

Thank you Mr. President,

At the outset, I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his valuable briefing. I would also like to pay tribute to all humanitarian and medical personnel for their efforts in the field to alleviate the human suffering in Syria under very difficult and often dangerous conditions, as the high number of injured and killed aid workers shows. I will present this statement on behalf of the co-penholders of the Syrian humanitarian file, Belgium, Germany and Kuwait.

Mr. President,

We meet today at the first Security Council meeting in 2019 on the humanitarian situation in Syria, and after turning the page on 2018, which sadly witnessed a continuation of the dire humanitarian situation in Syria. It is appropriate here to take a moment to review the situation. According to UN statistics, there are almost 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, more than 5 million of whom are children. There are more than 5.6 million registered refugees in neighboring countries, including 2.5 million children. More than 1 million people live in hard – to – reach areas. Behind these alarming numbers are countless stories of human suffering of Syrian civilians – children, women and the elderly – who have become victim to one of the most egregious conflicts of our times. As this human suffering persists, the international community, and the parties involved in the conflict in particular, must work together to improve the humanitarian situation and access in Syria in order to make a tangible difference for civilians on the ground.

Mr. President,

As we have entered a new year, serious humanitarian challenges on the ground remain:

There are still challenges, obstacles and constraints – either bureaucratic, security or otherwise – that limit the sustainable humanitarian access to those in need. We call upon all parties to continue to facilitate the safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access to all parts of Syria. We emphasize the need for such assistance to reach those in need in an impartial, non-discriminatory manner, in accordance with humanitarian principles and on a needs-based basis. Syria and other neighboring countries are witnessing a cold winter. This has exacerbated the living conditions of many in need, which has led to the deaths of a number of civilians, including children, over the past few weeks. UNICEF issued a statement on January 15, a statement that must move our conscience and humanity. I quote: “The lives of babies continue to be cut short by

health conditions that are preventable or treatable. There are no excuses for this in the 21st century. This tragic manmade loss of life must end now .. History will judge us for these entirely avoidable deaths.”

Mr. President, it is necessary to address the continued dramatic suffering of 42,000 people in Rukban camp who are desperately awaiting the arrival of humanitarian assistance. We had hoped that the last convoy that arrived to the camp last November would pave the way for sustainable humanitarian access to the camp, but this did not happen yet. This lack of access is unacceptable. We urge all parties concerned to cooperate in order to enable sustainable, unimpeded and safe access to Rukban and for the required facilitation letters to be granted swiftly.

Protection of civilians from conflict, death and human rights violations remains one of the biggest challenges in the Syrian crisis since its outbreak in 2011. We are closely following the developments in northern Syria and reiterate that the Russian-Turkish ceasefire Memorandum of Understanding in Idlib, home to nearly 3 million people, half of them IDPs, has to be sustained. A ceasefire, not only in Idlib, but nation-wide, would enable the flow of humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of the wounded and sick, in accordance with international law and as provided for in resolution 2401. The situation in Idlib is fragile and we all recall the warning by Under-Secretary-General Lowcock that a military operation in Idlib could lead to the worst humanitarian disaster of the 21st century.

Fighting in different areas of Syria in recent weeks, including in Deir al-Zour, has led to dozens of civilian casualties. Persons displaced because of armed clashes face serious dangers, such as being killed or hurt by explosives, being without shelter, food or water for prolonged periods in cold weather. The escalation in violence has also destroyed civilian infrastructure. We reaffirm that all parties must take all measures to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. We also call on the parties to the conflict to respect Security Council resolutions pertaining to civilian structures, in particular resolution 2286 on the protection of hospitals and health facilities in conflict.

Mr. President, we strongly condemn the arbitrary detention and torture of individuals in Syria, notably in prisons and detention facilities, as well as the frequent kidnappings, abductions, hostage-taking and forced disappearances and demand the immediate end of these practices and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons starting with women and children, as well as sick, wounded, persons with disabilities and elderly persons and humanitarian personnel and journalists. The abduction and killing of a humanitarian worker in Idlib earlier this year was a shameful act, and we condemn it in the strongest

terms. This is a reminder to all of us of the daily risks that humanitarian workers face as they help others. Parties to the conflict have an obligation not only to protect the lives of humanitarian workers, but also to ensure that they can work unhindered and free of fear.

There should be accountability for those who have committed violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. We stand firm on our commitment to fight impunity. In this context, we renew our support to the work of the IIM.

With regards to refugees, we would like to reiterate that any return of Syrian refugees to their homes must be a safe, voluntary and dignified return. There are clearly defined conditions for this that have to be met, as set out in UNHCR's returns thresholds. Measures such as arbitrary detention, and expropriation, to name but a few, contravene any efforts that would allow Syrians to return. We also reject attempts to make demographic changes in Syria.

Mr. President, we express our full support to the Special Envoy, Mr. Geir Pedersen. We must work with him to advance the political process, which is the only way to reach a sustainable solution to the crisis and to avoid further human suffering in Syria, through a political settlement in accordance with resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communique of 2012.

In conclusion, Mr. President, Belgium, Germany and Kuwait, as co-penholders and significant donors to the humanitarian response to Syria, will continue to spare no effort to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people and to ensure that the Security Council upholds its responsibilities in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and relevant Security Council resolutions.

Thank you Mr. President.