

Protecting Syrians amidst the COVID-19 outbreak

Thank you very much. And the United Kingdom is grateful to USG Lowcock and to Special Envoy Pedersen for their briefings. Both delivered stark warnings about the situation in Syria and the terrible toll that COVID-19 might take on a country inundated by nearly 10 years of conflict. And the UK shares that deep concern about the potentially catastrophic impacts that COVID-19 might have.

Of course, this risk is compounded by the destruction of health facilities by Russia and the regime over the years. As someone mentioned earlier, nearly half of the facilities that were standing in 2011 have gone – an awful situation from which to face this crisis. We look forward to the Secretary-General's Board of Inquiry report on some of those actions.

We heard from Mr Lowcock about the desperate humanitarian situation in the north-west of Syria as the conflict enters its tenth year. 6.2 million internally displaced people are at particularly severe risk. Almost one million of those are in the north-west, living in, as we heard from Mr Lowcock, in appalling conditions and entirely reliant on cross-border aid. We also heard about how the most vulnerable are children and women, and it was particularly depressing to hear of the impact on the population. This is why the UK recently announced a further \$100 million for the scaled up humanitarian response, which brings our overall commitment to around \$200 million.

We recognise those humanitarians who are continuing to work across Syria in the face of not just now violence, intimidation, but also the new threat of COVID-19. We salute their courage and commitment.

I wanted to take this moment to ask Mr Lowcock: in addition to the ceasefire, for which he rightly called, what are the key steps that you need to help Syrians combat COVID-19 in Syria? It's clear that cross-line is not an effective substitute for cross-border aid; to tackle COVID-19, it's imperative that aid is delivered through the most effective means possible. This means cross-border in the north-west and the north-east, as recommended by the Secretary-General in his February report. The whole Council needs to reflect on the negative impact of the current arrangements, and in the life of the required response to COVID-19, we should both continue and expand humanitarian access when we review the arrangements.

Mr President, if this virus is to be fought effectively in Syria, the ceasefire in Idlib must be permanent. To be enduring and ensure that civilians are protected and to receive the humanitarian assistance they require, it must be monitored and verified by the United Nations. So we welcome and we support Mr Lowcock and Mr Pedersen's call for a complete, immediate nationwide ceasefire in Syria to enable all-out efforts to suppress the virus.

Russia, earlier in their statement, called on us to help all Syrians. What the Syrian people really need more than anything is this genuine and enduring nationwide ceasefire and an inclusive political process, as called for in Resolution 2254. Anything less from those who wield power and influence in Syria at the moment might well be condemning Syrians to a new health crisis and in turn create further global crisis.

Thank you, Mr President.