

Syria's Constitutional Committee's launch and work must be accompanied by concrete actions

Mr President, the UK joins others in welcoming the announcement by the Secretary-General last week that agreement has finally been reached on the Constitutional Committee and, as Mr Pederson has said, that it will be convened in Geneva on the 30th of October. We are also grateful to you for setting out the modalities and also the complexion of the Constitutional Committee, which we also welcome. This progress is a true testament to your hard work over the last nine months, Mr Pederson, and, of course, that of your predecessor, Staffan de Mistura.

Last week, the UK hosted a ministerial meeting of the Syria small group at which all members welcomed the agreement. But we also recognised that this is only the first step towards the inclusive political settlement that Syria so desperately needs and which must ultimately include transitional arrangements and free and fair elections. As the Secretary-General himself stated: "This can and must be the beginning of the political path out of the tragedy towards a solution in line with Resolution 2254 that meets the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians". It will require serious engagement and commitment from all participants to succeed and we call on the regime in particular to demonstrate genuine commitment at the first meeting and beyond. But the problems of Syria were not caused by flaws in the existing constitution, but rather how that constitution was implemented and the regime's repressive policies. This is a critical first step, so the deeper roots of this conflict also need to be addressed. With this in mind, progress on the political process cannot be made in isolation. No one here is blind to this. We agree wholeheartedly with the Secretary-General that the Constitutional Committee's launch and work must be accompanied by concrete actions to build trust and confidence.

It is therefore crucial that all elements of 2254 be taken forward in tandem. Mr Pederson, you have our support in advancing these efforts, and we ask that all sides, and particularly the regime, engage fully with Mr Pederson's confidence building measures, especially in terms of greater humanitarian access, release of detainees and much needed information on the missing. It is also crucial that the constitutional committee represents the voices and views of the Syrian peoples freely expressed. Mr Pederson, you have done tremendous work to secure balance and we particularly welcome the strong civil society participation and that of women. But it is also critical that committee members are allowed to fulfill their duties free of fear and intimidation for themselves or their family members. If this process is to be truly free, legitimate, credible.

Mr President, today's briefing rightly focuses on the political process. But it would be remiss, as Mr Pederson and others have said, not to recall the dire situation in Idlib, an issue that has quite rightly dominated this

Council's work over the last few months. Over 1000 civilians have been killed, including 500 women and children, and over 676,000 people have been forced to leave their homes since the beginning of May.

And Idlib is the Syrian conflict in microcosm. The Syrian regime has targeted civilians through indiscriminate aerial bombardments, arbitrary detaining and torturing political opponents, and deliberately bombing civilians who seek shelter in schools and hospitals. We cannot allow impunity for these crimes or any of the crimes committed in the Syrian conflict. So it is a matter of utmost importance the people of Idlib and throughout Syria are allowed to live free of fear. In this respect we welcome the most recent ceasefire that has largely held since the 31st of August. However, we note its fragility, particularly given the continued reports of regime shelling. To our great disappointment, Russia and China vetoed the UN Security Council Resolution at the last humanitarian session. It is now morally incumbent on them and on Damascus to ensure that the ceasefire in Idlib continues and that international humanitarian law is fully respected. And perhaps when the Representative of Syria speaks shortly, he might tell this chamber what they are doing to ensure that the ceasefire continues to hold and to protect civilians on the ground. And given our Turkish colleague present today, the UK would like to state again that we welcome Turkey's ongoing efforts to end the violence in Idlib and to work to protect the ceasefire.

Mr President, the UK has so far given over \$3 billion in response to the crisis in Syria, which is our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. We will continue to do what we can to support those in need. With more than 400,000 Syrian lives lost and nearly 12 million people in continued dire need of humanitarian support, a political settlement cannot come soon enough.

So this morning, the UK joins others in welcoming your briefing, Mr Pedersen, on the plans and prospects for the Constitutional Committee. We support your efforts and we wish you every success in your continuing work. And we call on all members of this assembled council, all those in Syria and all those across the region to support your work.

Thank you, Mr President.