Mr. President, distinguished Council Members.

The humanitarian situation in Syria has seen some significant changes since I briefed you in this chamber last month. My briefing today will focus on three operational areas: first, the deeply concerning and rapidly unfolding situation in north-eastern Syria; second, the continuing crisis in north-western Syria; and third, an update on Rukban. I will also give an outlook for the coming weeks.

Mr. President,

The Secretary-General has expressed his grave concerns about the escalation of the conflict in the northeast and emphasized that any military operation must fully respect international law, including the UN Charter and international humanitarian law. Civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected. Safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access must be allowed so that the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations can carry out their critical work.

Since the beginning of military operation by the Turkish Armed Forces and allied non-state armed groups in north-east Syria earlier this month, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has received concerning reports of civilian casualties and damage to critical civilian infrastructure. The military operation has severely impacted the humanitarian situation. The UN has received assurances from the Government of Turkey that every effort is being made to ensure the protection of civilians and of the infrastructure they rely on.

The hostilities have triggered large population movements. In the last two weeks, almost 180,000 people, including close to 80,000 children, have fled south from the border areas between Turkey and Syria. People must be allowed to seek safety and move freely. Most are sheltering with friends and family, others are in displacement camps or collective shelters. As fighting subsided in some areas in recent days, some of those displaced have started to return. More than 10,000 people have fled to Iraq since the start of military operations in the northeast.

The UN remains deeply concerned about the prospects of further hostilities along the Turkish - Syrian border and the impact on civilians, including further displacement.
Mr. President,

The latest surge in hostilities in north-east Syria compounds an already dire humanitarian situation. Of the 3 million people in the northeast, 1.8 million were already in need of some form of humanitarian assistance even before recent developments; about 710,000 were displaced. Prior to the escalation, the United Nations and its partners were reaching 1.25 million people on average every month with life-saving assistance, such as food, shelter, water, sanitation, hygiene and health care, on average every month.

Humanitarian actors continue to deliver despite facing serious challenges on the ground, including hostilities and an unpredictable security environment. Many organizations working cross-border from Iraq have had to evacuate or relocate international staff. Some have had to temporarily limit or suspend operations due to the deteriorating security situation and concerns about access because of new parties gaining control of the areas where they operate. Organizations operating cross-border from Iraq nevertheless continue to provide humanitarian assistance, including trauma care, support to health services and sustaining water supplies. While national staff continue to work tirelessly to assist those in need, their capacity is stretched.

To meet immediate needs, the United Nations has since 9 October provided food to more than 286,000 people across Al-Hassakeh and Ar-Raqqqa governorates, as well as 10 tons of medicine to Qamishli national hospital. Winter supplies are being provided to the most vulnerable. Safe water, sanitation and hygiene efforts continue, and a polio campaign is ongoing with the support of the UN Children’s Fund. The UN Refugee Agency, together with the International Organization for Migration, is supporting people arriving in Iraq with shelter, core relief items and protection services.

There have also been efforts to ensure stocks are in place to scale up as needed. The World Food Programme is ensuring there is food on hand for about 500,000 people for one month. In Qamishli, the World Health Organization has pre-positioned 314,000 medical treatments, including trauma kits, that will be distributed to medical facilities in the area.

Following the UN’s engagement with the Government of Turkey, a technical team comprised of Syrian Arab Red Crescent and local water and electricity department technicians was able to access the Allouk water station, which provides water to over 400,000 people across Al-Hassakeh, and to temporarily restore the water flow after it was put out of service in the hostilities. They also restored electricity in Ras al-Ain. These are significant achievements, but they are no substitute for sustained services that can only be ensured if the parties take all feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm, and, ultimately, put an end to the hostilities. Continued access to the facilities will be necessary to keep them functioning in the coming days and weeks; hundreds of thousands of civilians depend on them.

As the situation evolves, a critical challenge facing humanitarian actors is the need to scale up operations from within Syria. To achieve this, we will need all parties to facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access via land and air routes to transport humanitarian supplies, along with an expansion of humanitarian capacity in the northeast. The UN leadership on the ground is working with all relevant parties to achieve this. The Syria Humanitarian Fund, supported by 16
donors, is planning a 15 million US dollar allocation for the northeast. Replenishing this fund will be critical.

Mr. President,

While still on north-east Syria, let me say a few words about Al Hol camp. We have provided regular updates on the situation in the camp where about 68,600 people reside; 94 per cent of them women and children, and 55 per cent of the children are under 12 years of age. Their situation is desperate. As the Secretary-General has noted, Member States have the primary responsibility for their own nationals, and policies and actions that lead to statelessness should be avoided.

Humanitarian organizations are monitoring how the evolving situation throughout the northeast might impact the civilian population in the camp. Despite a reduced presence, humanitarian actors continue to provide critical humanitarian services. However, more support is needed to ensure that adequate protection and humanitarian assistance can be provided over the coming weeks and months.

Mr. President,

I would now like to speak about the situation in the northwest. About 3 million people live in extremely difficult conditions in the Idleb de-escalation area in north-west Syria. We must also ensure that the situation there receives the attention and priority it deserves. About 2.1 million people depend on humanitarian aid and 1.6 million are displaced, many of them having been forced to move multiple times in search of safety.

The hostilities in the northwest have subsided following the announcement of a ceasefire on 30 August, but worrying signs of insecurity remain. There have, however, been recent reports of an uptick in hostilities. Between 18 and 20 October, the highest number of attacks were reported since the start of the ceasefire agreement, mostly affecting the southern parts of Idleb. We remain extremely concerned about the impact a further escalation of fighting might have for civilians, including further mass displacement for those forced to flee and the communities receiving them.

More than 400,000 people were already displaced between May and September this year and are sheltering in camps and informal sites in Idleb and Aleppo governorates. Most are in densely populated areas in the north, close to the Turkish border. Some people are still in the open air without adequate shelter and many will struggle to survive in colder temperatures. Although the academic year began in September, many school-aged children are deprived of education because of overcrowded learning facilities in the receiving communities, the heavy damage sustained by schools, the use of schools to house displaced people, and the lack of learning supplies and materials.

Humanitarian agencies have scaled up cross-border operations from Turkey to meet rising needs in Idleb. The past months have seen the highest number of trucks passing through the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism cross-border operations in Bab al Hawa and Bab al Salam since its inception in 2014. Food aid has nearly doubled in 2019, from reaching 560,000 civilians in the month of January to reaching 1.1 million in September through these cross-border operations. Tens of thousands more have received other services and support, such as winter clothing, household items, clean water, shelter, emergency nutrition and protection services.
The Under-Secretary General and Emergency Relief Coordinator visited the border region between Turkey and Syria earlier this month to assess the relief operation. He noted that the human cost of failing to renew the Security Council’s decision to authorize UN and partner cross-border operations would be immense. If UN cross-border deliveries were to be halted, civilian suffering would increase, potentially leading to greater displacement, including to neighbouring countries. The UN does not have an alternative method of delivery that could match the timeliness or reach, and it therefore remains critical to extend UN Security Council Resolution 2165 for another year.

Mr. President,

I would like now to speak about Rukban. The situation for people in this camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border remains critical. Following the mission that delivered aid to 15,000 people in early September, a second joint mission by the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in late September provided additional aid and supported voluntary departures of 329 people to collective shelters in Homs. Another mission to provide transport to those who want to leave is planned to depart shortly, pending security guarantees by all parties. Meanwhile the UN and SARC strive to continue assisting those most in need inside the camp. A woman and her 7-year-old child who required urgent surgery were evacuated to Homs on 22 October to ensure they received care. As cold months approach, many in Rukban continue to request support to leave. Since late March this year, some 18,300 people have left Rukban, but thousands remain in the area and need support until alternatives are found.

Mr. President,

In the face of these difficult operational challenges, the United Nations and its partners continue to deliver aid to millions across Syria. Through the first half of this year, the United Nations and humanitarian organizations reached about 6.3 million people in need on average each month. In the last two months, humanitarian agencies have provided assistance, including food, to more than 4 million people in need. More than 1.3 million health and medical treatments were provided to people throughout the country during the same period.

Despite these efforts, and after months of intensified needs, stocks are running low and gaps have emerged and remain to be addressed. People in north-west and north-east Syria are dependent on aid organizations to meet their basic needs. Without further funding, the availability of aid will be reduced. The 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria is funded at 45 per cent, or $1.48 billion, 10 months into the year. Donors have been generous, but more support is urgently needed; without it, partners will not be able to scale up their operations and respond to new and existing needs.

Mr. President,

While millions of people in Syria need humanitarian assistance, their primary need is: to be spared hostilities, and to have political solutions that end the violence, allowing people to begin to rebuild their lives, in safety and in dignity.

I will conclude this briefing by reiterating our three key points:

- Protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.
- Ensure safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to all civilians in need – including across borders.
- And cease hostilities and de-escalate the situation in north-east and north-west Syria.

Thank you, Mr. President.