

AS DELIVERED

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
23 March 2023

Mr President, (Mozambique, Mr. Pedro Comissário Afonso)

1. I have just returned to Geneva from Amman where I briefed and engaged senior officials from Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union and the League of Arab States, focusing on the way forward in the aftermath of last month's tragic earthquakes.
2. I had already benefited from in-depth discussions with Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry and League of Arab States Secretary General Aboul Gheit in Cairo, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan in Riyadh, and Jordanian Foreign Minister Safadi in Amman. I welcome the attention of the region on the crisis in Syria following the earthquakes.
3. Meanwhile, Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi visited Latakia, Jableh and Damascus in Syria in recent days. She met Syrian Foreign Minister Mekdad and other senior Government officials in Damascus and on the ground in areas affected by the earthquakes.

Mr. President,

4. Our messages have been the same with all we have engaged: let me share them with you today.
5. First, it is absolutely vital to continue to provide resources to support the emergency response to the earthquakes - while also of course continuing to support the broader humanitarian response – both in Syria and in the neighboring countries – to the immense suffering arising from the conflict. I welcome the pledges made for the Syrian earthquake response at the recent international donors conference held in Brussels and urge early disbursement of pledges. I continue to coordinate closely with my senior UN colleagues, and I welcome the recent engagements in Damascus of High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths. My OCHA colleague, Tareq Talahma, will brief you more in detail on the humanitarian situation.
6. Second, we need a sustained calm on the ground, especially in areas affected by the earthquakes. The week after the earthquakes saw signs of such calm emerging, with a *relative* lull in violence in most quarters. For brief moments, the unimaginable became real – parties on each side of the front-line largely refraining from hostilities. Since then, we have seen a creeping rise in incidents: regular exchanges of shelling and rocket fire across front-lines in the northwest and northeast; some crossline raids by listed terrorist group HTS; US claims of rocket attacks on its troops in Deir-ez-Zor; an incident in Afrin that saw some armed opposition fighters fire on civilians; further security incidents in the southwest; ISIL

attacks; and further airstrikes attributed to Israel, including on Aleppo International Airport, which resulted in material damage and airport closure that impacted on humanitarian operations.

Mr. President,

7. My concern is not just about the harm such violence causes to civilians. We have seen in the past that small incidents can bring about a broader escalation. This must be avoided at all costs.
8. I have therefore been working with key stakeholders towards a sustained calm, especially starting in the areas affected by the earthquake in north-west Syria. This is a matter I have raised widely, including in Damascus and with Iran, Türkiye, the Russian Federation and United States and all other members of the Ceasefire Task Force which meets in Geneva. I appreciate the positive responses of key Task Force members to this appeal and hope that they can exert their influence to tamp down on violence. Sustained calm will be an essential ingredient of donor confidence in supporting genuine rehabilitation in areas affected by the earthquakes.
9. Third, in the same way that we have seen moves from different sides in the humanitarian sphere, this logic can and must be applied to address post-earthquake rehabilitation and broader political challenges. We have seen two crossing points, long closed, reopened, and new openings on sanctions. This shows that different sides can make constructive moves. In sense, from all the discussions I have had, that there *is* an opportunity to move forward with additional moves on all sides beyond the immediate emergency.
10. In the effort to advance this discussion, we must engage the Syrian parties on how they can create an enabling environment for earthquake rehabilitation, and outside actors on how they can provide enhanced resources and remove any hindrances, including any arising from sanctions. For example, the security situation, civilian protection, housing land and property, civil documentation – as well as livelihoods, basic services, energy infrastructure – these are all vital issues related to earthquake rehabilitation. They and other issues – take conscription, for instance, or detention – are also of vital importance to Syrian civilians in general, including for refugees and IDPs. And there are other issues too that have featured in discussions to date. These can all be the subject of constructive work. I believe concrete, verifiable steps implemented mutually and reciprocally from all sides are doable. I am convinced that such steps could enable us to move forward incrementally into post-earthquake rehabilitation and, in the process, on political confidence building on issues in Security Council resolution 2254.
11. Let me note that I continue to prioritize the file of the detained, the abducted and the missing, including engaging their families. Earlier this month, I met representatives of the Truth and Justice Charter, who relayed to me how the earthquake had further compounded their angst of not knowing the fate or whereabouts of their beloved ones, or if they had been impacted by the earthquakes. Meanwhile, my Deputy continued to press this issue with interlocutors in Damascus. I also take this opportunity to reiterate the Secretary-General's call for the

General Assembly to consider establishing a new international body to clarify the fate and whereabouts of the missing.

Mr. President,

12. My fourth point: we must all understand that a degree of cooperation across divides is essential if the way forward is to be found. The Syrian Government, the Syrian Opposition, the Western players, the Arab players, the Astana players, other interested parties – none alone can move this process forward. Individual approaches will not make the kind of qualitative difference that a coordinated approach could make. But if all are prepared to put practical points on the table, and if players coordinate and work together, I am more convinced than ever that it is possible and essential to move forward - step for step and step by step.
13. In that spirit, I look forward to further engagement with the Government of Syria and the Syrian Negotiations Commission in the period ahead, and to further engagement in the region and beyond. The good offices of the United Nations will need the strong support of all outside actors in this next phase. I also believe there is a distinct and important role that can be played by key regional players and look forward to continuing to closely coordinate with them and all concerned.
14. As part of an inclusive approach, I will continue to engage with a wide range of Syrians through the Civil Society Support Room and through the Women's Advisory Board, which convened in The Hague two weeks ago. Their insights continue to inform our approach.

Mr. President,

15. I am concerned that the Constitutional Committee has now not met for ten months. This sends a troubling message: that Syrians' ability to search for a comprehensive solution is held hostage to issues unrelated to their country. The Committee must resume its work in Geneva in a spirit of compromise, substance and at pace.

Mr. President,

16. The situation today is so unprecedented that it calls for leadership, bold ideas and a cooperative spirit. A political solution is the only way forward for Syria. We may not be able to reach that in one step – but I believe we can progress towards it gradually. The status quo is unacceptable. The renewed diplomatic attention on Syria, including in the region, and the shared suffering of all Syrians in the aftermath of the earthquakes, create new obligations and indeed opportunities. If all parties engage, I believe we can move forward.

Mr. President,

17. Last week we passed the awful milestone of twelve years since the start of this conflict. A Syrian-owned, Syrian-led, UN-facilitated political process supported by the international community is more essential than ever. A political solution must restore Syria's sovereignty,

independence, unity and territorial integrity, and meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. We must move down this path, even if in stages. I am ready to use my good offices, develop proposals, and convene the necessary players in an effort to help facilitate the way forward, consistent with my mandate in Security Council resolution 2254.

Thank you, Mr. President.