

Syria: Briefing on Humanitarian Situation

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What's In Blue

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On Monday (22 August), OCHA head Stephen O'Brien will brief the Security Council on the most recent report on the humanitarian situation in Syria (S/2016/714). Most Council members anticipate that the briefing and the following consultations will focus on Aleppo as well as the push for a 48-hour pause to the fighting.

Council members will want O'Brien's assessment of the humanitarian situation in Aleppo, though few expect him to convey any significant progress since his last briefing on 9 August. At that time, rebel-held eastern Aleppo had been encircled for more than a month after government forces and allied militias—backed by Russian air strikes—took control of Castello Road, severing the opposition's final supply route into eastern Aleppo. OCHA has reported that this development left an estimated 250,000 to 275,000 civilians “closer to the line of fire and at risk of besiegement” and has repeatedly called for a weekly 48-hour pause in fighting to allow humanitarian aid to reach Aleppo. O'Brien is expected to inform Council members that the UN has pre-positioned supplies and stands ready to deliver aid into Aleppo if all parties, particularly the Syrian government, are able to provide security guarantees.

Regarding security guarantees for humanitarian aid delivery, Council members will want an update from O'Brien on the status of the discussions between Russia and the UN on Russia's unilateral 28 July proposal to open “humanitarian corridors” for civilians and rebels to leave Aleppo. The High Negotiations Committee (HNC), the Riyadh-based opposition umbrella group, condemned Russia's proposal for humanitarian corridors, characterising it as a euphemism for forced displacement. The same day that Russia announced its initiative for humanitarian corridors, O'Brien released a statement noting he was aware of the proposal and the critical need for the security of any such corridors to be guaranteed by all parties. The statement said that people should be able to use such corridors voluntarily, and that no one should be forced to flee by any specific route or to any particular location. It reiterated that international humanitarian law required humanitarian access for people to leave and for aid to come in.

On 3 August, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura transmitted to Russia the UN position paper that outlined the conditions that needed to be met for UN humanitarian agencies to possibly be involved with “humanitarian corridors” in Aleppo. It seems the letter included many of the points that OCHA had already publicly announced regarding the need to ensure the humanitarian nature of such corridors, as well as detailing operational and protection considerations that need to be present for the UN to be willing to engage, particularly regarding detention. Issues around detention are of importance to many Council members who have not forgotten the incident from early 2014 when, during a UN-monitored evacuation from Homs, men and boys were separated from their families

and detained by the government. Subsequently, international monitors had a great deal of difficulty in ascertaining the whereabouts of these men and boys. It seems Russia responded on 15 August that the UN position paper could be used as a basis for further discussion but that some elements required further work—such as security screening of evacuees.

These differences have left many Council members feeling that the prospects of establishing a humanitarian corridor for Aleppo, under UN auspices, are not imminent and are very much dependent on first getting a 48-hour pause in the fighting, which in turn hinges on the outcome of bilateral negotiations between Russia and the US. It seems the ambitious talks between Russia and the US about counter-terrorism cooperation in Syria in exchange for a renewed nationwide cessation of hostilities and a formula for a political transition have been whittled down to talks focused on an Aleppo ceasefire.

Some Council members were hoping that Russia and the US, as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), would be able to make progress on humanitarian access at the meeting of the ISSG humanitarian task-force in Geneva on 18 August. However, less than eight minutes after it started de Mistura suspended the meeting in light of escalating fighting in Aleppo and the lack of humanitarian access. In comments to the press, he again reiterated the UN's call for a 48-hour pause. On Monday, O'Brien is expected to stress the need for a pause in the fighting and an agreement from the ISSG co-chairs on the modalities of such a pause. While Russia announced its support for 48-hour ceasefires on Thursday (18 August), at press time Russia and the US had not reached an agreement.

O'Brien first asked the Council to support the UN's call for a 48-hour pause during a 25 July briefing. In press comments following that meeting, Japan, as president of the Council, said that there was overwhelming support among Council members for a weekly 48-hour humanitarian pause in the fighting in Aleppo. However, Council members were unable to issue a statement to this effect as Russia, which has played a direct role in supporting the government offensive, was unable to agree. There was another attempt to respond to the crisis in Aleppo following O'Brien's 9 August briefing. The UK circulated a draft press statement expressing support for "recurring substantial pauses in fighting to ensure sustained humanitarian deliveries ... to Aleppo can commence safely and effectively" and stressing that "any humanitarian initiative must operate according to humanitarian principles and be led by impartial humanitarian actors". It seems over three days of negotiations Russia insisted on language that the humanitarian situation had deteriorated due to terrorist activity, and that impartial humanitarian actors should act in close cooperation with the Syrian government. In the end consensus could not be reached and the statement was not issued.

Against this grim backdrop, several Council members believe that the chances of gaining humanitarian access to Aleppo, let alone resuming the intra-Syrian political talks, are dim in the absence of a major breakthrough between Russia and the US.

Looking ahead, Council members will hold consultations on the Syrian chemical weapons track on 30 August to discuss the monthly 2118 implementation report (S/2016/678). This document covers the OPCW Director-General's report that describes discrepancies in Syria's declared chemical weapons arsenal that have not been resolved despite repeated attempts over two years by the OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team to seek clarification from the Syrian government. These discrepancies and lack of sufficient cooperation from Syria have led the OPCW to conclude this past July that Syria's declaration cannot be considered accurate and complete. The Director-General's report also includes information that samples taken at several Syrian facilities indicated undeclared chemical weapons activities at multiple locations. Council members will also consider the final report of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) that is due late next week. This report is expected to determine responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in the nine cases the JIM is investigating: eight related to allegations of the government's use of chemical weapons and one related to an alleged use of chemical weapons by ISIL.

It is expected that these reports will initiate discussion among Council members about whether Syria is in breach of resolutions 2118, 2209 and 2235, and, if so, what course of action the Council should pursue given that all three resolutions threatened "further measures", commonly believed to be an implicit threat of sanctions. Meanwhile, the JIM's mandate expires in September and it is unclear whether it will be renewed.

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