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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the situation in Syria.

We'll get started with our witness. We have Nigel Fisher joining us today. He is the assistant secretary general, regional humanitarian coordinator for the Syria crisis, for the United Nations.

We have about half an hour, but I want to get in at least a full round of questions. We may go a little bit more than that just so we can get a full round in.

Mr. Fisher, welcome. Thanks for coming. We're glad to have you here today.

I'm going to turn it over to you, sir, for your opening comments. Then we'll go back and forth around the table for at least one full round of questions.

Mr. Nigel Fisher (Assistant Secretary General, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs): Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, I will speak in English, but I can answer questions in French.

[English]

It's a pleasure to be here today. Thank you for inviting me.

I have a short statement, less than 10 minutes I hope, which will leave adequate time for questions. As you've said, I'm the regional humanitarian coordinator for the Syria crisis, headquartered in Amman, Jordan.

Mr. Chair, there are three priorities that are confronting humanitarians in Syria today.

The first is that the people of Syria need protection. There are about 5,000 Syrians killed every month. Observers are saying that until now, some 140,000 Syrians have been killed. I think that this is a conservative estimate.

Second, securing access to affected civilians is absolutely fundamental. At least a quarter of a million Syrians are under siege currently.

Recently the United Nations agency and its partners evacuated 1,400 people from the old city of Homs after nine months of negotiation. During that evacuation, our convoy came under fire. Young men leaving the besieged areas, under our protection, were promptly arrested by the Syrian army and pro-regime militia.

In Yarmouk camp in Damascus—utter destruction. UNRWA, the organization supporting Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, has been able to deliver a few hundred food packages daily since January, often under fire and always under threat. Ceasefires are not respected, and the needs remain desperate.

The Syrian regime drops highly destructive barrel bombs on residential areas from Aleppo to Yabrud on the Lebanese border, to Daraa in the south, with impunity.

Over three million Syrians are living in hard-to-reach areas. Many have not seen humanitarian assistance for months, if not a year or more.

In mid-February we were estimating that some 9.3 million people in Syria were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, including six and a half million internally displaced, half of whom are children. But with recent displacements from Aleppo and Yabrud, that number must surely now surpass 10 million.

The number of refugees keeps rising. The UN High Commission for Refugees estimates now that the number of refugees in neighbouring countries has surpassed two and a half million. Again, that's the official figure; unofficial numbers are much higher.

The first priority for Syrians is protection, and the second is securing access.

The third priority facing humanitarians is funding. Without funding, we humanitarians cannot do what we are supposed to do. So we are thankful for Canada's recent commitments of generous new funding for the humanitarian situation for this year. From food to vaccines, to water to blankets and other non-food items, UN agencies and our partners, including many Syrian organizations—the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, local NGOs, and local councils—are reaching millions of Syrians, braving roadblocks, hostage-taking, and bombardment. But millions more remain out of our reach.

In early October of last year, that's over four months ago, the UN Security Council, recognizing the scale of the expanding humanitarian tragedy in Syria, adopted a presidential statement that stressed the need for immediate action to protect civilians and to assure access to those in need throughout the country.

Yet in the intervening months, the conflict has in fact intensified. Sieges continue to be used as a weapon of war. Systematic targeting of communities on the basis of religious affiliation continues. There has been no sign of a reduction of the indiscriminate nature of violence: aerial bombardment, especially the regime's use of barrel bombs, as well mortars and car bombs in populated areas. Syrian government forces and allied militia have been responsible for countless killings, disappearances, maimings, and torture. Civilian institutions have been attacked, including UNRWA schools.

● (1535)

Opposition forces, especially extremist elements, have been responsible for summary executions, recruitment of children for combat, sexual abuse, and use of terror tactics in civilian areas. The Secretary-General of the United Nations recently submitted to the Security Council his report on children and armed conflict in Syria, depicting what he called "unspeakable" suffering of civilians.

The humanitarian situation has continued to deteriorate. Given this, 10 days ago, the Security Council unanimously approved Security Council Resolution 2139. It demands parties to allow access across lines and across borders for UN humanitarian agencies and their partners.

Regarding cross-line access within Syria, since the resolution was adopted, we have, as UN agencies and partners, rapidly developed a plan for increasing access across conflict lines within Syria. This requires constant negotiation with the Syrian regime, as well as with opposition groups and with each blockage along the way. We don't expect the regime to suddenly stop impeding access and creating blockages, but we will assertively report any progress and all impediments. At least, unlike the earlier presidential statement, the resolution expresses the intent of the Security Council to take further steps in case of non-compliance with the resolution.

In regard to cross-border operations, in recent days we have also developed updated cross-border plans detailing where and who we can feasibly reach from neighbouring countries, from Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan, and mapping also the locations of armed groups to see where we can get passage and where we cannot.

Here I will mention a map that I have with me, which I can circulate. This is the kind of map that we've put together to try to map exactly.... This map indicates the location of people at risk and the location of various fighting groups. It indicates border areas where we are trying to gain access from neighbouring countries.

Everywhere there are constraints. For example, where ISIS is present, Turkey will not even open border crossings. Until today—and there's some breaking news—the Syrian regime has said repeatedly that, for it, cross-border operations from Turkey represent a red line. Syria often refers to its sovereign right to allow or not allow cross-border access. We counter that, beyond its sovereign rights, Syria has the sovereign obligation, well established under international humanitarian law, to at best facilitate access and at the very least not impede it.

Today's update is that I heard from the World Food Programme this morning that they have obtained the consent of the Syrian government for the passage of a World Food Programme food aid convoy across the Nusaybin border in Turkey—that is in the very far

northeast of Syria—from the Nusaybin border into Turkey through a Kurdish-controlled area of Syria, to the town of Qamishli in northeast Syria, in which WFP has a warehouse. The World Food Programme is at this point also trying to get the assent of the Turkish authorities for that passage.

If that happens, it will be really precedent setting, where we have the Syrian government agreeing on a crossing from Turkey, which, as I've said, to this point has always been a red line. As I said, we don't expect Syria to change overnight into a cooperative partner, but this is a small step, which is encouraging, since the resolution was adopted. We will use the resolution to push the limits and continue to use our contacts with Russia and Iran to urge them to use their influence on Syria.

Mr. Chair, I will close here and await your questions on Syria or on the situation in neighbouring countries, which I have not touched on in this presentation.

Thank you.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

We're going to start with the opposition and Madame Laverdière, for seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Fisher, for that very interesting presentation. Fortunately, you ended on a hopeful note although the situation is really not good.

In terms of access, whether it be from other countries or within other countries, is there something more that the international community, and notably Canada, could do?

[*English*]

Mr. Nigel Fisher: I think we just cannot stop applying pressure insisting on Syria's compliance with international humanitarian standards and human rights law.

As I said, Syria is always very insistent about its sovereignty, but under established practice of international humanitarian law, it has the obligation to facilitate or not impede access. It has allowed cross-border convoys from both Jordan and Iraq when those convoys have been taking supplies to government-controlled areas.

What we want to push for is have our bases reach people on the basis of need, not on the basis of location. This message needs to be passed unceasingly not only to Syria but to those who support Syria, Russia and Iran, and in fact all parties to the conflict and all sides.

We do have problems with opposition groups, and of course we have particular difficulties with the ISIS, but given the preponderance of force, the Syrian regime is the greatest challenge.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

In terms of funding, what is the current situation? To what extent are your needs being met?

[English]

Mr. Nigel Fisher: There was a pledging conference that took place on the 15th of January in Kuwait. Almost \$2.5 billion was pledged. Since that pledge, Canada has added \$150 million to commitments for this year, which makes it one of the top donors for the Syria crisis.

At present, a very small percentage of those pledges have translated into actual commitments. For example, with regard to refugee requirements in neighbouring countries, the UN High Commission for Refugees has at the moment received about half a billion dollars for a \$4 billion appeal, so we're still far short.

I must say that, even if we received 100% of that appeal, it would not meet all the requirements for people in neighbouring countries. We also have an appeal for \$2.5 billion inside Syria and, as I said, there are millions of people we are unable to reach because of conflict and sieges.

So the needs are huge, and the organization with which I work, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, is now cataloguing all those commitments made, and we are contacting donors to urge them to fulfill their commitments.

• (1545)

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

[English]

I have one last question. What are the challenges for coordination between OCHA and other UN agencies on the ground? Are there particular challenges?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: I must say coordination is improving. Within the country we have to try to maintain solidarity in facing the Syrian regime because, for example, in the past OCHA has been very critical of the regime, and the regime's response has been to tell our other agencies, "We don't have a problem with you; we have a problem with OCHA trying to divide us."

We try to maintain solidarity. We have a humanitarian coordinator on the ground in Damascus who represents the entire team in approaches to Syria to try to gain access.

But I must say it is always very difficult. The regime has provided us more visas, but it takes a long time. There are always delays in approval of convoys to reach people in need. I mentioned the Homs example. It took us nine months of negotiation to reach a basic agreement on the right of people in need to have access to assistance. As I said, once that operation started, we were bombarded. People were arrested. So frankly, we need to work together to maintain solidarity against this constant problem.

In the neighbouring countries, one of my main tasks is to try to pull the agencies together, whether they are working on immediate humanitarian relief for refugees, or whether we're also working to help the communities that are hosting refugees who also have considerable needs to have a coherent approach.

We're working on that. It is impossible really to distinguish between humanitarian action for refugees and help to communities,

so we're trying to bring these together so whatever the budget source, we can answer the system coherently.

I would say coordination is improving. We are working with many donors who are supporting this initiative. We are working with the neighbouring countries to try to ensure they are able to lead the response in their own countries with our support.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I have time for one small question. Given what happened in Homs, what do you think we should do in the future? Should we repeat that kind of experience? What are the lessons learned?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: We're pushing all the time. You may have seen an incredible photo of people waiting for assistance in Yarmouk camp, a Palestinian camp. We are pushing all the time and we meet resistance all the time. Our colleagues are in constant danger.

One of the points of light is that we are able to work with networks of local Syrian organizations, especially local councils. Whether they are working in areas controlled by opposition or by the regime, we find we are able to work with them, so we are trying to increase our assistance through Syrian organizations. It's also a basic philosophy to try to work through local organizations because they are going to be there long after we have left, so we have to support their capacity from now.

We're also trying especially to help communities that are not yet affected by conflict but where people are forced to be displaced because there's no work, there's no health care, no education, etc. If we can provide resources to keep people employed and keep community services going in a small way, we can prevent, to some extent, displacement.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Laverdière.

We're going to move over to Ms. Brown for seven minutes.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Mr. Fisher, we've been seized with this issue for some time now. We had Conrad Sauvé here just a couple of weeks ago. He talked about the work the Red Cross is doing working with the Red Crescent, and of course, the difficulties of getting access to the people inside Syria who really need the assistance. Of course we call on both sides to allow for humanitarian access because there are people who are suffering and who need our assistance.

You talked about the northeast area of Syria. One of our other witnesses talked about the different factions that Syria has been divided into, the Kurdish area in the northeast, and there are other sectarian groups. Is there something special about this group in the northeast that has been allowed access?

• (1550)

Mr. Nigel Fisher: It's a Kurdish area, and there has been an informal agreement between the Syrian authorities and the Kurds that the Kurds in a sense can have fairly free rein in that part. It is, I would say, compared with other groups, other areas, controlled by opposition elements. I would say the regime is less threatened by that. In a sense it does not present for them the kind of red line that other areas controlled by the opposition or crossing from Turkey would have. It's a little more open.

They have also allowed us to do convoys from Iraq and air drops into Hasakah, also for the same reasons.

Yes, I would say that there is an understanding, if I can call it that, between the Kurds who control that area and the regime, which is obviously not the case elsewhere.

Ms. Lois Brown: Is there any hope that this is a step in the direction of allowing anything else in?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: We have to hope. I think what we hope.... Let's say the Security Council resolution is not as strong as we would like. The Security Council resolution still requires us to request authorization from the Syrian authorities for any cross-border or cross-line activity, but what we want to do is push very hard, and we feel that if there's refusal, we can take that back to the Security Council. We're supposed to report monthly on every attempt to reach people in need and to record whether that was successful or not and why. We hope that we'll be a means of increasing pressure on the regime but also on opposition elements like the ISIS, but there our leverage is even less.

Ms. Lois Brown: It's very concerning that we're not seeing the funding that has been promised come through. I know that there was a funding conference a year ago January, and I've heard that about 27% of that money came in. Can you comment on that?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: I'm afraid that's incorrect.

At the first Kuwait pledging conference in mid-January 2013, about \$1.5 billion in pledges were made. By the end of the calendar year 2013, we had in fact received about \$4.5 billion. There were some countries that made pledges that did not fulfill them, but overall most countries actually over-fulfilled and came back two or three times. We are quite confident that the \$2.5 billion that was pledged in Kuwait is not the complete amount that we will see this year. As I said, the urgency now is the fulfillment of those commitments.

Ms. Lois Brown: I'd like to turn our attention to the issue of the children.

Last Thursday I had the opportunity to speak at a conference here in Ottawa at the Aga Khan Foundation. The initiative is No Lost Generation. Are you involved at all with that education piece, and if so, can you talk about that a little bit?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: Yes. The No Lost Generation initiative has arisen in an attempt to ensure education for Syrian children, especially Syrian refugee children. Before the conflict, Syria had one of the highest literacy rates and highest school enrolment rates. Our fear is that three years into the conflict, and not knowing how long this will last, Syrian children will lose out. We're not just talking about children in primary school, but all the way through to secondary and tertiary education. This initiative is a means to try to ensure that children continue to get educated.

I think it will be easier to reach refugee children than it is within, and as I said, it reaches all the way up. For example, in Turkey, the Turks are actually training young people midway through their university degrees in the Turkish language so that they can complete their degrees in Turkish universities. That kind of initiative is happening throughout the country.

I would just add that I've worked for many years with UNICEF. I've worked on child rights in conflict areas. I was proud to be associated with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other conventions looking at the protection of children in armed conflict. I must say that I feel we have enough principles. We have enough standards. We have enough norms. We now are in a situation where we have to find a way of applying them.

To me, I'm shocked. I've been in many crises, and this is the crisis where I find there is the most single-minded disregard for all the norms and international standards that have been developed. It's really disturbing. Children are being targeted, raped and tortured ad nauseam, and there is very little said about this, insufficiently. Even when reports are submitted to the Security Council, as the one recently on the situation of children, it barely raises a ripple.

In terms of what we can do, I think the voice of Canada at every opportunity has to remind that this is not about winning a war; this is about following international standards. How can anyone in this regime or in the opposition expect to be part of a future government when they are war criminals? They have committed war crimes. They have committed crimes against humanity. They have committed acts against all humanitarian standards.

I think we have to get out there to remind the regime, their supporters, the opposition that those who govern, govern in the interests of their people. I think this is totally forgotten in this crisis in a way that I cannot recall in any other.

● (1555)

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

We'll go now to Mr. Scarpaleggia. Welcome, sir.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair. I'm pleased to be here today.

Thank you very much, Mr. Fisher, for your description of the situation on the ground.

I'm trying to get a better understanding of things here. The United Nations Security Council passed resolution 2139. Could you tell us a little bit more about what the resolution says? I believe you said it requested the Syrian government to cooperate in the delivery of humanitarian aid or otherwise face sanctions.

Is my understanding correct?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: There are currently no sanctions specified in the resolution.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: No, but there's a kind of intimation—

Mr. Nigel Fisher: It's basically that the Security Council will remain seized of the situation and it will take further actions—

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Right, it will take further actions.

Mr. Nigel Fisher: —should its recommendations not be followed.

So if it has teeth, I would say it's milk teeth rather than wisdom teeth. I think it's something where we need to follow up aggressively with them.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: My question then is, how can we expect this resolution to be effective? It's obviously better than no resolution at all, but we're dealing with a very hardened government that, as I understand it from your testimony, will only let humanitarian aid into areas that it controls. Obviously it wants to keep the loyalty of people in those areas and so on.

What can a resolution like this do? Obviously it's important that the Security Council be seized and so on, but can we really say that the Syrian government, when it agrees to let humanitarian aid into non-government controlled areas, is really doing so because of the attention of the Security Council?

As a follow-up to that question, what kind of response are we getting from Russia and Iran to entreaties to prevail upon the Syrian government to allow humanitarian aid into the country into non-government controlled areas? Are Russia and Iran helping? Are they stonewalling?

What is your sense of what's going on through those diplomatic channels?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: No member of the United Nations likes to have a Security Council resolution written up on it, because they see this as impinging on their sovereignty. If you look in past conflicts, Sri Lanka, for example, they always tried to avoid a Security Council resolution at all means because it starts to erode their claim that they have absolute sovereign right over their territory and they broke no interference, etc.

If you look at why Russia and China, for example, have consistently vetoed resolutions in the past...less about Syria than their own sovereignty and what might happen to them in the future. I think there's leverage when there's a Security Council resolution because it opens the door to impinging on the sovereign rights that they like to protect.

If I can give a personal opinion, too, and it requires more analysis than perhaps I'm capable of, but I think if you look at both Russia and Iran, they are not absolutely wedded to Assad or the regime per se. They are wedded to having influence in Syria for religious or regional power reasons. So I could see, perhaps, and some analysts have said that if the Assad top layer becomes too embarrassing for Russia or Iran, for example, they may be willing to see them go.

Certainly, I don't think in Syria we should expect to see the entire governing structure disappear. I think that would be a disaster, because there is nothing else. But I think the top layer of these people who are clinging on to power by any means, one could see that eventually they may be too much of an embarrassment to Russia or to Iran.

What influence does Russia have? Russia, when we had the Security Council presidential statement, actually performed a very useful role in trying to get the Syrian regime to collaborate. There was some progress we saw in easing some of the bureaucratic restrictions we faced. For example, one of my roles is to facilitate

cross-border activities into Syria. I say "facilitate" because right now UN agencies have not been active across the border because of this sovereignty issue.

Syrians have warned the UN that we should not be too active. But I think there is.... Sorry, I've lost my thread here.

• (1600)

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: My question is, are the Russians and Iranians working with—

Mr. Nigel Fisher: Oh, sorry, yes.

The Russians were extremely helpful until they pushed to the point that the Syrians said, "We know the Russians have told you they're trying to help us, but in the end it's our country." So it's a limited effect, and of course, Russia has its own objectives in the area.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: In terms of the refugee situation, we have 2.5 million refugees in camps. I'm just seeking clarification for my own purposes.

Canada has agreed to take 1,300 refugees. Are these refugees from camps, or are they more private sponsorships of any Syrian, either...? Well, I guess it would be very hard for a Syrian inside the country to get out at this point and be accepted as a refugee by another country. But it could be a Syrian who is not in a camp, who is in another surrounding country.

When we talk about the 1,300 refugees, we're not talking about 1,300 coming from camps per se, or can it be?

Mr. Nigel Fisher: The fact is the majority of refugees in neighbouring countries are not in camps. A hundred per cent of those who go to Lebanon are not in camps. They're in communities. For 80% to 90% of those in Jordan, it's the same thing. They have to be registered refugees.

The two and a half million are those already registered by the UN High Commission for Refugees. We actually estimate there are even more informally.

That 1,300 would have to have been from among the registered refugees. I don't honestly know whether they would come from.... I don't think there's any distinction for Canada whether they come from camps or they're currently in communities.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: As long as they're registered.

Mr. Nigel Fisher: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have.

Mr. Fisher, I'm glad we could work with your time in Ottawa to be a part of the committee. It was great having you today.

We wish you all the best. Thank you.

We're going to suspend the meeting just for one second to set up our next witness.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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