

Statement delivered by the Permanent Representative of Belgium to the United Nations,
Ambassador Marc Pecsteen, on behalf of Humanitarian co-penholders of the Syria
humanitarian file

–Germany, Kuwait and Belgium –

at the UN Security Council Briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria

26 February 2019, New York

Mr President,

I will present this statement on behalf of the co-penholders on the Syria humanitarian file, Kuwait, Germany and Belgium. I would like to start by thanking Reena Ghelani, Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division of OCHA, for her valuable briefing. I would also like to thank through her all the **humanitarian and medical personnel** throughout Syria for their courage and their tireless efforts to alleviate the human suffering in Syria. They have been there from the start of the conflict, 8 years ago and continue to provide life-saving assistance, including most recently, through the humanitarian convoy to more than 40,000 IDPs at the **Rukban** camp.

Mr President,

The situation for IDPs at the Rukban camp further exacerbated over the winter-months. This has put particular strain on the vulnerable population of the camp, the vast majority women and children. After months of inexcusable delays, in the beginning of February, the UN finally received the green light to deploy – together with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent -- a joint inter-agency convoy consisting of 133 trucks. Humanitarian workers handed out much-needed food, sanitation and hygiene supplies and provided winterization materials. They also conducted a vaccination campaign for some 7000 children. Finally, they undertook an intentions survey of the inhabitants of the camp in order to explore a durable solution to the dire humanitarian situation in Rukban. According to the result of this survey, an overwhelming majority of the inhabitants wish to leave the camp and many of them want to return to their area of origin – though stating security and safety concerns as well as the lack of civil documentation and concerns about access to their property/housing.

Indeed, while this convoy was a much-needed step, and regular, sustained humanitarian access by the UN to those in Rukban remains a necessity in the short term, a more durable solution is needed, through collective efforts and arrangements in full coordination with the UN. These relocation efforts must however uphold key principles: all returns or relocations must be voluntary, safe, dignified, well-informed and in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law and key protection standards. People must be able to relocate to a place of their choosing. UN humanitarian staff must be granted access to the population prior to any departure, during movement and after the relocation, in order to provide protection support, assess needs and deliver assistance. Family unity needs to be safeguarded and children, women, the elderly and people with special needs must be afforded special protection during all phases of the relocation. Regular, free and unfettered access of UNHCHR to returnees is key to finding and successfully implementing durable solutions for IDPs and voluntary returnees.

Mr. President, we continue to urge all parties to grant regular, safe, sustained and unconditional humanitarian **access** across Syria. Parties to the conflict must allow the humanitarian community to provide protection and assistance based on needs including gender-specific needs, and in an impartial and non-discriminatory manner. Far too often, constraints of bureaucratic or security nature, by all parties, remain. Far too often, the UN is not able to reach people in need. This considerably affects UN access to areas with high needs, particularly during the current winter months.

Mr. President,

We are closely following the situation in the **North** of Syria, specifically in the **Idlib** Governate, where 3 million civilians are located, half of them IDPs. After a period of relative calm, the recent surge of violent incidents, has resulted in numerous civilian casualties. The **Russian-Turkish ceasefire Memorandum of Understanding** has been instrumental in preventing the catastrophic consequences that would be caused by any military offensive. We reiterate our call on all parties to continue to engage in the full implementation of the agreement, as the situation in Idlib remains particularly fragile. We also call for a nationwide cessation of hostilities, as stipulated in resolution 2401. Furthermore, we also call on all parties to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, as laid out by international humanitarian and international human rights law, as a matter of priority. We strongly condemn all attacks against civilian infrastructure, in particular against schools and hospitals, as well as indiscriminatory attacks on densely populated areas.

Following weeks of intense fighting in the area of **Deir-ez-Zor**, fighting is subsiding. Over the last weeks, some 25 000 people, especially the most vulnerable: women, children and elderly, fled the area of Hajin to relocate to the Al Hole Camp. Along the 300 km long route, they further encountered harsh conditions: cold temperatures, and lack of food, water, shelter and health services and serious protection concerns. We deplore the loss of lives amongst those making this journey northwards, in particular the many new-borns and young children . The situation at the Al Hole camp is dire, the camp is overcrowded and the capacity has been overstretched by the numerous new arrivals pushing the number of people at the camp to almost 47000. We welcome the installation of a transit center to provide urgently needed assistance to IDPs, halfway between Haijn and Al Hole. We support all efforts to allow UN humanitarian access in order to alleviate the human suffering.

Mr. President,

Thousands of Syrian men, women, and children continue to be arbitrarily arrested and detained. We take note of the recent release of a number of detainees and prisoners. However, more needs to be done and we call on all actors to continue work on this important issue, towards concrete, tangible progress. We condemn the reported use of torture and sexual violence against these men, women and children. Perpetrators are to be held accountable.

The conflict in Syria is soon entering its 8th year. The humanitarian needs, both inside the country and in the region, remain particularly high. Inside Syria, nearly 12 million people of which almost half are children, are still in need of humanitarian assistance; ranging from food provision and medical treatment, WASH, protection and psycho-social support services, child protection, protection of gender-based violence and mine action. UN

humanitarian agencies and partners continue to reach more than 3 million people per month, both from inside Syria and through the cross-border mechanism, as mandated by the Security Council. 700 000 people amongst them, most of them displaced, are in acute need, and receive lifesaving assistance.

The **Brussels III conference “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region”**, taking place in Brussels mid-March, will allow us to renew our focus on the plight of the population affected by the Syrian conflict as well as Syrian refugees in the region and renew our commitment and concrete support to their humanitarian needs. It will offer a forum to discuss the most critical humanitarian issues, such as access, the provision of life-saving aid and protection, as well as approaches to livelihoods and resilience. It will also seek new financial pledges to address the needs in Syria and the region. We call on all potential donors to contribute to alleviate these needs.

Mr. President,

The people of Syria deserve to live in peace. Only peace grounded in strong, inclusive foundations can break the cycle of violence.

Therefore, we need to advance the political process through a genuine and inclusive political settlement in accordance with **resolution 2254**, and the 2012 Geneva Communique and other relevant Security Council resolutions. Also, we continue to advocate for accountability for all those responsible for breaches of international law, in particular international humanitarian law and human rights law. To this end, the co-penholders will continue to support the important role of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM). Without an inclusive political solution in accordance with resolution 2254, and without accountability, no sustainable peace is possible.

Let me finish, Mr. President, by expressing our full support to Special Envoy Pedersen in his engagement to implement resolution 2254. We look forward to his first briefing to the Council this Thursday.