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R. Rob.

Thank you for your letter of 14 July to the Minister for Syrian Refugees, on behalf of a number of your constituents, about Syria. I am replying as Minister responsible for our relations with the Middle East.

I share your constituents' concerns regarding the appalling humanitarian situation in Syria. The UK's priority in Syria is to achieve a political settlement; this is the only way to stop this terrible war and give Syrians hope for the future. We need to see an effective Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) in Syria. We are working with partners in the International Syria Support Group and with the Opposition to find a way to restore the Cessation. We have made clear to Russia that we expect it to deliver on the commitments it made in the International Syria Support Group statement of 17 May and in the US-Russia statement of 9 May to use its influence with the parties on the ground to abide by the CoH.

We also need to see drastic improvement in humanitarian access to besieged and hard to reach areas. The reality on the ground remains shocking. Over 590,000 Syrians now live in besieged areas, and a total of 4.9m in hard-to-reach areas, in desperate need of humanitarian aid. UN agencies and NGOs are doing courageous work in the most challenging of circumstances to try to reach as many of them as possible. Yet the Asad regime, in flagrant disregard of the needs of the Syrian people and the united position of the international community on this issue, continues to block humanitarian access to many besieged areas, or to punish those populations which receive aid. In July, only three of sixteen besieged locations have been reached by humanitarian convoys – in spite of the Asad regime's commitment to allow full access. It is vital that we hold the Asad regime to account for the delivery of these commitments, and work to help the UN to deliver its plan of aid convoy deliveries on the ground. Starvation should never be used as a weapon of war and we call for complete and unfettered humanitarian access across Syria, and an end to all violations of international humanitarian law, as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Russia, which has unique influence, must put pressure on the Asad regime to lift sieges and grant full and sustained humanitarian access.

We continue to support the UN Commission of Inquiry's (COI) investigations into human rights violations and abuses in Syria. In partnership with other donor countries, we are funding the collection of documentary evidence for use in possible legal processes in the future. The UK co-sponsored a UN Security Council resolution to refer all those responsible for war-crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria, regardless of affiliation, to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Russia and China chose to veto this resolution. We play a leading role on the tri-annual Syria resolution at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). As we have done in previous sessions, the UK led HRC resolutions in March and June to draw attention to the ongoing violations and abuses of human rights in Syria, the vast majority of which are the responsibility of the Asad regime. At the March HRC, the resolution renewed the mandate of the COI so that this body can continue to carry out its important work to monitor and document human rights violations and abuses. We will continue to use our leadership role in the Human Rights Council to shine a spotlight on the dire human rights

situation and make clear our strong condemnation of the Asad regime. We will also continue to call for an end to enforced disappearances and the immediate release of those arbitrarily detained by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict. We call for the COI to be given full and unhindered access to Syria.

Your constituents' also raised the issue of women and civil society groups being involved in the Syrian peace talks. In the lead-up to the Geneva talks, we strongly encouraged both the opposition High Negotiation Committee (HNC) and the UN to include women in the negotiations. We are pleased that Mr de Mistura established a Women's Advisory Board/Committee and that the HNC included three women in their Negotiating Team, as well as establishing a separate five member Women's Consultative Committee. We are also welcome the establishment by Mr de Mistura of a Civil Society Advisory Committee. It is important that their voices are heard.

Whilst doing all we can to support a political settlement, the UK continues to be at the forefront of global efforts to provide humanitarian aid, having committed over £2.3 billion to vulnerable and displaced people inside Syria and to refugees in neighbouring countries. The UK also co-hosted the Supporting Syria and the Region Conference in London on 4 February which saw the international community pledge over \$12 billion to meet the immediate and longer-term needs of all those affected by crisis.

Please assure your constituents that the UK will continue to do all that we can to ensure that a long-term, lasting solution is found to resolve the current crisis in Syria. And in the meantime, we will maintain all efforts to help those people affected by it.

Yours sincerely,



TOBIAS ELLWOOD MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State