

Speech: Preventing the targeting of civilians in Syria



Statement and right of reply by Ambassador Karen Pierce, UK Permanent Representative to the UN, at the Security Council briefing on Syria.

Thanks very much, Mr President. Thank you to the Assistant Secretary-General for her briefing.

Like others, Mr President we continue to be extremely concerned by the Syrian offensive in Northwest Syria. And I want to put on record how much we welcome Turkey's ongoing efforts to reinstate the ceasefire, de-escalate the violence and set up a working group on Idlib.

As the French representative said: 3 million lives are at risk and we don't want to see another Aleppo. One of the things that has worried us, Mr President, is that there was a declaration of a unilateral ceasefire by the pro-regime forces, but violence went on to increase the very next day and has increased further in recent days. So I join others, Mr President, in calling for the ceasefire to be respected; in calling on all parties to adhere to the Sochi ceasefire; to respect international law; and protect civilians and aid workers. And the international community won't let up on the pressure until these stipulations are met.

There's one report in the press this morning, Mr President, that doctors at a maternity hospital in Al Atareb in Aleppo, in the countryside around Aleppo, are reporting multiple attacks in the area and have started to evacuate the hospital. I wonder if OCHA could say whether they know this report to be correct or not and if the hospital's location has been included in the de-confliction mechanism.

One of the things we discussed last time, Mr President was that de-confliction mechanism. It's inexcusable that hospitals, schools and other infrastructure have been attacked despite OCHA's de-confliction mechanism. And I want to join other colleagues in calling on all parties to distinguish between civilians and civilian infrastructure and military targets.

In that connection, Mr President, I want to be clear that we condemn breaches of the ceasefire by the terrorist group HTS. All combatants in a conflict – non-state actors or state actors – are bound by IHL, so there's no excuse at all for these attacks on hospitals and other civilian targets. But I think it's very important that we stress that the fight against terrorists isn't carte blanche to conduct any attacks indiscriminately and it doesn't take place in a civilian free zone. So I join others again in calling for the principles of distinction, proportionality and necessity.

The other thing that has deeply concerned us, Mr President has been the reports of journalists in Idlib being targeted last week. The latest was a Sky News crew on 23rd of May. And I recall that in February a US District Court found the Syrian authorities responsible for killing Sunday Times' journalist Marie Colvin in 2012. So again, Mr President, here is another group of people that urgently requires the interest and protection of this Security Council.

I want to just say a word, if I may, about humanitarian access in Rukban and in Al-Hol. In Al-Hol we need to see UN access. We're very concerned also at the deteriorating situation in Rukban. The humanitarian conditions are dire and are a direct result of humanitarian access having been blocked. And as the US representative said, this means residents are forced to leave or face continued peril inside that camp. A third aid convoy must be allowed to reach the camp via the UN in Damascus. This is now becoming desperate.

Mr President, we asked on the last occasion – I did and a number of other colleagues did – we asked some questions of the Syrian authorities. We didn't get any answers. So I don't want to repeat those questions. I want to make it a bit easier. I'd like to ask today for four commitments from the Syrian representative on behalf of his Government:

Number one, Mr President is a commitment not to target journalists. Number two is a commitment to abide by IHL. Number three is a commitment to abide by UNSCRs on protection of civilians. And number four is a commitment to let in the third UN convoy into the camp in Rukban, as a number of us have called for. These commitments aren't difficult to give, Mr President. I think any government that truly had the safety and interests of its citizens at heart would be able to give them.

Finally, I'd like to close by echoing what the French representative said about the peace process. It goes much wider than just the Constitutional Committee. There cannot be any reconstruction assistance from our side until there is a sustainable and reversible political process. And I wanted also to end by repeating what the French and US representatives said about chemical weapons; we are ready to respond robustly if needed. And on the issue of have there been chemical attacks or not, the OPCW, Mr President, have fact-finding missions that can go in and ascertain the answer to that important question.

Thank you.

Thank you, Mr President. Sorry for taking the floor again. I'll be brief. But I've been quite alarmed by what we've just heard in the last closing interventions. So I'd like to be very clear about a number of things.

First of all, I'd like the record to show that I didn't get the commitments that I was seeking. I want to be very clear that the Sky News crew is not a legitimate target. Targeting journalists is not permissible. And I call again on the Syrian representative to pass that message back to his government and give us a commitment that they won't be targeted, unlike the late Marie Colvin.

The second thing I wanted to do, Mr President, was repudiate the slander against the White Helmets. I've said many times in this chamber that they're a humanitarian organisation doing good work to help the suffering civilians in Syria.

The third thing I wanted to do was to say that OCHA does not do the UK and US bidding in the manner in which the Syrian representative implied. OCHA, like all the UN, is impartial; it does the best job it can in terrible circumstances for the people of Syria. And it would be better if the Syrian authorities supported OCHA in that work rather than attack them.

And the last thing I wanted to say, Mr President was that there are more babies in Idlib than there are HTS fighters. Rather than talk about responding to HTS provocations, no one is taking issue with the question of whether to respond to HTS provocations. The question, Mr President is how they get responded to. How do Russia and the Syrian regime respond to HTS? They say they want to protect the 3 million civilians in Idlib, but massive aerial bombardment of civilian areas, bombing of hospitals, schools and civilian infrastructure is not necessary and it's certainly not proportionate. That's the absolutely critical thing about IHL. There needs to be a distinction between civilian and military targets and there needs to be proportionality. And that's what we're not seeing, Mr President. And that's why the Council is so worried about this.

Thank you.