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Note to the Secretary-General

MISSION TO SYRIA 11-12 JANUARY 2014

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EXECUTIVE OFFICE
OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

1. I travelled to Syria from 11 to 12 January. The purpose of my visit was to follow up on the implementation of the UN Security Council Presidential Statement of 2 October 2013 especially with regard to access to besieged communities and hard to reach areas, and get the latest update on the humanitarian situation ahead of the Kuwait II Conference.

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2. As was the case during my brief visit in December, my meetings with Minister Moallem, Vice-Minister Mekdad of Foreign Affairs, and Minister al-Shammat of Social Affairs, were positive despite robust discussions on the Government's criticism that the United Nations rarely condemns abuses committed by the opposition, and refusal to accept that it is responsible for targeting its own people. I reiterated the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian action making reference to the numerous statements made by you, me and other UN colleagues and reminded the Minister that in our humanitarian work we do not take sides. Despite the cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United Nations, the reality on the ground has not changed. In two years, the number of people in need in Syria has grown from one million to over nine million, and there are now over two million refugees in the region.

3. I welcomed the limited progress on administrative issues including more visas issued and pressed the Russian and Iranian Ambassadors to continue their advocacy on our behalf. I reminded the authorities that the progress on visas and administrative issues is overshadowed by the lack of progress on protection of civilians, access to besieged and hard to reach communities and on the demilitarization of medical facilities and schools. The authorities would have liked more praise for this limited effort.

4. I discussed with Vice-Minister Mekdad and Minister Moallem the opportunity to capitalize on local reconciliation dialogues and truces in some areas to bring more aid in. These include Adra, Yarmouk camp, rural Aleppo, Al Ghouta and Moadamiya. Minister Moallem said that access to Barzeh could happen immediately, and Vice-Minister Mekdad said that humanitarian convoys could reach Adra and rural Aleppo shortly. Minister Moallem also encouraged us to have direct contact with opposition groups locally to get access to areas under their control. Whilst I have informed the authorities in numerous meetings of our right to meet groups on the ground to secure access, this is the first time there has been recognition of our right to do so. I also received assurances from Minister Moallem that he would use his contacts with the security forces to ensure that we are kept informed of what is happening to the 20 UN staff (17 from UNWRA) currently in detention, and that those who are not to be referred to Court will be released.

5. In my meeting with Minister al-Shammat, I was concerned to hear about increasing cases of pregnancies of young girls, sexual and gender-based violence against young girls who are 'given' to armed groups by their father and/or brothers, and training and recruitment of child soldiers. I stressed the importance for the UN to have access to the available data to get a comprehensive picture of the protection situation, and see how to deal with it, given the allegations made by different sides in the conflict.

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6. While in Damascus, I also visited a collective shelter supported by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and met SARC President, Dr. Attar. Dr. Attar and the SARC are under intense pressure, and he made references to attempts, by the Government to undermine SARC's neutrality and independence, and curtail their decision-making capacity at the local level. A year ago, many in the international community were questioning SARC's independence; today SARC is looking to the international community to shield them from domestic pressure. They remain our biggest partner on the ground.

7. With respect to Kuwait II and our fundraising efforts, Minister Moallem recognized the importance of the pledging conference, unlike a year ago when he was dismissive of our efforts. He was, however, skeptical about the use of funds by some of the Gulf charities, which he sees as having a political agenda which fuels the conflict.

8. On Geneva II, the Russian Ambassador stressed the risk of a 'big provocation' in the next few days that could derail the talks and the need for moderate forces and the Government to unite against radical forces. The Iranian Ambassador reiterated the importance of finding a political solution to the crisis. However, he noted that Geneva II would give birth to an 'incomplete child' without Iran's participation. He said that it was difficult for Iran to accept the outcome of Geneva I, which it had not attended, in order to attend Geneva II. In his view, tackling the growing terrorism threat in Syria was the overall priority. Minister Moallem was clear that he does not see a role for the opposition in discussions on humanitarian issues at Geneva II since these issues should be discussed between the Government and the UN.

9. The situation in Damascus, with shops open and people in the streets, despite the growth in check points and constant sounds of mortars gives a false sense of reality. The reality remains that 250,000 civilians are trapped in besieged communities, some very close to the centre of Damascus with disturbing reports of people on the brink of starvation. Progress remain too limited and too slow. I am scheduled to give a written update to the Security Council on implementation of the PRST after 15 January and will convene the third meeting of the High Level Group (HLG) in Rome on 3 February, hosted by Foreign Minister Bonino. I will keep you updated of any progress.



Valerie Amos
16 January 2014

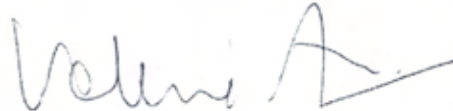
cc. Mr. Eliasson
Mr. Brahimi
Dr. Chan
Ms. Cousin
Mr. Feltman
Mr. Guterres
Mr. Kennedy
Mr. Lake
Ms. Malcorra

Note to the Deputy Secretary-General

MISSION TO SYRIA 11-12 JANUARY 2014

Please find attached a note to the Secretary-General on my mission to Syria.

I would appreciate if you could kindly submit this to the Secretary-General.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Valerie A.', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Valerie Amos
16 January 2014