

Speech: Addressing the Political Situation in Syria

Thank you very much Mr President, and thank you to Staffan De Mistura and to John Ging for their briefings. And once again can I, through them, thank their teams on the ground who are doing good work in very difficult circumstances.

Mr President, as there was some positive news on the political front, and as we don't often have positive news on the political front, I'd like to kick off by talking about that. We are very grateful to you, Staffan, for your leadership in everything you've done to drive the political process forward. I think the recent meetings of the Astana group and the small group in Geneva underline the centrality and primacy of the UN Geneva process and I agree with the French Ambassador completely about the UN being the best placed to decide how to take a constitutional committee forward and to ensure that Syrians from the full range of political perspectives and civil society are represented on the constitutional committee. It was very welcome to hear what Staffan had to say about women's participation in particular and thank you for referring to the 30 percent minimum that we have put in our letter with our Peruvian and Swedish colleagues. When I was posted to the UN in Geneva, I actually met some of these Syrian women, and they are very impressive, they are energetic, they are secular in the main and they have a contribution to make. So that's extremely good to hear.

I think the committee does represent an important step forward in the political process, but as well as addressing fundamental constitutional questions, we would also believe, Mr President, that the process needs to make real progress towards creating a calm, safe and neutral environment. And this will ultimately be essential if there are ever to be free and fair elections. We believe that we should be building on emerging areas of common ground between key international actors, and for our part, we the United Kingdom remain committed to supporting the political process and a pragmatic political settlement that brings an end to the conflict and also ensures regional stability. But we do worry, Mr President, that things like the recent Law 10 cast some doubt on the Syrian authorities' willingness to engage meaningfully, and I would be very grateful to hear an assurance from the Syrian Ambassador when he speaks about the commitment to the political process.

Mr President, I said that the political process had made some positive steps forward recently and as the two previous speakers have pointed out, that cannot be said at all of the situation on the ground – what Staffan calls “battlefield developments” – and humanitarian access. We too remain deeply concerned by the escalating attacks by Syrian forces backed by Russian airstrikes against the de-escalation area in southwest Syria. I completely endorse what the American and French Representatives said about the risks to life inherent in that, but also the significant risk it poses to regional stability and security. The attacks are in flagrant violation of the de-

escalation agreement that was reached between Presidents Trump and Putin in November. This is disappointing for very many reasons, but not least because it casts doubt on the willingness of Russia to abide by her international commitments. And I join France and America in urging Russia to uphold the commitments under this agreement and ensure that the Syrian government abides by the ceasefire so that we can avert a further humanitarian crisis and so we can make a contribution to regional stability.

Turning to humanitarian access, we too welcome the UN Secretary-General's thorough report. And it is clear that the geographical space for cross-border operations has shrunk, particularly in the southeast of Idlib. And as areas have transitioned to the control of the government of Syria, if I have understood correctly, humanitarian access has decreased. Actually, the reverse ought to be true. The fact that the areas have come under the control of the Syrian authorities ought to make humanitarian access easier and more comprehensive, so again, I would be very grateful if the Syrian Ambassador and perhaps the Russian Ambassador can address some of this in their remarks because I would really like to understand why it is so difficult to get humanitarian access in. We talked about this in our last round of consultations and it still isn't clear to me why there is an erratic pattern of some UN personnel being allowed in but not others, some convoys being allowed through, but not others. So I really hope the Council can have some more information about that so we can make some proper decisions about how best we can contribute to the situation on the ground. And in that respect I would just like to recall that there are still 2 million Syrians living in hard to reach locations across the country, and "hard to reach" makes it sound like you've got to forge rivers or climb mountains. It's not that sort of "hard to reach," as far as I understand, it's an access point. So we're back to this point of needing to understand why access is quite so difficult.

I would also just like to echo what John said about the attacks on health facilities. These also are unjustifiable. They are outlawed under international law. We call on them to stop. It is not right that aid workers suffer in this way. It's not right that the people of Syria should be denied the opportunity to access medical facilities.

So in sum, Mr President, I think there are three things that the United Kingdom wishes to call for today. We would like to hear directly from the Syrians and the Russians about their sincerity in engaging in a political process. We would like to hear about the southern de-escalation zone and what can be done to restore the ceasefire and grant humanitarian access. And we would like to hear about the Syrian government's policies and practices that are creating obstacles to vulnerable displaced people receiving services, receiving food and aid, returning home, and rebuilding their lives.

Thank you Mr President.