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PRESS RELEASE

The latest news regarding situation around Syria

**Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN Office and other
International Organisations in Geneva Gennady Gatilov's interview with
Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, March 5, 2018**

Question: What does Russia think about the resolution on the situation in Syria's Eastern Ghouta, passed by the UN Human Rights Council?

Gennady Gatilov: As is known, our British colleagues convened emergency debates on Friday and submitted a confrontational and politicised text for the Human Rights Council to consider. We saw clearly that the alarming goal of this ploy was to unleash criticism of Damascus in a scenario similar to the developments around Aleppo in 2016.

Question: And what about states which denounce terrorists in UN Security Council resolutions but which simultaneously decline to support amendments based on these same decisions of the UN Security Council?

Gennady Gatilov: We have suggested amendments to the submitted document. These amendments aim to uncover the real intentions of those who support politicised initiatives by the UN Human Rights Council that, in fact, are aimed at supporting anti-government armed units.

All states that do not want the conflict to escalate and which sincerely strive to resolve the Syrian conflict and to eliminate the terrorist threat should have supported our amendments. But one can draw the conclusion that those who initiated this resolution are not interested in resolving the crisis around Eastern Ghouta, and actually continue to support militants and turn a blind eye to their crimes.

It is symptomatic that the United Kingdom, supported by the US, demanded voting on our amendments. Therefore, they have in fact proven their support for terrorists in Syria, including in Eastern Ghouta.

We have closely monitored the voting results and we have come to the conclusion that this vote is a striking example of the application of double standards. Some states declined to denounce terrorists and terrorist attacks against civilians for political reasons. We cannot agree with this position.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks during trilateral talks with Foreign Minister of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif and Foreign Minister of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu as part of a meeting of the guarantor states of the Astana process, Astana, March 16, 2018

Mr Abdrakhmanov,

In the first place, let me thank the leaders of the Republic of Kazakhstan, your country's President Nursultan Nazarbayev and you personally, as the Chairperson of this meeting, for the hospitality and support that Kazakhstan has accorded and continues to accord ever since the Astana format was launched. I am sure that these feelings are shared by my colleagues and friends, the ministers of foreign affairs of Iran and Turkey Mohammad Javad Zarif and Mevlut Cavusoglu.

During the time that we have worked here, Astana has confirmed its role as one of the main capitals in the heart of Eurasia, where tradition and modernity, the East and the West harmoniously intertwine. With the start of the

Astana process, the city has become a crucial platform for decision-making on a Syrian settlement, one of the most acute international problems. To speak in a lofty style, when the name of the capital of Kazakhstan is heard in the media, millions of Syrians look to Astana with hope.

The Astana format, which was set up by Russia, Iran and Turkey a year ago, has proved its significance and become synonymous with progress along the path of normalising the situation in Syria and the promotion of a political and diplomatic solution. I will not enumerate all the concrete positive shifts in the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, which became possible thanks, above all, to the initiatives coordinated here, in Astana. I will only say that the de-escalation zones are really working, that the principles of humanitarian mine clearance have been worked out and that a working group has been formed to liberate the detained hostages and it held its first and very productive meeting here yesterday. Without doubt, our efforts have greatly facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid and paved the way for the resumption of a fully-fledged political process on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This was very clearly expressed in the Final Statement of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, an unprecedented conference that we convened in Sochi, with representatives from all the main ethnic and religious groups of the Syrian society.

It is worth mentioning that not everyone is satisfied with the progress made through our efforts and based on full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. Our efforts and the things we are seeking to achieve in Astana are not welcomed by those who, in breach of all international norms and in gross violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, have evidently embarked on a path towards division and regime change in Syria with the aim of splitting this very important Middle Eastern country into small principalities controlled by outside players. I am convinced that we are on the right side of history and definitely on the right side of international law. Along with the ongoing fight against terrorism, we will keep moving forward in

all the areas identified as priorities in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and reflected in the documents of the Astana talks and the Sochi Congress. I hope that the US-led international coalitions will eventually realise that instead of exonerating terrorists, as is now happening in Eastern Ghouta, it is necessary to wage a principled, consistent, uncompromising struggle against terrorist organisations, including Jabhat al-Nusra, no matter what it mimics or what new names it takes. One of the main problems in this connection (something we discussed with our American colleagues from as far back as ex-President Barack Obama's administration) is the need to separate the right, constructive armed opposition from terrorists, above all Jabhat al-Nusra, against which the American coalition is still refusing to take action, despite the fact that the UN Security Council's resolution qualifies it as a terrorist group.

I will not elaborate on our further work. This is an internal matter. We will tell the media about what has been agreed today. At this stage, let me once again thank our Kazakh hosts and friends and express confidence that the Astana process will continue to succeed in providing effective assistance to the Syrian settlement in full compliance with UN Security Council resolutions.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu following a meeting of the Astana process guarantor states, Astana, March 16, 2018

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have just ended a trilateral meeting of foreign ministers of the Russian Federation, the Turkish Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran that guarantee compliance with the ceasefire regime in Syria. I avail myself of this opportunity to sincerely thank the leaders of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the President of

Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev and our colleague and friend, Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Kairat Abdrakhmanov, for their hospitality as well as for their assistance to the Astana format throughout the last year.

We have reviewed the results of our work since the Astana process was launched in January 2017 in the capital of Kazakhstan. Since that time, our high-ranking representatives of guarantor countries have held eight rounds of detailed talks in Astana. This made it possible to approve specific measures for scaling down violence on the ground, restoring trust between the conflicting parties, improving the humanitarian situation and incentivising efforts to search for a political solution. It is also important that successful collective efforts made it possible to considerably expedite the complete elimination of ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other terrorist organisations, as listed by the UN Security Council. Today, virtually no one can offer any well-substantiated arguments denying the fact that the Astana format and its achievements have become an effective tool for facilitating peace and stability in Syria, that this format has proved its viability, and that it remains highly popular.

I would like to make a reservation here that unsubstantiated attempts have been made and are being made to downplay and even nullify the significance of the Astana process. We can see this very clearly. This is being done by those who don't like the very fact of partner-like cooperation between Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as by those who do not want to preserve Syria as an integral state and who want to turn this vitally important country into another chaos-ridden territory where it would be convenient to play geopolitical games.

Contrary to this adventurous line, the three guarantor countries firmly display their invariable commitment to Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. They remain committed to fundamental principles that are formalised in the UN Security Council's resolutions, primarily UN Security Council's Resolution 2254. In January 2018, representatives of all sections of Syrian society clearly confirmed these highly important principles during the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in Sochi on the initiative of the

Presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran. Today, we have agreed to continue assisting the Syrians in restoring the country's unity and achieving a political settlement, including through the establishment of the Constitutional Committee, as agreed at the Congress in Sochi, and to launch its work in Geneva in the near future. As before, this implies our firm support for this political process being implemented by the Syrians themselves. As the UN Security Council has decided, the Syrians themselves must reach a mutual agreement without outside interference. It is the people of Syria alone who have to determine their country's future.

Further coordination of efforts of Russia, Iran and Turkey as guarantor countries is particularly important today when the situation in Syria and such areas as Eastern Ghouta, Yarmouk, Fuah and Kefraya, Al-Rukban, Raqqa, the Idlib and Hama provinces, has been seriously aggravated. We can see a lop-sided interpretation of the situation around Eastern Ghouta, similar to comments on the situation in Eastern Aleppo. Obviously, some of our Western colleagues want to save terrorists and to preserve their combat potential. First of all, this concerns Jabhat al-Nusra terrorists acting as provocateurs in scenarios of Western geopolitical stage directors who are guided by anything, except the interests of the Syrian nation.

Despite daily humanitarian pauses being introduced since February 27, constant fire attacks on Damascus kill civilians, and convoys with humanitarian aid are being blocked. This creates an atmosphere of fear in the Syrian capital and provides a pretext for far-fetched accusations against Syrian authorities and also Russia who reportedly are not doing enough to fulfil the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2401. We would like to remind everyone that any use of force against Damascus on the basis of far-fetched pretexts is unacceptable. Recent threats regarding possible unilateral US military strikes against Syria, including Damascus, just like in April 2017, on the basis of groundless accusations as regards the use of chemical weapons by the

Government of Syria, are unacceptable and cannot be tolerated. We have stated this to US representatives with all clarity via diplomatic and military channels.

Despite the entire fuss raised around Eastern Ghouta, we continue to assist the efforts being made by the Syrian authorities to evacuate civilians, the sick and the wounded and to provide access to humanitarian convoys, and this work is producing obvious results. Yesterday alone, over 12,000 people left Eastern Ghouta. The UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross have sent a convoy with 137 tonnes of humanitarian aid to Douma. We are determined to continue our efforts to ensure strict and unfailing compliance with all provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2401 in their entirety, so as to help consolidate the ceasefire regime as well as to improve the humanitarian situation all over Syria, while resolutely combating terrorists who will be targeted despite any resolutions. We are urging all other parties to be guided by these principles.

I would like to speak separately about yesterday's first meeting of a new mechanism of the Astana format held in Astana. This mechanism is a working group to release detainees and hostages, to exchange the bodies of the deceased and to locate missing persons. Apart from representatives of our three countries, the meeting involved representatives of the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross. This group's initial practical work is an important contribution to the process of restoring trust between the Syrians and normalising the overall situation in Syria.

Our working document that was coordinated yesterday determines the parameters of our future work and creates all necessary conditions to make this work effective.

In conclusion, I would like to note once again that the Astana format continues to develop successfully. But it is even more important not to stop after these achievements and to expand the accumulated potential. Today's meeting confirms our common desire to continue our joint work in the interests of a reliable and long-term Syrian peace settlement. The agreed-upon joint statement

made by the three ministers, being circulated after our meeting, reflects our assessments and future plans.

We have also agreed to prepare for a regular summit of the three countries' leaders, scheduled for April 4 in Turkey. This event is acquiring particular significance today and is called on to strengthen our coordinated efforts for achieving equitable peace in Syria. I am confident that as soon as this goal is achieved, it will positively influence the overall situation in the Middle East.

I would like to thank our colleagues for this extremely close cooperation. We would like to thank our Kazakhstani hosts once again. I am confident that this is not our last meeting in hospitable Kazakhstan.

Question: Did you agree today to extend the duration of the de-escalation zones? If so, how long will they function? Will the extension last six months, as usual, or any other term? Did you discuss the possibility of expanding these de-escalation zones to include new territories including the Afrin area? I would like to clarify the remarks by Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu: Do I understand correctly that a congress similar to the one in Sochi will be held in Istanbul and later in Iran?

Sergey Lavrov: I would like to start with this. The interpretation was inaccurate. It implies that the November 22 Sochi summit with the Presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey would not be a one-time event. The next summit of the three presidents is scheduled for April 4 in Turkey. After that, we will, naturally, be ready to accept an invitation from our Iranian friends. We are not talking about a congress, as mentioned by the interpreter, so we ask you not to create any ambiguity in the media.

Regarding your first question, the de-escalation zones continue to function, and these zones are not permanent, as was noted during their creation. This regime has already been extended once. When the current period expires, we will decide on the future of the zones, with due consideration for the situation on the ground and the developments around the zones. We are

interested in ending the violations of the ceasefire as soon as possible. And what is also important, we are interested in establishing contacts between the local authorities inside the de-escalation zones and the Syrian government agencies on maintaining normal human life and supporting the local population. This is a key aspect of the de-escalation zone concept. We did not discuss expanding them or the creation of new zones.

Question: Only yesterday, efforts by the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides enabled 12,000 people to leave Eastern Ghouta. How would you explain the fact that the UN is not playing a role in this process? Are you satisfied with the UN's overall contribution to the Geneva process to establish a constitutional committee?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already shared information on Eastern Ghouta. As you have said, more than 12,000 civilians left Eastern Ghouta, and this process continues. I just received a phone call from Moscow. I apologise for having to answer the phone call, but it was on the subject we are now discussing. There are serious problems: people are leaving the area, but the militants are trying to prevent them from doing so. Nevertheless, little by little, efforts to reach out to field commanders in Eastern Ghouta are yielding results. I hope they go further and separate their forces from Jabhat al-Nusra which controls a considerable part of Eastern Ghouta. Humanitarian aid is being sent into this enclave, primarily by the Russian military. As I said in my opening remarks, the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) yesterday sent a humanitarian convoy with 140 tonnes of aid. This happened after a lengthy pause when the UN was not very active in dealing with these matters. Of course, this was partly attributable to security concerns. Overall, it is obvious that the international community must step up humanitarian assistance.

As I said, humanitarian assistance is being delivered to Eastern Ghouta, and there are now more deliveries like this. There are problems with people leaving Eastern Ghouta, since they need accommodation, and even the most basic goods are lacking, including blankets and essential supplies. We call on

those within the international community who have voiced concerns about the humanitarian situation in Syria and the fate of civilians, and primarily the UN and other humanitarian organisations, to provide immediate relief to the people who are fleeing terrorists and are moving from Eastern Ghouta to territories controlled by the Syrian Government.

As for the UN's role in the Geneva process and efforts to establish a constitutional committee based on the resolutions of the Sochi Congress, I think that it would be premature to draw any conclusions. The Sochi Congress was held just over a month ago. Agreements on how the constitutional committee is to be formed were reached at the Congress. It is obvious that the UN must play a coordinating role, while its actions should be based on the contributions of the three guarantor states. Based on the resolutions of the Sochi Congress, the UN must ensure that the constitutional committee is inclusive and representative in its composition in terms of the participation of all ethnic, religious and political groups in Syrian society.

This is not easy, and let me remind you that today we discussed this matter. In fact, it took our friends from Saudi Arabia more than six months to unite the so-called Riyadh, Cairo and Moscow opposition groups into one delegation, which was a very useful initiative that everyone supported.

I am not saying that the creation of the constitutional committee should take that long, but I would refrain from any estimates at this point, since this is work in progress. This is quite a complicated process, and probably a decisive phase in the political process. As soon as the committee is established and accepted by everyone as a competent body, it is then that the work on constitutional reform can begin. Of course, as stated in all UN Security Council resolutions, any agreement can only be reached by common accord between the government and the opposition. Nobody can impose anything on anyone.

Question: We have to ask about Washington and London's latest statements and actions regarding Russia. What can you say about the recent statement by the US State Department regarding plans for new sanctions against

Russia over the poisoning of Sergey Skripal as well as the steps taken by the US Treasury Department under the so-called Mueller list?

Also, I would like to repeat what the chief UK military official has said: “Russia should go away and shut up.” Do you remember the last time such a high-ranking official used this language in relations with Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: It is highly impossible to remember [spoken in English]. No, I do not recall this, of course. We no longer take notice of this, and we do not get angry over the new sanctions – not that we ever did. They invented a story about our interference in their elections. It began more than a year ago. They have held investigations and hearings. But not a single hard fact has been presented to the public. They are compensating for the absence of facts with ever new sanctions for the same crime, which, it should be said, runs contrary to Anglo-Saxon law. In fact, we have seen a completely unusual side of the Anglo-Saxon system of law and justice. On the other hand, it has happened so many times of late that we should be used to it.

What is happening? I watched BBC and CNN news today. Their manner of providing information is very simple. They say that France, Germany and the US stand in solidarity with Britain. They demand to know why Russia has poisoned that colonel. But Russia says it has not poisoned him. This is how they present the matter. They do not say that an investigation is underway, that it is not over yet and that the results of this investigation have not been submitted to any court, in particular a UK court. They do not say that the UK has referred this problem to the OPCW and hence should act in keeping with its CWC commitments. They do not say that Russia has legitimately asked to see any evidence of these allegations, or that Russia is acting in accordance with an international treaty that has been ratified by Russia, Britain and all other countries, which are seriously concerned about this now. They have told us openly that they would not talk with us. It is a flagrant violation of the CWC provisions, under which any signatory state, before doing anything, must directly interact with the state that is suspected to be the origin of the poisonous

substance in question. But they tell us arrogantly that they will not talk with us. Your colleagues from the BBC and other media outlets do not tell this to the Western reader. They phrase the news very simply but they announce them with very meaningful expressions on their faces. Russia has been called upon to explain why it did this, but Russia has denied the responsibility. Needless to say, this is how ordinary people will remember this. These are the methods of Western propaganda. I hope we will never stoop so low.

In principle, I feel embarrassed talking about this situation. I think we did all we could and we have asked absolutely legitimately that the UK do what it should do under the CWC. But you can see the reaction this has produced. Even in British parliament, when an opposition leader asked the country's leaders to show them what they have on Russia, they refused to do so. I want to repeat that they completely disregard our request that in this case we should wait until the poisoning victim gets better – I pray for this – just as his daughter, who is a Russian citizen. They refuse to say anything about her, although they should. Likewise, they do not share any information about the death of Nikolay Glushkov, even though they should. Why not ask Mr Skripal, when he gets better? He will probably be able to tell us what happened on the day of the tragedy. There is no evidence indicating when a hearing of his case could be held.

We initially cooperated with the British justice authorities in the notorious case of Alexander Litvinenko. But when we started asking concrete questions related to the investigation of his death, our British colleagues stopped working with us and held the hearing behind closed doors. The ruling refers to confidential materials which have not been shown to anyone outside the hearing. Despite the fact that it was a well-orchestrated mystery, they at least held a hearing, after which the British government reviewed its activities and drew conclusions. But no hearing has so far been held in the case of Skripal.

I no longer want to comment on this. It is on the conscience of those who have launched this shameless and unjustified anti-Russia game.

As for the statement by the chief UK military official, as you put it, the UK Defence Secretary is a nice young man who probably wants to make history with his loud statements. “Highly possible” is the main argument of Theresa May regarding Russia’s alleged guilt. And his contribution is, “Russia should go away and shut up.” Or maybe he did not receive a proper education, I don't know.

**Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s opening remarks during a meeting with
President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev on the
sidelines of a meeting of the guarantor states of the Astana process, Astana,
March 16, 2018**

Mr Nazarbayev,

Colleagues,

I am sincerely grateful to you, Mr President, for your attention to the work of the Astana process. Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and inform you about the results of our ministerial session.

We began with the humanitarian hardships of the Syrian people. We fully agree that this problem is a priority. We must focus on addressing it. The UN Security Council adopted yet another resolution that calls for immediate negotiations to enable the ceasefire to come into force across the whole of Syria. To a large extent, this problem is being created by terrorists who use civilians as human shields, including in Eastern Ghouta, where around 20,000 civilians were able to leave over the past two days. Together with our UN partners we are considering ways to provide them with essentials in temporary locations until they are able to return to their homes in Eastern Ghouta, like it is the case in eastern Aleppo, where around 200,000 residents, who fled along the

humanitarian corridors when the fight against terrorists was underway, have returned by now.

I would like to state very clearly that we are exceedingly grateful to our Kazakh friends and to you personally, Mr Nazarbayev, for offering Astana as a platform for our talks. Astana gave a start to the process that has been recognised by all, including those who, as you said, are not particularly happy about this initiative that took place in the capital of Kazakhstan with the participation of our three guarantor states. The main thing is that Astana has encouraged efforts within the framework of the Syrian settlement process in all directions: the fight against terrorism, the creation of de-escalation zones, where the ceasefire, despite violations, has made it possible to reduce violence, address humanitarian issues more effectively and, still more importantly, paved the way for a political process on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which was again discussed during the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi, where Kazakhstan, as the host country of the Astana process, was also represented. Today, you have clearly reaffirmed the need, in keeping with the Sochi agreements, to help our colleagues from the UN to form a constitutional committee and move forward.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the Astana platform is valuable not only in terms of creating the best possible conditions for staying and working here, for the impeccable arrangement of all aspects of our meetings, including news conferences, translation and so on, but also in terms of creating a comfortable atmosphere not just for our direct work, but also a comfortable political atmosphere, considering Astana's invariable desire to bridge the gaps between conflicting viewpoints. The very spirit of Kazakhstan's solution-oriented foreign policy helps us work more effectively. Of course, perfection has no limits, but we are grateful to you for your high praise of our efforts, your promised attention to this work and the participation of our friend, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kairat Abdrakhmanov, in arrangements and in setting the right political tone for our discussions.

**Comment by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov following a meeting with
President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev on the sidelines of a
meeting of the guarantor states of the Astana process, Astana,
March 16, 2018**

On my own behalf and on behalf of my colleagues from Iran and Turkey, I would like to thank President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev and the entire Kazakh leadership for the hospitality accorded to the participants in this regular meeting within the framework of the Astana process. This time, it was a meeting of foreign ministers and it marked a very important step in promoting a settlement in Syria.

We assessed the work of the Astana format over the past year.

We stated that, despite sporadic incidents, the level of violence has dropped significantly after the establishment of four de-escalation zones and that essential progress has been made in tackling humanitarian problems.

Certainly, we reaffirmed our determination to continue the painstaking, uncompromising fight against remainder of terrorist groups identified as such by the UN Security Council.

We again reiterated that positive changes on the ground in Syria enable us at present to transition to active efforts towards launching political negotiations on the future state system of Syria on the basis of the principles approved by the overwhelming majority of Syrian ethnic, religious, political and social groups that gathered in Sochi on January 30, 2018. The Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi adopted the Final Statement creating all necessary pre-requisites for the UN to step up its work and in keeping with the recommendations of the three guarantor states – Russia, Turkey and Iran – to form a constitutional committee that will represent all layers of Syrian society. I hope that this will be done fairly quickly.

We agreed upon a summit meeting of the presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran to be held in Turkey on April 4, during which new additional approaches will be coordinated on how to advance and put to life the principles of a settlement, approved at the UN Security Council and actively supported by the Astana process.

Yet another important decision reached today is the creation of a working group to liberate the detained hostages, recover the bodies of those killed and search for those missing, which is setting down to work in cooperation with representatives from the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

We again thanked President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev for his attention to our work and the efforts being taken by our Kazakh friends to create the most favourable and comfortable atmosphere possible for our work and for addressing complicated political matters.

**Comment by the Information and Press Department on the situation in
Damascus' suburb Eastern Ghouta**

We note with satisfaction that the situation in Eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus where terrorists and extremists had ruled supreme and had sporadically shelled the capital of Syria and committed other crimes for a long time, is now becoming more stable. The government forces have reestablished control over most of this district's territory. Talks, now underway with credible members of military units, aim to end the confrontation as soon as possible.

At the same time, representatives of the Russian Armed Forces are conducting a unique and unprecedented in scale operation in keeping with the unanimously adopted UN Security Council Resolution 2401. The only aim of the operation is to help the residents of Eastern Ghouta. As a result of this operation, over 70,000 civilians have been evacuated via humanitarian corridors. In addition to this, the UN, the Syrian Red Crescent Society and the

International Red Cross Committee have sent in three humanitarian convoys there.

Those Syrians who have escaped from Jihadist captivity are openly talking about the crimes of extremists and lawlessness, including the confiscation of humanitarian aid, the use of civilians as a human shield and efforts to hamper voluntary evacuation.

Representatives from the UN humanitarian agencies working on the ground unequivocally praise the efforts of Russia and Syria to resolve Eastern Ghouta's humanitarian problems in extremely difficult conditions. However, it appears that these reports are being suppressed by senior UN Secretariat officials and are also being ignored by Western politicians as well as media outlets that prefer to circulate unverified and openly false stories, including those about the alleged use of chemical weapons by the government forces. Their only goal is to discredit Moscow and Damascus, no matter what.

The initiative of some Western members of the UN Security Council to hold a special meeting on March 19, to invite UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, who is known for his biased and subjective opinions concerning the situation in Syria and in many other countries and whose actions as well as comments are unacceptable for such a senior UN official, and to review the human rights situation in Syria speaks volumes in the context of the propaganda campaign. But their plans aiming to organise yet another emotional show at the UN Security Council, to slander Russia and Syria and to formalise human rights matters in the Council's agenda (in violation of its mandate) were not realised. Indicatively, this initiative did not receive the required support at the UN Security Council. Mr Al Hussein's successor will have to work hard in order to restore the high reputation of the responsible position of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that he had undermined.

Briefing by Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department

Artyom Kozhin, Moscow, March 23, 2018

The situation in Syria

The situation in Syria remains tense.

The international community continues to focus on Eastern Ghouta where an unparalleled counter-terrorist operation is being carried out by the Syrian army with the support of the Russian Aerospace Forces. The goal is to eliminate the terrorist threat to Damascus from Jabhat al-Nusra extremist armed groups, which took control of this densely populated suburb of the Syrian capital. The operation is unusual in that to be successful, it is necessary to separate the terrorists from the civilians whom they are using as human shields.

With the assistance of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides, over 80,000 civilians have been evacuated to date from Eastern Ghouta through dedicated humanitarian corridors, which represent a large part of the local population. The people were evacuated under the supervision of representatives from UN institutions, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which did not find any violations of international humanitarian law during the evacuation process.

The residents left the place of their own accord, and none of them were subjected to violence or robbed by the Syrian military or security forces who kept order. Once free, the people started crying and talking about the suffering they experienced while held hostage by the terrorists. Their hatred of the extremist groups which arbitrarily killed civilians, robbed them of their property, appropriated humanitarian aid and forced ordinary people to starve, was running high.

The Syrian Government deployed three camps for the temporarily displaced persons outside the towns of Dumayr, Adra and Hirjillah. The Russian military are actively involved in providing food, bedding and first aid. We expect that the international community will join these efforts.

The terrorists tried to prevent the evacuation of the civilians from the fighting zones, intimidated people and opened fire at the humanitarian corridors realising that the presence of a significant number of civilians in Eastern Ghouta hampered the actions of government forces as they tried to avoid collateral damage.

Residential areas of Damascus are coming under regular rocket and mortar attack. On March 20, gunmen launched rockets at the Kashkul market from an area outside Ain Terma in Eastern Ghouta, which is controlled by the Failaq ar-Rahman group, killing 37 and wounding 35.

By now, the Syrian army has liberated about 80 percent of Eastern Ghouta. In accordance with the agreement reached with the assistance of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of the Opposing Sides, the evacuation of illegal armed groups from Harasta to the province of Idlib began on March 22.

In liberated Eastern Ghouta towns, the Syrian military found several makeshift workshops for manufacturing munitions and reservoirs with poisonous agents, in particular, chlorine, weighing about 40 tonnes, which is indicative of the scale of the provocations planned by the terrorists.

The town of Afrin in northwestern Syria was taken as part of the Olive Branch operation by the Turkish military on March 18. Fully cognizant of their responsibility for the lives of the local residents, the command of the Kurdish units had decided to leave the city without a fight. Syrian illegal armed groups entered Afrin and proceeded to ransack the town. The mayhem was stopped only a few days later thanks to the decisive actions of the Turkish army, which arrested over 100 marauders.

We note the lack of progress in implementing UNSC Resolution 2401 concerning the situation in Raqqa and Rukban Camp for temporarily displaced persons. To reiterate, access to these sites is controlled by the US military, and has so far been closed to representatives of the legitimate Syrian authorities, the UN and independent media. During a meeting of the international task force on humanitarian assistance to Syria in Geneva on March 16, the UN Resident

Coordinator in Syria Ali al-Zaatari confirmed the willingness of the Syrian government, the ICRC and the SARC to start delivering humanitarian aid to Rukban after receiving written security guarantees from the Americans.

We plan to continue our efforts to implement the provisions of UNSC Resolution 2401, which is aimed at reinforcing the ceasefire and improving the humanitarian situation throughout Syria while resolutely fighting terrorists, and call upon all parties to help us in any way they can.

We consistently work on the political track seeking to achieve a settlement in Syria. A trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey as guarantor countries behind observing the ceasefire in Syria took place in Astana on March 16. The ministers agreed to continue to assist the Syrians in restoring the unity of their country and achieving a political settlement of the crisis under UN Security Council Resolution 2254, in particular, by creating a Constitutional Committee and launching its work in Geneva, as stipulated by the decisions of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi.

The first meeting of the working group on releasing detainees/hostages, transferring the bodies of those who lost their lives and searching for missing people took place on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting in the capital of Kazakhstan, and was attended by representatives of the UN and the ICRC. The start of its practical work has become an important contribution to the process of restoring confidence among the Syrians and normalising the situation in Syria in general.