

UN relief chief urges Security Council to back aid delivery, more funding for millions of Syrians hit by harsh weather

“Millions are living under tents or tarpaulins or in damaged buildings with no power or heating. There are severe shortages of all the basics – from blankets to baby milk to bandages,” [Mark Lowcock](#) told the Security Council, adding that the harsh weather is destroying the makeshift shelters and forcing tens of thousands more people to move.

He said that since late last year, the UN and its partners had been raising funds to support vulnerable Syrians with vital winter items, including plastic sheeting to reinforce shelters, stoves and heating fuel, as well as blankets, jackets and winter clothes.

“We have raised \$81 million so far, which has allowed us to help 1.2 million people. Continued support is critical to ensuring that all those in need can be reached,” he said.

Turning to war-battered Idlib, he said weather has been difficult for the people there, where the risk of military escalation continues to loom. Over the second half of last year he had frequently highlighted the growing concerns of the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), which he heads up, about the plight of three million people in Idlib and neighboring areas in north-west Syria, from which civilians simply have nowhere else to flee, should there be a full-scale military incursion into the area.

While a September agreement between Russia and Turkey was followed by a significant decrease in ground fighting and airstrikes, January saw an increase in fighting between non-State armed groups, placing civilians at risk and resulting in injury and death.

“Today I reiterate the importance of sustaining the Russia-Turkey agreement and I remind you that a large-scale military operation in Idlib would have catastrophic humanitarian implications,” he said of the deal brokered by the two countries to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Idlib.



UN Photo/Manuel Elias

Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, briefs the Security Council on Syria (file).

Further, Mr. Lowcock recalled that last month, the Council extended the authorization for the cross-border relief operation into Idlib. As hundreds of thousands of people are reached each month with lifesaving assistance through our cross-border operations, he said: "We must continue to be able to provide food, medicine, tents, critical winter supplies and other help."

Meanwhile, he said some 42,000 people remain stranded in Rukban along the Syria-Jordan border. Conditions in the informal settlement have continued to deteriorate since the last humanitarian convoy to the area, from 3 to 8 November. Eight infants reportedly died there since last month.

"Again, the cold is making the situation even worse. So, it is critical that the parties support a second convoy to Rukban, said Mr. Lowcock, explaining that the UN has been engaged on multiple fronts to ensure that can happen, including by addressing concerns expressed by Russia and the Syrian Government about the security of the convoy and monitoring arrangements for aid distribution.

"On 27 January, we received verbal approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Damascus for the convoy to proceed. Security guarantees have also been received from the Russian Federation and from International Coalition Forces," he told Council members, and planning was now underway for loading of the trucks to begin before the end of the week, and for them to set off by 5 February.

"We call on all parties to ensure that this goes ahead without any further delay," he stated.

UN relief chief's specific asks on Syria for the Security Council

- First, support from all Member States to ensure that the parties respect and protect civilians, with particular attention to the north-west and north-east of the country.
- Second, the humanitarian convoy to Rukban must be allowed to proceed as planned.
- Third, for all parties to facilitate safe, regular and sustained humanitarian access, so we can carry out additional needs assessments, deliver to all areas where needs are most severe and monitor the impact of our interventions.
- And fourth, financing for the immediate life-saving needs in Syria, to help people through the bitter winter, but also to ensure the humanitarian programmes in OCHA's 2019 [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) are well-funded. [A conference in Brussels](#) on 13-14 March will be a critical marker in this regard.