

Providing rapid humanitarian relief to the people of Syria

Thank you, Mr President, and we're grateful as ever to Mr Rajasingham and for his briefing today.

The humanitarian situation in Syria clearly remains bleak. And it's clear from the briefing that the decision by some members of this Council to veto on the 7th and the 10th of July resolutions that would have authorised sufficient humanitarian border crossings, crossings that the UN told us were desperately needed, that that decision has had the impact that we all feared. As OCHA has made clear, access has been reduced and this has resulted in more costly, higher risk, less timely and ultimately less effective humanitarian aid. And the people of Syria are suffering as a result.

It's also clear that the increasingly fragile north-west ceasefire and the worrying rise in Covid cases has left Syria once again on the brink of humanitarian disaster. The reports from inside Syria of increasing numbers of Covid deaths and that hospitals in Aleppo are running out of body bags are shocking.

The temporary postponement of the Constitutional Committee talks within Geneva due to members of all three delegations testing positive for Covid illustrates just how widespread the disease is and shows both the human cost and the impact on work to create a future Syria.

Yet we should not be surprised that this disaster is unfolding and that healthcare capacity within Syria is so greatly overstretched. The Syrian regime's brutal pursuit of the conflict has left the whole of Syria ill prepared for a pandemic.

It is disturbing that there are now only 57 fully functioning public hospitals in the whole of the country. To address the threat of Covid across Syria, it is essential that the World Health Organization has unfettered access and is able to deliver a coordinated response.

Amongst all of this, health care workers continue to put their lives at risk to help those who need it most in the face of bombs and violence. And the deadly virus, where official figures suggest they account for 5% of the confirmed number of Covid cases, these brave individuals continue to do all they can to save those most in need. The UN commends them and the UK commends them for the incredible work that they've done.

Now, as I said earlier, there can be no doubt that the impact of the decisions this Council has made to restrict cross-border aid has hampered the efforts of health and relief workers in the north-west. As the Secretary-General mentions in his report, this has resulted in the more costly, higher risk, less timely and ultimately less effective humanitarian response I referred to earlier.

In the north-east, we were shocked to hear of the eight children who died within just one week at Al Hol, largely due to the issues faced by the health facilities within the camp not being sufficient to help them. We understand that a significant part of the problem is a direct result to the failure of this Council, or rather those Council members who vetoed access, to approve that continued cross-border access through Yaroubiya.

The statistics are clear and stark: the UN submitted 251 requests to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct missions in June and July, of which only 138 were approved. 138 out of 251. Of these, UN agencies were only able to conduct 93 missions due to Covid-19 considerations. That's 37 percent of the UN's original ask. With Covid complicating the UN's ability to conduct missions, it is all the more vital that Damascus provides timely approvals.

For cross-line access to truly work, the UN must be given unfettered access and be allowed to deliver aid to those who need it, when they need it, without obstruction. This includes those in Rukhban Camp. The regime and Russia must allow UN convoys to enter and give medical aid to the 12,000 residents there.

Lastly, on rising food insecurity, 9.3 Million people are currently food insecure. And there has been a 261 percent increase in food prices from July 2019 as a result mainly of exchange rate volatility and the regional banking crisis and, of course, the knock-on effects of Covid-19. We are deeply concerned that the World Food Programme was only able to reach 4.4 million of those 9.3 million who needed help in July. This problem will be further exacerbated if we fail to respond to the threat of Covid properly. These people cannot just be left to starve.

In line with the Secretary-General's call, the UK urges parties to adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law. Rapid aid relief is desperately needed to prepare for and respond to the Covid crisis across Syria. If Damascus continues to prevent the UN from delivering adequate cross-line aid in a safe and timely manner, then the Council will undoubtedly need to revisit the issue as soon as possible.

Thank you, Mr President.