need.

A number of colleagues have talked about sanctions. Goods and medical supplies used for humanitarian purposes are not subject to EU sanctions, which are now part of the United Kingdom's national legislation, and additional exemptions from sanctions are available for humanitarian activities in Syria.

In conclusion, Mr President, the evidence is clearly set out in the Secretary-General's report. There remains a pressing humanitarian need across Syria. We must remember the millions of lives at stake. COVID-19 has changed the world we all live in. It has changed the situation on the ground in Syria. And I believe that it means we must be ready to change our approach. We must put aside our political differences and act on the basis of humanitarian needs to authorise temporary cross-border access through Yaroubiya. And we must, of course, renew Resolution 2504. There is no other responsible course of action any of us could take.

Thank you, Mr President.