

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

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*Dé Máirt, 9 Márta 2021*

*Tuesday, 9 March 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Berry,	Catherine Ardagh,
John Brady,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Sorca Clarke,	Joe O'Reilly,
Gary Gannon,	Niall Ó Donnghaile,
David Stanton.	Diarmuid Wilson.

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Vincent P. Martin.

Teachta / Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Syrian Conflict: Engagement with Non-governmental Organisations**

**Chairman:** I have received apologies from Deputy Brian Leddin. I welcome everybody and acknowledge the logistical challenge with which we are faced, which is testament to the great advance in communications technology.

The purpose of our meeting this afternoon is to hear from witnesses on the current humanitarian situation in Syria. As we approach the tenth anniversary of a situation that has decimated the country and its people, I and the committee believe it is important we have the opportunity of hearing first hand the effects of what has been a dreadful conflict on the people of Syria, particularly those displaced from their homes and their communities both internally across Syria and internationally across the wider region.

On behalf of the committee, I am very pleased to welcome representatives from Trócaire, SAWA for Development and Aid, GOAL, Oxfam, Concern and World Vision. I particularly welcome Mr. Niall O’Keeffe of Trócaire, Mr. Nasser Alheraki, Mr. Moutaz Adham and Dr. Rouba Mhaissen who are joining us from Syria, Lebanon and Turkey.

On a housekeeping matter, I remind witnesses of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. If statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, I would ask witnesses to discontinue their remarks. It goes without saying that they will comply with such a direction. For witnesses attending remotely outside of the Leinster House campus, there are some limitations in respect of parliamentary privilege and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as witnesses who may be physically present. In this regard, witnesses who are participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State are advised that they should always be mindful of their domestic law and how it may apply to the evidence given or tendered.

I thank the members for joining us, albeit remotely. I remind them of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make that person identifiable. I also remind members that they are only allowed to participate in the meeting by dint of their being physically located in the Leinster House complex, and I know all of them are. For anybody watching this meeting online, some Oireachtas Members and witnesses are accessing this meeting from a remote perspective. Due to these unprecedented circumstances and the large number of people attending the meeting remotely, I ask everybody to bear with us in the event of any technical issue arising that may pose a challenge.

It gives me great pleasure to call on Mr. Niall O’Keeffe to make his opening statement and to introduce us to our panel of speakers. After hearing from them, members of the committee will have an opportunity to ask questions, make observations and deal with issues accordingly. Mr. O’Keeffe is very welcome.

**Mr. Niall O’Keeffe:** I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for providing us with the opportunity to meet them today and provide them with a briefing on the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Ten years ago this month civil protests escalated quickly into a civil war and since that time Syria has become and remains one of the world’s largest, most deadly and most

complex humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of thousands of people, and by some estimates more than half a million, have been killed and more than half the population of 23 million people have been displaced from their homes. The lives of many Syrians have changed significantly and for the worst. Our five organisations have prepared a joint briefing document for the committee, which I hope it received and which outlines our priorities.

When we were preparing for this meeting, we thought it would be extremely valuable if the committee could hear first hand from our Syrian colleagues who come with lived experience and significant expertise. We have provided the committee with a biography of each of three speakers. To introduce them, the committee will first hear from Mr. Nasser Alheraki, the area co-ordinator for GOAL in north-west Syria, followed by Mr. Moutaz Adham, the country director for Oxfam in Syria, and, lastly, followed by Dr. Rouba Mhaisen, the director of a Syrian organisation called SAWA for Development and Aid, which is a Trócaire partner organisation. Each speaker will provide a short input of approximately five minutes each, following which we look forward to discussion with the committee members.

Before we begin, it is also important for us to highlight that as humanitarian organisations in the course of our discussions with the committee, we may face some challenges in commenting publicly or even in depth on the politics of the current situation. The safety of our staff and colleagues is critical for us. Our primary focus is on the provision of principled humanitarian assistance to those who are affected by the crisis. With that in mind I will now hand over to Mr. Alheraki.

**Mr. Nasser Alheraki:** I thank Mr. O’Keeffe for that introduction. I am an area co-ordinator with GOAL in north-west Syria. I was born and raised in Aleppo in Syria. I graduated from Ebla University in banking and financial science. Before the start of the war I volunteered with the Red Crescent in Aleppo and I continued my humanitarian work in Aleppo during the first two years of the war. In August 2013, after the arbitrary arrest of my 15-year-old brother Nahel, and continuous pressure on my family from the security forces, we were forced to flee our home and arrived in Turkey.

It was not easy at first to learn a new culture and language, and to start a new life. We really hoped we could eventually go back to our country. However, engaging with the community and understanding the local way of life made it less difficult for us in more recent years.

In my role with GOAL I travel between Turkey and north-west Syria every week to work with our programme beneficiaries, our local staff and our implementing partners. We work in Idlib and northern Aleppo within an area that is roughly the size of County Galway. More than 4 million people live in Idlib and northern Aleppo under fear of shelling and bombardments. Over half of this population was displaced to this area from other areas of the country. Many had to escape conflict several times. Women and children make up the largest part of this population. In each location I visit, I meet people who were forced to leave their homes, and who lost family members, relatives and friends.

Over 500,000 civilians have lost their lives in this war. More than 400 humanitarian aid workers have been reported killed in the past ten years, but I suspect this number may be much higher. GOAL lost four of our colleagues: Nihad Alkadi; Zeiad Abdulhay; Hayyan Ramadan; and Mustafa Shoib. God bless their souls.

Memories of loss are countless. Each person is a dictionary of painful stories. It is not possible to imagine the number of times people I meet were forced to leave different locations to

escape attacks and faced the cold in the streets, with no access to shelter or food.

We in GOAL strive to provide humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable people in this area. We help to deliver clean piped water. We supply food, basic needs and emergency relief to these communities who have nothing to fall back on. These people have had to survive the harsh winter weather and the coronavirus outbreak in unfinished buildings or in crowded camps. Last year GOAL and its partners reached more than 1.3 million people in Idlib and northern Aleppo with food assistance. About 1 million of this population also received water from the 66 water stations that GOAL has supported and that supply 123 locations in Idlib.

This situation cannot continue for much longer. Unless a peaceful solution to the conflict is found, no amount of humanitarian aid will be enough. The co-ordinated delivery of humanitarian assistance is also at risk now. Ireland has a unique role to play today in making a difference for millions of people in Syria who have no means of survival other than humanitarian aid. As a co-penholder of the humanitarian file for Syria on the UN Security Council and as one of the world's foremost peacekeepers, Ireland can stress the importance of an immediate solution to the conflict and work to ensure that aid delivery corridors are kept open.

Despite the passing of ten years, we still lack any kind of solutions for Syrian families caught in the line of fire. If the UN Security Council decides to stop mandating the only remaining cross-border humanitarian aid corridor into north-west Syria in July, the timely and efficient delivery of assistance will be very difficult to maintain. The UN's co-ordinating role will end and international humanitarian funding for north-west Syria, which is already in decline, may decrease further.

Mark Lowcock, the UN emergency relief co-ordinator, recently noted that efforts to establish a cross-line delivery mechanism from Damascus to north-west Syria have failed. From my experience of humanitarian work in Aleppo in the first two years of the war, this is not surprising. I also know that the families I meet in north-west Syria will find it difficult to accept assistance that is overseen from Damascus, given how much they have suffered from war planes that come from the same direction.

I am aware that this is only part of the discussion, and that the UN Security Council decision will be debated behind closed doors, between countries that may be diplomatic rivals. However, as someone who sees the growing hardship on the ground every week, I can only stress that humanitarian access should follow humanitarian need and not politics. Ireland now has the opportunity to be the voice of humanitarianism in the Security Council - to speak with humanitarians, for humanitarians and for humanity. Perhaps the voice of compassion alone will not end this crisis, but this voice might help to ensure we can ease the suffering of people who have nowhere to escape.

I thank the committee for its support for GOAL and for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

**Mr. Moutaz Adham:** As the country director for Oxfam in Syria, I thank the committee for giving me this platform to present our lived experience and analysis of the humanitarian context in Syria. My remarks today will focus primarily on humanitarian access and approaches, and perhaps build on what has already been shared by my colleague, the previous speaker.

In this context, and to add to what others have said, I again underline the importance of unhindered humanitarian access in Syria for humanitarian actors responding to save lives and

build the resilience of people. Protecting the health, well-being and dignity of those in need is an obligation on all parties in a conflict. It is universally accepted under international humanitarian law. This, of course, applies to the different modality of aid delivery in Syria - cross-border, that is, across international borders or across conflict lines or perhaps within the same areas of control. In the past, Oxfam has been able to deliver aid across conflict lines in the south of Syria in Dar'a and the north of Syria in Aleppo but we know that certain communities will not be reachable from Damascus. As such, all modality of operations is still very much needed. We ask that Ireland continues to be an important voice in promoting humanitarian access, which is complementary in all of its forms as an enabler of our work as aid agencies through the platform of the UN Security Council and beyond. This has never been more important in the context of collapsed health systems, damaged water and sanitation infrastructure essential to good hygiene practices and crowded displaced persons' camps and the threat of Covid-19.

It is important to stress that there are many dimensions of humanitarian access. In Syria, it is possible to deliver a principled humanitarian response from Damascus, although it is fraught with difficulties that exacerbate human suffering and that we believe there are ways to overcome. Humanitarian access amidst shifting lines and hostilities involving multiple entities - even entities with changing allegiances and identities - requires constant context analysis and negotiation based on mutual understanding of neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian action. In our experience, this can take anywhere from one week to several weeks to, in a few instances, months. In some instances, we have simply not been able to negotiate access at all. Such complexity and delay means that it is too late for communities and often beyond the patience of short-term emergency funding from donors. Critical for operational agencies is the important funding we see from donors that provides us with the flexibility to respond to needs on the ground as and when access permits. Access is not only access of humanitarian actors to vulnerable communities. It is also the access of vulnerable communities to the aid they deem critical, including aid that supports their early recovery and resilience building, something many donors are still reluctant to support. As a respected member of the donor community, Ireland can be an important voice for flexible and predictable humanitarian funding enshrined in the principles of good humanitarian donorship, including commitment to provide funding to the third pillar of the Syria humanitarian response plan.

These same principles of good humanitarian donorship affirm the role of civil society organisations in providing humanitarian assistance on the basis of need without discrimination, particularly in situations of armed conflict. To fulfil this role, it should be emphasised that humanitarian access must not be a one-off event but a continuous process of engagement of those we seek to assist. This provides space to hear their voices and the design of the "who, where, how, what and when" of aid provided and, critically, to understand from their perspective whether this has proven effective. As mentioned earlier, operating in Syria is possible but it is extremely complex. There has been much improvement in access through continuous engagement of international NGOs from Damascus with the government of Syria, including with local authorities. Much more could still be done diplomatically by both the UN system and states and their donor bodies to impress on the government of Syria the necessity of this type of access. In other contexts, this engagement would be normal. However, in the Syrian context and due to the positions of non-engagement with the government of Syria by many countries, the burden of much of that is being put on the shoulders of humanitarian actors alone. We welcome Ireland's support for these diplomatic efforts.

I have spoken about humanitarian aid and access. Justifiable attention here and debate over the preconditions for the safe return of those displaced in and outside of Syria as well as the

country's reconstruction have nonetheless deflected attention from alternative approaches. Approaches such as early recovery and resilience building of vulnerable populations are in other contexts globally part of any humanitarian response. In the Syrian context, the humanitarian response has been for the most part narrowed to basic life-saving emergency response and early recovery and resilience building of the population has been conflated with the very political subject of reconstruction. I refer specifically to efforts to reduce dependency on aid and consider more dignified and sustainable solutions. This includes efforts to ensure vulnerable Syrians have sustainable access to basic services, resume income-generating opportunities, restore their capacity to observe and recover from further shocks and crises and strengthen the social fabric of a country strained by ten years of conflict. Focus on such an approach, which should accommodate the critical shift in women's roles to primary or sole breadwinners for their families, is now being accelerated by increasing poverty levels estimated at more than 90% of the population and likely to continue to increase through 2021 given the country's and worldwide economic crisis, the decreasing purchasing power of households, the debilitating effects of Covid-19 and the impact of sanctions on the country.

Viable livelihood opportunities must be accompanied by a secure environment and the availability of basic social infrastructure and services for which responsibility will ultimately have to be steered by local authorities. There is a demand for the aid system as a whole to become comfortable with engagement with local government and technical line ministry structures be they in Syria or elsewhere and, specifically, that member states and relevant regulatory bodies ensure that respective measures such as sanctions and counter-terrorism provision do not hinder a more dignified, cost-effective and sustainable response across Syria. This requires effective exemptions, clear interpretive guidance, guaranteed banking channels for the transfer of funds into Syria and a manageable level of risk sharing with implementing partners. As a donor, thought leader and respected governor within the international community, Ireland can have a constructive voice in assisting others to avoid conflating support for building the resilience of a people living too long in a crisis with the more politicised questions of the reconstruction of Syria. I shall conclude my remarks by referring the committee to our recent reports and statements shared prior to this meeting and am happy to answer any further questions it may have.

**Dr. Rouba Mhaissen:** I will start by thanking Ireland and the Irish people for always taking just stances when it comes to wars and the plights of people such as those in Syria. I thank the people of Ireland for showing generosity to the various campaigns that we led through Trócaire around Christmas time and other times of year. Trócaire and another personal donor are the biggest donors for the efforts we lead with Syrian refugees and the internally displaced.

As my colleagues said, it has been ten years since the people of Syria took to the streets demanding basic rights, justice, dignity and freedom. However, while a lot of media and politicians would like to say that the war in Syria is over because the shelling has largely stopped, the war is far from over and a difficult situation remains on Syrian soil. It is true that Syria is not divided today in terms of territory, but it is very fragmented and there are many other division lines, as my colleague mentioned.

At a political level, we are unlikely to see any constitutional reforms before the elections of 2021, and if the current President of Syria is re-elected, we are unlikely to see any such reforms in the next seven years. We can discuss the reasons for that. There is stalling in the political process. We are pushing for a UN security resolution to end the war with a political deal. However, those efforts are also stalling and it is unlikely to happen because we have not seen any progress in Geneva.

What people do not know is that this has implications for people's lives. Today the Syrian regime is in need of dollars which is leading it to monetise, for example, the military service. People can pay a sum to avoid doing military service. The regime is also pushing non-governmental organisations, NGOs, to have a bigger role as a source of income to overcome the sanctions. All the political considerations I have mentioned have direct effects on people's lives. More than half the Syrian population are refugees or are internally displaced, meaning they are living in tents or extremely precarious situations. More than 80% of Syrians have high debts. Some 13 million are in need of humanitarian assistance and 80% live under the poverty line in a country where that was unheard of before the war.

In neighbouring countries, for example, Lebanon, a country with already weak infrastructure, two out of three children continue to live without education. With hyperinflation in Syria and Lebanon, the situation is very difficult and leading to a lot of black market jobs and unstable living. With the coronavirus, refugees in these countries feel even more isolated. That is why our interventions, with Trócaire and others offering psychosocial support, especially for women and vulnerable categories of people, are still needed.

Inside Syria today, we are doing some pre- and post-return monitoring with Syrians. Many people who go back are regretting the decision to do so. That is due to many factors, the first of which is the matter of protection. As I said, safety is not only about shelter from shelling and bombs. It is not only a physical matter. Of course, many of the people who have returned are faced with kidnapping, abduction or imprisonment based on their political leanings. Many are also forced into military service despite that they do not want to be fighting fellow Syrians. There is no access to basic services such as education, as my colleague from Oxfam mentioned and I will not repeat that. Social tensions still exist. There are housing, land and property, HLP, issues. Many people cannot access their homes simply because their homes are not there and it takes a lot to revamp these homes because they are occupied or because they have been, unfortunately, closed by the Syrian regime.

All of that leads me to say that we need to continue pushing when we hear the conditions for safe, dignified and voluntary returns are in place. Those conditions are not yet in place, and whenever we hear any European or neighbouring countries state refugees should be forced to return to Syria, we must continue to stand our ground. We also need to continue pushing for humanitarian funding for neighbouring countries which are still taking on the majority of the burden. If that does not happen, we might again see an influx of refugees coming illegally, endangering their lives. In order not to see these refugees coming in such precarious ways, we need to continue pushing on the issue of resettlement.

As my colleague and friend Nasser said, Ireland is a penholder for humanitarian affairs to continue pushing for cross-border aid to be available. I am speaking today to very high-level politicians and people who are involved in foreign affairs. Ireland needs to play a leadership role in putting a political end to the war rather continuing a war that is causing the loss of too many lives. I know that the Minister for Foreign Affairs recently visited Iran. I think the negotiations over the Iranian deal and the Iranian role in Syria can be used to guarantee an end to the war and a better life for Syrians, both inside and outside Syria.

I am happy to engage in conversation and answer any questions. I again thank Trócaire and everyone else for this great opportunity.

**Mr. Niall O'Keeffe:** I will conclude on behalf of the whole group. I again thank the committee members for their time today. In the briefing document we have shared in advance, we

prioritised a number of things, some of which I will briefly mention. One relates to humanitarian access. We feel that the key priority for the moment is securing the renewal of UN Resolution 2533 which facilitates the cross-border humanitarian access in the north west.

The return of refugees and internally displaced people must be voluntary, safe and dignified. While there is a lot to be done, international funding for reconstruction must be dependent on ensuring there is a secure and inclusive environment for all Syrians in Syria.

Ireland pledged €25 million to the humanitarian crisis in 2020, which was very welcome. It is critical that Ireland continues, or considers increasing, that level of support in 2021, commensurate with the rising needs and vulnerabilities in Syria and among the Syrian population.

The peace process has, by and large, stalled. However, Ireland, through its seat on the UN Security Council, must spare no efforts in giving voice to those Syrians who are most in need and must advocate for a lasting solution to the conflict.

**Chairman:** I thank our three guests for their contributions. I will now proceed to questions from members of the committee. I do not see anybody offering immediately so I will ask Deputy Brady to lead off. Members might indicate their keenness or desire to pose questions thereafter. I am conscious of the fact we have a large number of panellists who will wish to elaborate further on some of the questions that will be asked. It goes without saying that I ask members to be as concise as possible with their questions to our panellists. I will ask Mr. O’Keeffe to distribute the questions among those he feels are best placed to answer.

**Deputy John Brady:** I thank our guests for this important piece of work relating to a conflict that, unfortunately, has fallen off the political agenda. It is not getting the international focus that it deserves. Unfortunately, it is probably up there with other conflicts, such as Yemen, where the humanitarian crisis is reaching astronomical levels.

I want to make some comments first and then ask some specific questions. I reiterate my total support and that of my party for UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015). It is really important, especially the sections demanding that all parties take all appropriate steps to protect civilians, including members of ethnic, religious and confessional communities. The resolution stresses in this regard that the primary responsibility to protect the population lies with the Syrian authorities and that the only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. It is really important to state that.

Unfortunately, what is happening in Syria is not good. As I see it, this has become a geopolitical issue. I call on all the international players to step back from the conflict and allow the Syrian people to negotiate a peaceful settlement through constitutional change. In referring to international players it is important to state all of them, including Iran, Russia, Israel, USA, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Through their involvement they have probably added to the duration of this conflict.

The UN special envoy for Syria has engaged in a gruesome block of work in terms of the constitutional reform committee. I know the committee met again for the fifth time in January. Slow progress, if any, is being made in respect of the face-to-face talks between the government and opposition parties on the drafting of a new constitution. I implore the Government to use its influence to ensure all players engage in that committee fully. Ultimately, it is the only solution to the conflict.

Another major ask relates to the continuation of cross-border humanitarian aid and UN Security Council Resolution 2533 (2020). That needs to be continued. I know that is up again in July.

The crisis - what is happening on the ground in Syria - is appalling. All the figures have been given out. Some 13 million ordinary people are in need of humanitarian assistance. The number of people internally displaced and displaced in adjoining countries is terrible. These people should have the right to return. This is something that I totally support.

I congratulate the NGOs on their work on the ground in providing humanitarian assistance. They are all doing fantastic work that must be supported and I absolutely support it.

I am keen to hone in on the issue of sanctions, how that is impacting on the distribution of humanitarian aid for people who need it most. Unfortunately, it is a tool that has been used in other previous conflicts, such as in Iraq. We know the human cost of sanctions that were imposed. UNICEF has spoken of how 500,000 children, unfortunately, have died as a result of sanctions. Some sanctions are targeted. Unfortunately, what we have seen is the imposition of unilateral sanctions.

Specific work has been carried out by the UN rapporteurs to examine the sanctions issue. A report was produced in 2018 by the now-deceased Idriss Jazairy. He said that unilateral sanctions which restrict nearly any financial transaction or which seek to prevent third countries from engaging in legal trade with a country were an illegal and immoral form of coercion, especially when such actions harm the human rights of people living in targeted countries. He went on to say in reference to Syria that the complex financial sanctions prevented government and humanitarian actors from buying food, medicine and spare parts for water pumps or electrical generators from western countries, thus imposing further suffering on innocent civilians. He made a specific call on states to address this issue by creating a UN-led procurement mechanism that would provide for the human rights of civilians. He went on to talk about other countries in which these unilateral sanctions are imposed. He has since passed away and the current rapporteur is Alena Douhan. In a recently published report she said some other humanitarian organisations have complained because their humanitarian work aimed to deliver medicine, medical equipment and food to Syria. However, during the pandemic, this has been frozen as have the bank accounts of their personnel. All of this is due to secondary sanctions that are being imposed. We know how the imposition of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 in July last year will deepen the humanitarian crisis and impact on the rebuilding of Syria.

Some specific questions stem from this. We know the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance. How is the imposition of unilateral sanctions impacting on the excellent work that the NGOs are doing? Is it impeding their work in terms of some of the issues that have been highlighted by the UN rapporteurs?

The Caesar Act is relevant. We know people have been internally displaced and others have been displaced in other countries. They can come back home. However, if they end up in a refugee camp it is not an ideal situation. The Act is aimed at stopping the reconstruction of Syria. How do the NGO representatives see the Act playing out? How do they see what has been described as immoral, illegal unilateral? How are the sanctions impacting on humanitarian work in Syria?

**Chairman:** I will group the questions because I am conscious of the clock. I will call on Deputy Stanton and Deputy Clarke. We will then go back to our panel to deal with Deputy

Brady's questions and the questions I anticipate coming from other members. Then I will start the next round with Senator Joe O'Reilly. We will hear from Deputy Stanton followed by Deputy Clarke.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I welcome our guests to the meeting. I thank them for being here and for the work they are doing. We should always at this time think of all the people who have died in the past ten years in the conflict and the suffering that has gone on. It is important that we have this meeting because, as Deputy Brady said, this has gone off the political radar here. It is important that we refresh the minds of the people in Ireland on what is happening in Syria.

The Chairman and myself in our former roles have met many Syrians who have come here as refugees and settled here. We set up a committee sponsorship programme last year. I call on colleagues to look at that again. People can come here as refugees, settle into communities in Ireland and start a new life. Many people came from Lebanon. I know that mention was made of Lebanon and Jordan and those countries were under extraordinary pressure. However, at least there is no war happening there.

Someone said that the war is not over year in Syria and people are still in terrible danger. People who go back may not be safe either. I take note of what was said with respect to returnees and people not being forced back. They may be interrogated or worse if they do so in certain circumstances.

Can the NGO representatives comment on the role of the Covid-19 virus in northern Syria? We have been asked to highlight the need for the vaccines to be made available there. How might that be done? What is the role of the virus there? Has it taken hold? What has been its impact? Is it possible to get the various vaccines in there to vaccinate people so that at least there is some protection against that, the other enemy that is out there. I note the remarks concerning high deaths and 80% below the poverty level. I hear people in Ireland bandy about words like catastrophic and disastrous, who say things are awful and terrible. I do not think that people here have even a vague notion of what our fellow human beings are suffering in places like northern Syria. We have not got a notion, we do not have a clue. I hear people talk about crisis in Ireland; there is no crisis here. If anyone wants to see crisis they can go to northern Syria or Lebanon or, as Deputy Brady said, Yemen and other places. That is where one will find crisis and devastation.

I support what the witnesses have sought with regard to the various resolutions. I think we have a unique place in the United Nations now and I will support anything we can do at UN level to progress and maintain the resolutions, to get the humanitarian aid in there and to try to get a lasting solution to this awful, difficult, almost intractable problem. I thank everyone here for the work they do and the people on the ground out there who are putting their lives at risk in so many ways and doing so much for these people who had good lives before the war, who were doing very well. I have met many Syrians here and was really impressed with them.

**Mr. Niall O'Keeffe:** Mr. Adham from Oxfam will answer the question about sanctions and Mr. Alheraki from Goal will answer Deputy Stanton's question about Covid.

**Mr. Moutaz Adham:** The question of sanctions is very complicated. It is beyond any humanitarian organisation to be able to really analyse the impact of sanctions and which factor is contributing to what. As others have noted, multiple factors are at play in this, the ten year conflict, Covid-19, the situation in neighbouring Lebanon and also sanctions. It is very difficult to assess exactly what is contributing to what outcome. The Deputy mentioned the Caesar Act.

It is also difficult to assess what its contribution was and what was the contribution of European sanctions. Globally, we know that sanctions hurt the most vulnerable people and we are concerned about them.

On the impact on the delivery of humanitarian response, a factor which has really impacted the different humanitarian organisations is their ability to receive funds into Syria. We get our funding from different donors but then we face major difficulties in receiving those funds inside the country to enable us to deliver the humanitarian response. Recently in Damascus, one of the largest international NGOs was almost forced to downsize because of the difficulty it has been having in receiving funds into Syria.

We also know that there is an impact when we do have to resort to international tenders. Those do not get any participation from the private sector outside Syria because of fear of sanctions. Is it a direct effect of sanctions or a chilling effect, I do not know, it is very complicated. Another example is where we were delivering a life-saving response in Deir ez-Zor right after ISIS was defeated there and after the siege was lifted. It was through a national partner and we had to transfer funds through our national fund at Deir ez-Zor. There was only one operational bank there and it was a sanctioned bank. It took us about four months to negotiate an exemption. This was the true definition of a life-saving response. Those are some examples of the impact of sanctions, whether or not it is the chilling effect, on the delivery of the material response.

**Mr. Nasser Alheraki:** I thank the Deputy for the question about Covid. It is really important. In Syria, we are suffering from multiple crises. The priorities have been around attacks and the conflict inside Syria and the winter crisis, and then Covid came at the end. The vulnerable families we serve would not think of Covid or that crisis but we think of the health workers who need support, the humanitarian workers who need to deliver efficient assistance for them. Our teams are going door to door visiting the vulnerable people to make assessments and ensure the efficiency of the delivery of the assistance. For those people, vaccination should be a priority. Elderly people are passing away because they do not have easy access to health facilities to support them and to prevent the virus spreading out more across Syria. Vaccination should be a priority for the humanitarian workers and my colleagues who work in health facilities who we meet day to day. It is another part of the crisis facing the Syrian people which they are not aware of. We need support to deal with vaccination, and to prioritise it.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank our guests for giving so freely of their time and speaking so passionately about the conflict in Syria. There is no doubt about the incredible human cost of this conflict which will be counted for many, many years to come. To read that 80% of people are living below the poverty line and more than 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, is a stark reality for these people's lives. It would be remiss of me, a day after International Women's Day, not to raise the effect of conflict on women but also the effect and meaningful role in gender balance that needs to be played in economic development as Syria enters into a much brighter place than before.

On food insecurity, I read that 37% of mothers are suffering from malnutrition. The health effects on both mothers and children are profound at that level of malnutrition. What barriers and obstacles should be addressed immediately so that these people can receive adequate food and nutrition? In terms of the conflict and post conflict, has any research been done on the levels of violence against women either as internally displaced persons or in the camps afterwards? As Syria moves forward, hopefully into a much brighter future, what is the female engagement expected to be at the negotiation table in any peace process? It is critical that women have a voice in any peace process that may happen. As the sustainable development and resilience

building that are needed to do that take place, what is the role of gender in economic development in terms of access to education? Any viable livelihood is dependent on a level of education.

I am very lucky that quite a few women who have come from Syria live in my home town. They are incredibly engaging and remarkable women. What role can they play in the development and resilience building of the women back in their home country? What role can Ireland play in ensuring that the issues of the effect of conflict on women and gender in economic development receive the attention they deserve?

**Chairman:** I ask members to indicate if they wish to ask questions.

I call Senator O'Reilly who is Deputy Speaker of our Upper House, the Seanad, and a long-standing member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I thank the Chairman for the kind introduction and the opportunity to speak. I agree with my colleagues, Deputies Brady and Stanton, that the great thing about today is that we are bringing this horrendous conflict back into focus for those who are observing the meeting and also putting it centre stage for our agenda on the UN Security Council. That is a great achievement from today.

As Deputy Clarke said, it is an horrendous, shocking and appalling story. There is not much point in my repeating the statistics. There is such human tragedy behind each of them, whether it is displaced people, people who have died or people below the poverty line, now at 80%. It is an horrendous story. We all understand that access is critical in the delivery of the humanitarian aid. The witnesses are very welcome here and we admire what they do in that regard.

UN Resolution 2533 is up for renewal. I presume the witnesses are not too fearful about that. It is our job to assist aid agencies at UN level and I have no doubt we will. While the witnesses cite it as crucial, I presume they are not concerned that there will be any diminution of access. If they are concerned, perhaps they might elaborate on that so that it can inform any report or commentary we might make to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in the UN context.

Dr. Rouba Mhaissen made the stark remark that she thought the peace process was in great jeopardy. While as Mr. O'Keeffe said at the outset, we do not want to stray too much into the area of politics, I ask her to elaborate on that remark. Can she offer any direction to us or any hope that we might be able to achieve anything there during our tenure on the UN Security Council?

At the outset Deputy Brady said there will need to be - we might have a moral leadership role here - a restrained approach from some in the international community not to be unhelpfully involved. I thank the witnesses and I admire what they do. This is an horrific story and has been for several years.

**Chairman:** Before I call Mr. O'Keeffe again, I wish to ask a number of questions. The dire humanitarian situation persists in Syria, notwithstanding an element of there being less of a ground conflict in recent times. I read over the weekend that Damascus is now regarded in certain quarters as being a relatively peaceful city. If that is the case - I am not sure that it is - it certainly cannot be said of areas in the north-west of the country, in particular Idlib. Perhaps one of the witnesses could give us an outline of the current situation in Idlib.

I note that once again arrangements are being set in place for a donor conference. Before the

end of the month we will have our fifth Brussels donor conference. To what extent are donors being influenced by a lack of political process and a lack of political reform? What is likelihood of an element of donor fatigue given that we have now reached the tenth anniversary? Many donor conferences have taken place before and the pledges were high. The situation on the ground probably did not match that. How might a cycle of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction feed into an element of donor fatigue? How can that be best dealt with by governments, acknowledging, as many our guests have said, an onus on Ireland, particularly during our membership of the Security Council, to provide a position of leadership on this issue?

**Mr. Niall O’Keeffe:** The Chairman asked several questions. I will call on Ms Kennedy from Concern to address the question on adequate nutrition and food. Following that I will ask Dr. Mhaisse to respond to the questions on the peace process, gender-based violence and the role of women. Mr. O’Rourke from GOAL will respond to the question on the UN cross-border resolution. Finally, I will talk about donor fatigue.

**Ms Brid Kennedy:** The role of women and nutrition are strongly interlinked. We have talked about the major displacements of people over the past ten years. Traditionally women were the bearers of children and looked after rearing them. Now women have become breadwinners because many of the men have been injured or killed in the war. Regarding nutrition, women are going out predominantly trying to find low-paid work. They are not able to afford food and certainly not nutritious food. With sanctions and the economic decline, there is a shortage of good quality food and a shortage of clean water. A combination of the shortage of food and clean water along with very poor living conditions, especially for women and families living in tents in which they have coped with the extreme heat of the summer and the extreme cold and floods of the winter, is contributing to malnutrition at different levels.

In addition, the entire healthcare system has collapsed. There is a shortage of nurses and doctors because many have fled Syria. Those who are left working in the country are poorly resourced to treat children with malnutrition and other health conditions that inadvertently lead to malnutrition.

**Dr. Rouba Mhaisse:** I want to comment very briefly on the issue of sanctions, which I believe my colleague has already addressed. I want to ask a question, however. If a regime can still support military activities that cost so much, why can the same regime not support the humanitarian needs of its own people? The sanctions are mainly addressed by private companies. They are not addressed in the sectors of education or health. The Caesar Act is very clear on that. We should always weigh the opportunity costs of a large-scale humanitarian response against the money falling into the wrong hands. Some of the difficulties mentioned are also with regard to, in general, the banks’ counterterrorism legislation, which not only affects Damascus; it affects everywhere. Even Lebanon is affected by the counterterrorism legislation. This is just a small bracket.

I thank Deputy Clarke for her question. I wish a happy International Women’s Day and big solidarity to all present. We still have a long way to go as women. I am hoping we will achieve that collectively. I am happy to say that sometimes in wars, outside of the structures which used to dominate the country, such as the cultural, political and social structures, we are seeing great changes in gender roles. I believe this is happening a lot in the Syrian context. I wanted to start on a positive note. As the Deputy said, however, there are many challenges. Of course, many papers have been written about the violence against women. We can definitely send those around after the meeting. Women are being trafficked. They are returning first into Syria and are scapegoated into going there to check on the situation because they are not forced into mili-

tary service. They are discriminated against in their own communities. They are sometimes forced to have sex in return for aid. Sex is definitely used as a weapon of war by militia factions and people with arms. Therefore, this is definitely still the case.

Gender roles in politics are really shameful. Before the war, there was an image of the presence of women but it was not really a meaningful presence. I am ashamed to say that even when the opposition was in control of so many territories in Syria, the picture was not any better. Only approximately 2% to 5% of local councils were made up of women. In terms of the Geneva peace talks, the maximum participation of women that was reached in one of the rounds was 15%. Everyone who is engaged in funding the talks needs to put that as a main ask. We need to see 50% participation, or at least 30% working towards 50%, of women in all domains of political life. Unless we do it that way, we will not see this. Even in other countries where the distribution is much better, we still see a huge lack of participation of women.

I believe women play a big role in economic development, notably because today in Idlib and Lebanon, the majority of the internally displaced people and refugees are women. There are many female-headed households, as there are in government-held or regime-held areas inside Syria. As I said, women today are taking on new roles they were not doing before. Therefore, we need to push in that direction.

What can Ireland do? I really believe that despite the fact the political process is not happening and the political peace agreement has not been signed, we need to start to prepare today for when it is. This is where our real work will begin. I propose, therefore, that we should start training female community mediators - women who will start working on the infrastructure of the communities in terms of social cohesion, redevelopment and economic development. We need to start to train these women from today to lead as mediators. We can talk about politics with a big “P” and start working on pushing women into that sphere. However, much small “p” politics is going on at a community level and this is where women really have a huge role. I am happy to discuss this idea further with Trócaire and everyone else.

I will make two final comments. Someone asked about the peace process today. Russia and the regime are continuing to stall the peace process; first, by not always participating in the Geneva peace talks. These talks are being held up every single time. In addition, however, the regime or Government always puts themes on the agenda it knows are problematic. For example, rather than discussing the role of the constitution, or the real joint issues that present unity among Syrians, it puts on the agenda things like who will be considered a terrorist if he or she does not support the Syrian army, the issue of Arabness, knowing this will be a huge issue for the Kurdish component, or the counterterrorism issue.

I believe there is a huge role for Ireland to play here. First, Ireland is part of the EU, which is the umbrella for this peace process. It should, therefore, continue to push Iran, Russia and the regime to engage. I know the Iranian foreign minister was visiting. Ireland should, therefore, push Iran to stop supporting the military and push the regime. I believe Iran has even more power over the regime than Russia. Therefore, there is a need to push Iran to force it to start talking and having this conversation, which will be Syrian-led.

On the issue of Damascus being peaceful, I believe we should ask, “Peaceful for whom?” and “Peaceful how?” If we are talking about Abu Rummaneh, Al-Masaneh, Al-Malky and the centre of Damascus being safe for expatriates and international staff to have “happy hour” and such, then the answer is “Yes”; it is safe on that level. However, if we are talking about a Damascus that is free of kidnapping, taking activists into prison, forcing young men into military

service and militia putting arms in the hands of people, or if we talk about protection in the big sense of the word in terms of food, shelter, education and hospitals, then I would say, of course, that Damascus is not a safe place for Syrians.

**Mr. Niall O’Keeffe:** Mr. O’Rourke will speak to us on the other questions.

**Mr. Derek O’Rourke:** I thank Mr. O’Keeffe. Before I address Senator O’Reilly’s question on the cross-border resolution that is up for renewal, I can also address the Chairman’s question on Idlib in terms of security in north-west Syria. Four days ago, on 5 March, we marked one year of a ceasefire in the north west, which is remarkable and great. We must understand, however, that the ceasefire in this context does not mean a complete cessation of violence and hostilities. It means a massive reduction in violence and hostilities, and for that, I say it is great. We must understand, however, that the front line which separates north-west Syria and Idlib from the Government-held areas is still active.

That brings me on to Senator O’Reilly’s question on the cross-border resolution. I believe the argument of those who say it should not be renewed is based around the fact that there is a viable alternative in cross-line humanitarian aid rather than cross-border aid from Turkey, as we currently have in place, and that the humanitarian aid would come across that active front line I mentioned. The first barrier is that it is incredibly dangerous and not safe for humanitarian workers to try to deliver aid across an active front line in which there are daily incidents of shelling and sniper fire. There are landmines. Improvised explosive devices are lying around. Just last December, nine months into the ceasefire, a humanitarian staff member of a partner organisation of GOAL was killed 7 km or 8 km in from that front line by a shell. It is not safe to do it and this is the first barrier to cross line delivery of humanitarian aid.

The second barrier is the infrastructure. We are talking about feeding and providing aid not to hundreds of thousands of people but to millions of people. This requires significant logistical effort. It requires a massive supply chain. The border crossing between Turkey and north-west Syria on which it is operationally done at present is huge. There are massive loading and unloading areas with hundreds of trucks per day. There is no infrastructure on that active front line at present. If the resolution is not to be renewed on 10 July, and the alternative is to be cross line humanitarian aid delivery, then that delivery has to begin on 11 July. In other words, where is the preparation for the type of infrastructure to deliver aid to millions of people across an active front line that has to be ready four months from now? We are simply not seeing it. There is no preparation on the ground for this kind of infrastructure.

The third barrier to cross line delivery of humanitarian aid is the historical record. Ten years of conflict is a decent amount of time to be able to establish a trend, and the trend over those ten years has been that cross line aid does not work. The parties that are required to facilitate cross line aid are not interested in delivering humanitarian aid across front lines in the Syrian conflict at a rate that is necessary to feed those millions of people in, as my colleague, Mr. Alheraki, said, an area the size of County Galway that has a population the size of Ireland squeezed into it and half of them are homeless because it is not where they are from but to where they were displaced. They are not living in adequate shelter.

As I mentioned earlier, when I addressed the Cathaoirleach’s question on the status of the conflict in the north west, despite the ceasefire there are daily violations and daily conflict incidents and it is not safe.

**Mr. Niall O’Keeffe:** On the final point with regard to support for humanitarian funding

and donor fatigue, it is very clear that donor fatigue is taking place. Ten years of conflict, ten years of humanitarian crisis and ten years of the international community providing funding for humanitarian assistance for people in Syria is a very long time. What we have seen in recent years is a declining amount of humanitarian funding being provided and, on the other side, over the past year or 18 months we have really seen increasing amounts of humanitarian need. The situation is getting worse due to the economic decline, Covid, and the stalemate that exists throughout Syria and in the region for Syrian refugees.

The reality is that last year, the UN humanitarian appeal received only 56% of its funding, which is a shockingly poor result for a whole year that such a humanitarian fund would receive such a low amount of funding. This downward trend has been going on for a number of years. It is important to say that humanitarian funding is really just a sticking plaster. It will not resolve the situation. It will not find a political solution, rebuild Syria or do anything. All it does is ensure that people who are desperately in need of assistance today can receive that assistance. Unfortunately for those people, they do not know what will happen tomorrow or next week. Unfortunately, the humanitarian assistance is really just a sticking plaster for the situation.

What is needed is that at the donor conference that will take place in Brussels at the end of this month, the international community must step up and provide support in a way that is commensurate to the level of need in Syria. There also needs to be a matching political effort at international level to find a lasting solution to this. Last year, Ireland pledged €25 million to the crisis, which is fantastic. Ireland has been quite good in terms of providing humanitarian support to the UN system and to each of our organisations here, and for this we are very thankful, but the needs continue to be there.

**Chairman:** We have time for a further quick round of questions.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I apologise to the witnesses. I had another engagement this morning and I will read up on what the witnesses have said. We pump in millions of euro in aid. Do the regimes that run these countries care about their own citizens? Do they make any contribution towards the welfare of their own citizens?

**Deputy David Stanton:** We have spoken about the physical dangers, issues, tribulations and terrible things that have happened. Would any of the witnesses comment on the psychological and psychiatric impact of what is going on there now and into future?

**Senator Vincent P. Martin:** This has been a very beneficial meeting with regard to receiving information. I speak more in hope than expectation. I just hope the tragic anniversary that is looming of ten years of such a catastrophe will re-energise people and reprioritise this great catastrophe in our time. I take it from the committee's guests that funding is obviously important as is using the influence that Ireland now has. We never give up hope. We owe it to the people to keep hoping. I see political paralysis and I am trying to be hopeful. Will the witnesses leave us on a hopeful note? It is an horrendous human tragedy.

In a nutshell, apart from the many other complicated matters the witnesses have covered so well, and apart from funding and Ireland's influence at the Security Council, are there any other cry out desperate messages they have for us on which we will do our best? Our Minister for Foreign Affairs is very accessible. He is up to speed on this. As an ordinary member of the Green Party and a Senator, we are taking this so seriously today. Deputy Brian Leddin could not make it today and I am honoured and proud to stand in for him at this very important briefing. It is so auspicious to have a ten year anniversary of such an incredible tragedy. I invite the

witnesses to try to see whether there is any optimism. I thank the Chair.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** This is not a question but more of a thank you statement. I spent much time in Damascus, Hama and Homs in 2012 and 2018 so I am very familiar with the situation on the ground. I am also very familiar with the risks the witnesses and their people are taking and the great work they are doing out there. I thank them for everything they are doing. It is very much appreciated. They certainly have our full support from Dublin.

**Chairman:** In dealing with the questions and observations, perhaps some of the witnesses who have not yet made a contribution might have time to make a brief contribution before we conclude.

**Mr. Niall O’Keeffe:** I thank the Chair and the members. With regard to the question on the regime, Mr. Adham is very well placed to speak about this. There was a question about psychological issues and their cost. Dr. Mhaissen is working in that area and will respond to that question. Ms Van Lieshout from GOAL will respond to the question about hope.

**Mr. Moutaz Adham:** The question as to whether the regime cares is a political one, but I will address it from the humanitarian perspective in terms of our experience in dealing with the local authorities and technical line ministries, if not the regime itself. As outlined in our reports on access from Damascus, we have found allies in local authorities and technical ministries. There are different modalities for international NGOs operating from Damascus, and one of these is that they deal directly with the line ministries, which is very effective in the context of access. We have found allies in the local authorities and technical line ministries in the delivery of the humanitarian response. Of course, there is much more to be done and we are not at a point where we are completely satisfied, but we are able, through dialogue with the technical line ministries and local authorities, to achieve more access in Damascus and in Government-controlled areas.

We are not present in the north west or north east of the country, but in Government-controlled areas the biggest provider of basic services is still the public sector, although in the past year this has diminished greatly. Subsidies have been lifted or partially lifted on items like bread, heating fuel and so on. Nonetheless, the public sector is still a big provider of public services. Recently we have seen people queueing for hours and hours to collect a simple loaf of bread. We have seen drivers queueing outside gas stations for hours, and sometimes overnight, for 20 litres of fuel for their vehicles. It is becoming more and more difficult and challenging for the public sector to provide services. As I mentioned, the reasons for this are very complicated and difficult for humanitarian actors to analyse. It could be the impact of ten years of conflict, the effect of the sanctions or the mismanagement of the public sector.

**Dr. Rouba Mhaissen:** The question of whether the Syrian regime cares for its own citizens is an oxymoron. Today we are seeing people who previously supported the regime travelling to Europe to seek asylum, which says a lot. Even the supporters of the regime are now tired. As my colleague has said, people are queueing for several hours to get fuel or bread and so on.

In terms of psychosocial supports, we are dealing with layers and layers of trauma. People had to leave their homes, move to a different city or a different country and some took a boat to yet another country. Some were raped. We deal with children who saw their own parents killed and who had to step over their bodies, who saw genocide in their own towns. Even those who are far away from areas of conflict hear the sound of shelling. All of that accumulates. Added to that today is the isolation of Covid and the fear of not being able to live. We often talk about

women and the trauma they suffer, but imagine being a Syrian man who used to provide for his family. Today he is no longer a hero because he is not fighting inside Syria. He is a refugee who cannot earn money for his family. He no longer plays the role of provider and feels totally emasculated. He cannot cry because he is a man and needs to be strong. He cannot be intimate with his wife because he lives with ten other people in a tent. Young people do not see any future. They do not have qualifications and cannot work in the countries in which they are refugees. We are talking about multiple layers of trauma.

We are trying to deal with this in Trócaire through psychosocial support sessions and also through economic development, which also attempts to address psychosocial trauma. I am hopeful because Syria is still on the agenda of this committee. That provides me with hope because, unfortunately, it has fallen off the agenda of too many countries. I am very grateful and optimistic that members here still care and have so many questions about Syria.

**Ms Mary Van Lieshout:** I thank committee members for their committed questions and their leadership on this issue, which is important to all of us who have been working on the front line for the past ten years. I want to respond to Senator Martin's question about hope. It is important to say that the real heroes or stalwarts are the Syrian people and the Syrian NGOs who are on the front line. They are continuing daily to show up, cross the front lines and take brave decisions. Our hope lies, first and foremost, in supporting the people of Syria to come to the table and find solutions. I have 600 Syrian colleagues. As the committee heard earlier, many humanitarian workers have died over the past ten years and the vast majority of them were Syrian. They took a pledge to work for a humanitarian agency in this conflict and we should all be hopeful their bravery spills over.

There are other elements of hope too. I acknowledge the courage and bravery of the Irish Government in seeking a seat on the UN Security Council. We cannot forget that in the past four to six years, the multilateral system has been under tremendous attack from different political elements around the globe. It has been one of the most discouraging periods for the multilateral system but it was in that context Irish political representatives said they believe in the UN and in multilateralism. I never want us to lose faith in the multilateral system, as much in need of reform as it is. The Irish Government has positioned itself wisely and bravely on the Security Council. I agree with Dr. Mhaissen that this sends a message of hope.

Let us not forget there are individuals on the front line. I commend Ms Geraldine Byrne Nason, our ambassador on the Security Council. She is meeting tirelessly with NGOs to make sure she is bringing on-the-ground information from all of the world's hotspots into her conversations. I commend the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, on his recent travels to the Middle East. He travelled to the humanitarian access point in Turkey to see the practical difficulties that would arise if that border crossing closes. There is the institution of Ireland and there are some individuals who continue to give us hope today.

Let us not forget the bigger picture. We have seen a shift in the US Administration, a very hopeful and helpful shift. We can have hope that the first outings of the new Administration have been very positive for multilateralism. I am deeply hopeful the leadership of the Biden Administration, the leadership of Joe Biden himself during the Ebola crisis will come to the fore on Covid. His leadership under former President Obama will shine through and multilateralism will be strengthened. We will be at a table where peace and human rights are part of the conversation again. I hope that is all not too ethereal, but I believe there are practical reasons, from the people on the ground to the global leadership we have today, to have hope. To repeat what Dr. Mhaissen said, I thank the committee members for their attention, for attending this

meeting and for standing with all of us on the ground who are working so hard on this. I thank them for their solidarity. That is also part of our hope.

**Senator Vincent P. Martin:** I thank Ms Van Lieshout for her uplifting, hopeful words. It is a highlight of this afternoon for us. The very least we owe the people is hope. I have no doubt that the Irish Government will contribute through our access and influence with President Biden, especially in the coming days. I thank the witnesses.

**Chairman:** Does Mr. O’Keeffe wish to make some brief concluding remarks? Thank you all for your engagement.

**Mr. Niall O’Keeffe:** To be honest, Ms Van Lieshout has made very positive and hopeful remarks. They are critically important.

As a group of organisations, we highlighted a number of areas that we believe are critical, including the renewal of the UN resolution for cross-border humanitarian assistance, the importance of safe return for refugees and internally displaced people and the importance of having a safe environment to which they can return. There is also the importance of humanitarian funding, and Ireland can play a role in that. Then there is the importance of the peace process and ensuring that every effort is made to find a lasting and peaceful solution to the conflict.

On behalf of all the organisations here, we thank the committee members for giving their time today. Syria is such a humanitarian crisis it is important to be able to get this profile and engagement from so many members of the committee. I thank them for attending today, listening to our issues, asking us questions and discussing it. I thank them for their participation.

Second, in terms of the humanitarian funding, we know Ireland has been very generous in its support in this crisis. We appreciate that it is something that works across the political system in Ireland. There is strong support for the humanitarian funding which Ireland has been providing in the Syrian conflict and in many other crisis situations. Our role as humanitarian organisations and as an international community is to provide a humanitarian response in this situation and to support Syrians who are in desperate need of such support at this time. We all believe that Syrians need to be in the driving seat in terms of finding a solution to this conflict that will last for them, and deciding for themselves what Syria will be like in the future. Our role is very much to provide some assistance to help them through this horrendous period. Hopefully, the international community can come together in supporting them, and enabling and empowering them to find a solution that is inclusive and respectful for all Syrians.

Once again, I thank the committee for its time and influence. We hope the members will take on board the issues we have prioritised and use the committee’s influence wherever possible to press these priorities elsewhere.

**Chairman:** Thank you, Mr. O’Keeffe, and your team for what, in my view and in the view of the members, was an important exercise. It is a source of shame for international governments and the international community that the conflict in Syria appears to have faded from the front pages and news headlines. The exercise this afternoon was most worthwhile in updating us from the front line. I thank the representatives from SAWA for Development and Aid, GOAL, Oxfam, World Vision Ireland, Concern and Trócaire for taking the time to meet us.

I intend to propose to committee members that after this meeting we write to our colleagues in the foreign affairs and defence committees in the European Union and the UK, and also the European Parliament, and inform them of the importance of marking the tenth anniversary by

renewing efforts to urge all the actors to seek to achieve political and lasting solutions. The lasting solutions will be dependent on the leadership of the international community. We will call, specifically, for support for the further renewal of UN Resolution 2533. I intend that we will do that today.

I acknowledge the leadership and the tremendous role being played by the NGO community both in Syria and in the neighbourhood, putting its own safety at risk to assist from a humanitarian perspective. In particular, I thank the speakers who joined us from Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. I wish you all well and thank you for the work you are doing for and on behalf of the people in Syria. You are doing that in the most exceptional, difficult and dangerous circumstances and we are very grateful for your efforts. We look forward to a further engagement in the future when, perhaps, the hope that Senator Martin mentioned is being realised.

I acknowledge the logistical efforts that have been made, very successfully, to make this meeting a reality, notwithstanding the Covid restrictions. I thank our team and am grateful for the logistical assistance we received in the committee to ensure your voices were heard and that our questions were dealt with in this manner.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.18 p.m. *sine die*.