

# 'Sanctity of human civilian life' in Idlib must win out, urges UN Syria Envoy

With the ingredients for a "perfect storm" brewing in the Syrian province of Idlib, the international community cannot allow civilians there to succumb to such a fate, the UN Envoy for the country told the [Security Council](#) on Friday.

Speaking from Geneva, where he is based, Staffan de Mistura briefed the 15 ambassadors on the intensified military presence and increased airstrikes in the northwestern region, which have prompted fears of a potential humanitarian catastrophe in the last rebel stronghold in the country.

Idlib is one of four "de-escalation zones" in Syria agreed under a deal reached last year by Iran, Russia and Turkey in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana.

The UN estimates nearly three million people are trapped there, half of whom were displaced from other parts of the country. While most are civilians, terrorist organizations, foreign fighters and armed opposition groups have also gathered in Idlib.

"I have laid out...all the ingredients for a perfect storm. The dangers are profound that any battle for Idlib could be, would be, a horrific and bloody battle. Civilians are its potential victims, and there are ever-present dangers in the case of a full-scale assault of incidents, rapid escalations, involving regional and international players," the UN Envoy said.

"The Security Council cannot accept that the civilians of Idlib must face this type of fate. Efforts to combat terrorism do not supersede obligations under international law in the moral conscience of humanity. We must put the sanctity of human civilian life above everything else."

Mr. De Mistura urged all stakeholders in the crisis to find a solution to prevent a tragedy in Idlib while also addressing the issue of terrorism.

The three "Astana guarantors" met in Tehran on Friday and Mr. De Mistura will hold talks with them in Geneva starting on Monday.

He will also meet with representatives from Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States later in the week.

"It would be the ultimate failure of imagination and of diplomacy if, with these efforts, we simply saw an increase of military activities," he said.

John Ging, a top official with the UN's humanitarian affairs office, [OCHA](#), updated ambassadors on ongoing efforts in Idlib, where the global organization and its partners reach around two million people each month.

Plans are in place to support up to 900,000 civilians who could be affected by conflict, while stocks of food, medical supplies and other items have been pre-positioned.

Mr. Ging reported that parties to the conflict have received “de-confliction information” related to 125 humanitarian facilities, warehouses and other sites in Idlib where residents can find assistance.

“In their military operations, all parties bear the obligation to take constant care to spare civilians, and civilian objects, including humanitarian workers and humanitarian facilities,” he said.

The OCHA Director of Operations concluded his briefing with five requests to the international community.

These “key asks” included a call for a cessation of hostilities in Idlib, for safe humanitarian access, and to allow civilians the freedom to leave the area. Mr. Ging also appealed for an increase in humanitarian funding, noting that the current response was “already overstretched”.

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## [‘Children’s crisis’ in South Sudan must be addressed, says top UN official calling for real accountability](#)

Virginia Gamba, the United Nations Special Representative for [Children and Armed Conflict](#), on Friday called for much greater accountability and effort, to prevent grave violations against children across the world’s youngest nation, South Sudan.

Speaking in the capital Juba, at the end of four-day mission to the country, she said that in 2017, close to 1,400 children had been directly affected, with thousands more bearing the brunt of conflict. Ms. Gamba called on those in authority to take concrete action to end the violations and prevent any recurrence.

“The UN stands ready to support the development and implementation of such [concrete actions](#), including through the joint development of a comprehensive Action Plan covering all six grave violations and the provision of technical assistance for implementation as required,” she added.

The Security Council has officially cited “six grave violations”: Recruitment and use of children by parties to conflict; rape and other forms of sexual

violence; attacks on schools and hospitals; abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access.

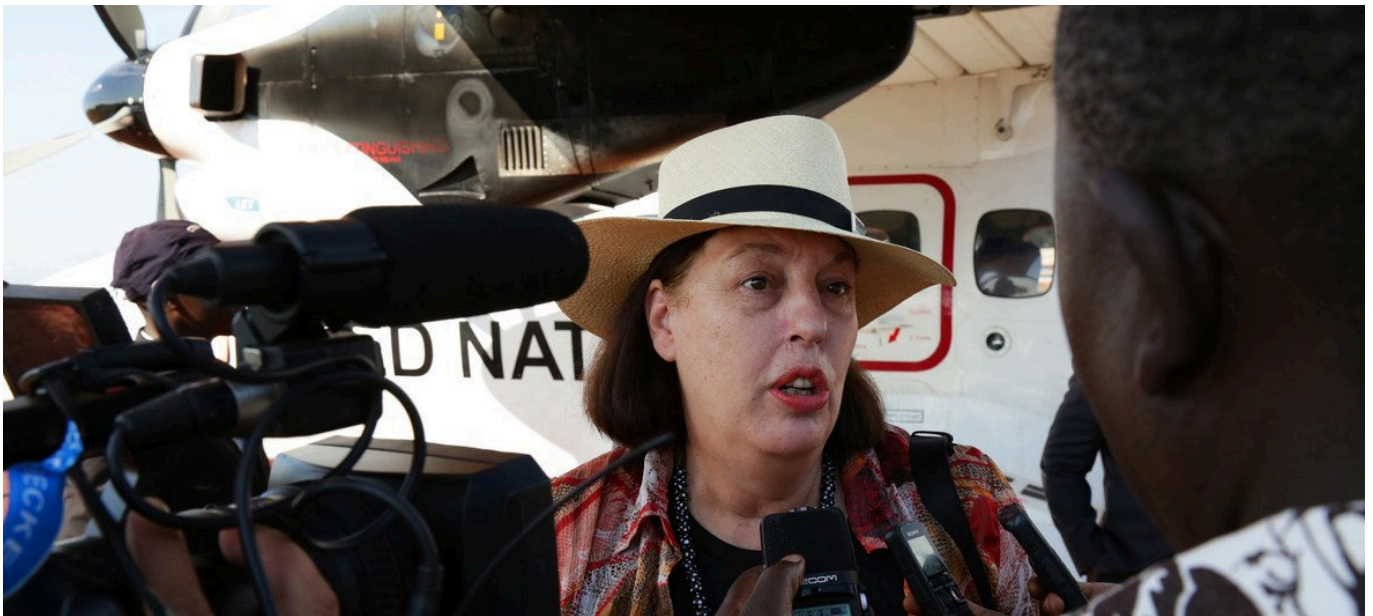
Marking her first visit to South Sudan since she took office in April last year, Ms. Gamba emphasized that half of the country's population is below age 18, declaring that "the crisis in South Sudan is a children's crisis."

"My discussions with the authorities lead me to believe that the time is ripe to work with the Government and revise the existing Action Plans (drawn up in 2012 and 2015) so as to develop a comprehensive plan, addressing all six grave violations endured by the children of South Sudan," she stressed.

Ms. Gamba also called for violation-prevention plans to be included in any future peacebuilding initiative across the country.

The Special Representative was encouraged by the large number of children released this year by armed groups, and called for redoubled efforts to release every child being held against their will.

She also emphasized the Government's role in providing long-term support to released children, including psychosocial support to victims and communities.



UNMISS

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, is interviewed by the media on her arrival in Yambio on 7 September, 2018.

"In Yambio, I met children recently released and was moved by their stories, which unfortunately are not unique," she recounted.

"It is crucial that each and every boy and girl released, benefits from reintegration programmes and the international community must take a strong step and support these children and their communities in a sustainable and comprehensive manner," she added.

Government troops, together with forces loyal to senior politicians, Riek Machar, and Taban Deng, were cited as UN-verified violating parties in the 2017 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict in South Sudan.

Ms. Gamba also encouraged the criminalization of all grave violations against children in the review of the penal code, the full implementation of the Child Act and the swift signature into law of the Civil Registry Act, offering her full support to these processes.

Ms. Gamba thanked key child protection partners, including the UN [Children's Fund](#), UNICEF, the [UN Mission in South Sudan \(UNMISS\)](#) and non-governmental organizations for their "admirable work" in helping to improve children's lives there.

"No time must be lost in protecting the children of South Sudan from being used and abused in, for and by armed conflict," she stressed. "They are not only the future of South Sudan, but also its present."

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## **WFP and UNICEF prepare for the worst in Syria's Idlib, as insecurity mars start of another school year**

Emergency food supplies for hundreds of thousands of people in Syria's Idlib are "ready for distribution" in the event of mass displacement caused by a full-scale military offensive on the last opposition-held region, the World Food Programme (WFP) said on Friday.

Spokesperson Herve Verhoosel told journalists in Geneva that the UN agency has enough ready-to-eat food for 850,000 people for one week, but that the "single greatest priority" must be to end the conflict.

"WFP appeals to all parties to protect civilians, respect humanitarian principles and allow for the safe delivery of food to families in need, no matter where they are," he said.

This food aid is either already inside Syria or can be brought in to the war-torn country from neighbouring Turkey. Additional supplies for displaced families can also be diverted from WFP's monthly deliveries to Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, according to the WFP spokesperson.

"Sufficient" nutrition supplies are also in place for 180,000 children and women for up to three months, Mr Verhoosel explained, before adding that the more than seven-year war had left 6.5 million Syrians food insecure and another four million are at risk of becoming so – twice as many as last year.

And amid preparations for the potential mass displacement, [UN Children's Fund](#) UNICEF warned that the conflict has caused an education crisis, affecting Syrian youngsters nationwide.

"Thousands of children in Idlib have been forced to leave their homes multiple times and are now living in overcrowded makeshift shelters, with food, water and medicine in dangerously short supply," said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director. "A fresh wave of violence could leave them trapped between fighting lines or caught in the crossfire, with potentially fatal consequences," she added.

Protect children. Give us safe, sustained and unconditional access to them. Allow and enable those who want to leave to do so safely and voluntarily – *UNICEF chief, Henrietta Fore*

Even as the new school year started on 1 September, many schools are still lacking vital supplies, almost 7,000 classrooms are in need of rehabilitation, and over 2,300 teaching positions are currently vacant.

Four million children throughout the country were due to go back to school, but two million cannot. As fighting intensifies, UNICEF is gravely concerned that potential airstrikes, ground military operations, and the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas will be disastrous for children, said Ms. Fore.

"Our request is simple: Protect children. Give us safe, sustained and unconditional access to them. Allow and enable those who want to leave to do so safely and voluntarily," she added.

For UNICEF, education can help overcome trauma, foster reconciliation and repair a community's social fabric. Despite these benefits, however, the task of getting children into school has been made harder owing to a shortfall of some 180,000 education workers nationwide.

In Idlib, where schools have been opening earlier than usual in an effort to provide more lesson time for some 400,000 children, "schooling is often suspended because of insecurity, shelling and violence", UNICEF spokesperson, Christophe Boulierac said, briefing reporters in Geneva on Friday.

Outside Syria, education is also a major problem in refugee host countries, he added. "While the percentage of out-of-school children in these neighbouring countries dropped from 41 per cent in 2016 to 35 per cent in 2017, there continue to be 700,000 children out of school in the neighbouring countries."

Faced with a severe funding shortfall amounting to \$517 million, the UN agency fears that host governments in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, "who have spared no effort" to accommodate Syrian children, could change policies that have kept schools open to refugees.

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## Security Council must work towards 'common approach' as investigations continue into alleged Syria chemical attack

Experts continue to gather information related to an alleged chemical weapons attack in Douma, Syria, earlier this year, the UN's nuclear disarmament chief told the Security Council on Thursday.

Izumi Nakamitsu updated ambassadors on these developments and the implementation of a five-year-old Council resolution calling for the destruction of the country's chemical weapons programme.

A team from UN partner the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)) has conducted on-site visits to Douma, located outside Syria's capital, Damascus, where 70 people reportedly died and hundreds more sought medical treatment after the suspected chemical attack on 7 April.

Ms. Nakamitsu said the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) published an interim report in July and Syria has provided comments .

"The FFM continues to collect and analyse information with regard to the alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in Douma and will provide a final report on its findings in due course," she said.

The UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs added that the team is also analyzing information from Syria in connection with four reported incidents which occurred during July and November 2017 and are currently under investigation by the national authorities.

However, she expressed concern over the lack of a means to attribute responsibility for chemical attacks.

OPCW member states had issued a decision last June calling for "arrangements" to identify perpetrators in the event the FFM determines chemical weapons use had occurred in Syria.

"The closure of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, which was mandated to identify the perpetrators of such acts, emboldened those who have sought to carry out further attacks," she said. "Anyone who uses chemical weapons must be identified and must be held to account."

Ms. Nakamitsu underscored the Council's preeminent role in maintaining global peace and security, adding that the OPCW decision did not lessen the need for

unity in the chamber.

“The Secretary-General has repeatedly expressed his willingness to assist the Council, and I reiterate his calls for the Council to work together to find a common approach to tackle this issue, which has become one of the most critical challenges to the maintenance of international peace and security,” she said.

The meeting was part of reporting in connection with a 2013 Security Council resolution on eliminating Syria’s chemical weapons stock.

Ms. Nakamitsu recalled that last month, the Council learned that the OPCW had verified the destruction of all 27 chemical weapons production facilities declared by the Syrian authorities, which she called “an important step towards the full implementation” of the resolution.

“The complete implementation of resolution 2118 is critical not only for finding a long-overdue end to the ongoing conflict in Syria but also for stability in the region in the longer-term,” she stated.

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## [Russian operatives carried out Salisbury chemical attack alleges UK; accusations part of ‘post-truth world’ asserts Moscow](#)

The United Kingdom and Russia traded a volley of words at the United Nations Security Council on Thursday, with the former laying out information which, it alleges, clearly places two Russian military intelligence operatives behind the deadly nerve-agent attack in the English city of Salisbury on 4 March.

The charges were categorically refuted by Russia, which instead accused the UK of trying to sow “anti-Russian hysteria.”

Today’s meeting, requested by the UK, follows evidence it released on its investigation into the Salisbury incident that left former Russian intelligence officer, Sergei Skripal, his daughter Yulia, and a local police officer, seriously injured. In July, two additional people living in the Salisbury area, were exposed to the chemical, and one of them died as a result.

The UK alleges that the deadly chemical is the Soviet-era nerve agent, Novichok. In April, the [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#)

(OPCW) agreed with that assessment.

UK Permanent Representative, Karen Pierce, told the Council that her country's investigation had identified two Russian nationals, who travelled under the names of Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov – both members of the Russian Military Intelligence Service (known as the GRU) – as those behind the nerve-agent attack and has issued international arrest warrants against them.

Ms. Pierce also said that the P5 – China, France, Russia, UK and the United States, the five permanent members of the Security Council – bear an important responsibility to uphold international law, especially against weapons of mass destruction.

“One P5 member has not upheld these important norms [...] and played dice with the lives of the people of Salisbury,” she said, noting that her country has no quarrel with Russia but that the UK will “respond robustly when our security is threatened and the lives of our citizens are endangered.”



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia of the Russian Federation addresses the Security Council meeting considering the letter from the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the United Nations.

### **No convincing evidence, says Russia**

Forcefully denying and rebutting the investigation's findings, Russia's Permanent Representative Vassily A. Nebenzia said that the UK had not provided any convincing evidence relating to the Salisbury incident, but instead only lies concerning double agents, cyberattacks and military-grade chemical agents.

“I am not going to go through the list of this unfounded and mendacious cocktail of facts,” he said.



Saying that Russia had offered to help the investigation, he said that "London has been refusing us this cooperation. London needs this story for just one purpose – to unleash a disgusting anti-Russian hysteria and to involve other countries in this hysteria," Mr. Nebenzia added.

Citing several inconsistencies in allegations levelled against his country, the Russian Permanent Representative said it remains impossible to know the real names of the suspects and therefore whether they are connected to the Russian Military Intelligence Service.

He claimed that the charges were yet another part of the "post-truth world" crafted by Western countries, he stressed, rejecting UK's sensational disclosures, as well as all unfounded allegations about his Government's involvement in the Salisbury events.

Several other Council members, including the United States and France, extended their support for the UK investigation and its findings, but the Bolivian Ambassador said that there needed to be restraint by Members, warning against "slinging allegations" in the chamber, and calling for the use of diplomatic channels to ensure cooperation in resolving the dispute over the Salisbury chemical weapons incidents.