

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

“We need unconditional, unimpeded and sustained access to every single vulnerable person in Syria”

Entretien avec

Stephen O'Brien • Sous-Secrétaire Général des Nations unies pour les Affaires humanitaires et Coordinateur de l'aide d'urgence (BCAH)

What has been going on in Syria for the past six years is probably unprecedented since the Second World War. But this paroxysmic conflict, which captures the attention of the entire international community – but without triggering funds and actions – should not make us forget the massive humanitarian crises that are scattered around the planet. This is what Stephen O'Brien tells us during an exclusive interview he gave to the chief editor of *Humanitarian Alternatives*. An opportunity, also, to know a little more about the reform of the UN since the arrival of António Guterres at its head.

Humanitarian Alternatives – *What are the UN's current priorities in Syria?*

Stephen O'Brien – The UN will continue to be at the forefront of efforts to facilitate a peace process in Syria. The need for a political solution to bring an end to this horrendous chapter in Syria's history is as urgent and profound as ever.

At the same time, six years on from the onset of conflict, humanitarian needs in Syria and neighbouring countries are unprecedented. Some 13.5 million people cannot access the very basics they need to survive; 6.3 million people are internally displaced – 430,000 of them Palestinian refugees –, almost all of whom are reliant on humanitarian assistance.

Even if country-wide peace were to take hold tomorrow, large-scale humanitarian assistance operations would still likely be needed for years to come. The focus for the UN in Syria and in neighbouring countries will continue to be to save lives, protect people and reduce suffering until people can rebuild their lives in safety and security.

To assist those in need, we need unconditional, unimpeded and sustained access to every single vulnerable person in Syria. With some 640,000 people besieged by fighting parties, and 4 million people in hard-to-reach towns and cities, we do not have the level or frequency of access that we need. We have called for, and will continue to call for freedom of movement for all people so they can access essential services, livelihoods and the very basics of life for their families.

Today the UN and its partners are delivering food assistance, health and nutrition support and other life-saving aid to millions of people every month. But our funding is still falling critically short. Last year we received only half of the US\$3.1 billion we needed to save lives and reduce suffering inside Syria. This year we need \$3.4 billion, in addition to \$4.63 billion to address the needs of refugees from Syria and communities hosting them over 2017 and 2018. While donors have been, and are, generous, unless further funds are secured, the UN and its partners will have

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to scale back life-saving assistance for Syrians, refugees and host communities. The impact of this will be catastrophic.

While the focus for the UN is on saving and protecting lives, we are also starting to help families and communities to recover and rebuild their lives, and these efforts will gain momentum over the coming years. The vast majority of Syrians – whether inside Syria or refugees – fall below the poverty line, and struggle to afford essentials such as food, rent and health care, let alone access to jobs, while half of refugee children are out of school. The devastation to civic infrastructure has known no bounds, with hundreds of health clinics and hospitals damaged or destroyed, alongside one third of the country's schools and numerous water and electricity stations.

Rebuilding the lives and repairing the devastation that has been wrought on Syria's infrastructure will require an epic, years-long rebuilding effort. We must harness the power of all partners, including development actors, humanitarians and the private sector, to fix a broken Syria.

H. A. – *UN reform-wise, what measures do you and the Secretary-General plan to undertake?*

S. O'B. – These are challenging times. We face new and old wars that are more interlinked and complex than ever before, making them increasingly difficult to resolve. These conflicts produce horrific violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses. Fear is growing globally as international terrorism networks extend their reach. Today, more people have fled their homes than since the Second World War. Meanwhile, megatrends, including climate change, population growth, urbanization, food insecurity and water scarcity are increasing the competition for resources and heightening tensions and instability.

In this interlinked, networked era, multilateralism is more important than ever. As Secretary-General António Guterres has stressed, the United Nations must be at the cornerstone of this multilateral approach. The Secretary-General has outlined three major reform areas for the United Nations over coming years. The first is on conflict prevention, recognizing that the most serious shortcoming of the international community is its inability to prevent crises from taking hold. The second will be to deliver on the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, with their promise to leave no one behind. This will entail repositioning development at the forefront of the UN's work and will endorse the new way of working adopted at the World Humanitarian Summit, whereby humanitarian and development partners work towards collective outcomes to reduce vulnerability. Thirdly, the Secretary-General has initiated an internal reform process to simplify systems, decentralize power and create a more nimble, efficient and effective UN. Achieving gender parity by the end of the Secretary-General's mandate will be part of this reform.

OCHA is also in the midst of a reform process in which we are re-aligning our structure, management and staffing systems to ensure we are fit for purpose to face the challenges of the future. I kick started this process in 2015, eager to ensure that OCHA is optimally structured and managed. In a separate process, OCHA's funding from donors levelled out, following many years of growth. Donors and stakeholders across the humanitarian spectrum recognize the critical importance of OCHA's mandate, which spans coordination, policy, advocacy, information management and resource mobilisation. As we move forward, our goal is to more precisely outline our role and maximize our effectiveness in each of these areas, through a streamlined structure, more flexible systems and more empowered staff.

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H. A. – *What are the main crises that will take up most of your time and energy in coming months?*

S. O'B. – Humanitarian suffering grows year on year. It is driven mainly by conflicts that last for years – even decades – with no end in sight, and an increase in the frequency, intensity and longevity of natural disasters. This year, the UN and humanitarian partners are calling for \$22.2 billion to meet the needs of 92.8 million people in 33 countries, reflecting an exponential growth in need. These figures may rise as new crises hit and new appeals are launched over the year.

Emergency appeals have been launched for years in succession due to protracted crises in Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Iraq, the occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, Sudan and beyond. While humanitarian funding is higher than ever, it is not keeping up with the relentless growth in need. Last year, our global humanitarian appeal was only just over half-funded by year-end.

The following are some of the crises that will require an urgent scale-up of efforts. In South Sudan, a brutal civil war has displaced one in five people – or 2.3 million people, over half of them children. Thousands of homes have been ruined, tens of thousands of women have been brutally sexually assaulted as a war tactic, and almost 1 million children cannot access school.

In Yemen, the UN is seeking \$2.1 billion to help 12 million people whose lives have been devastated by two years of war. Conflict and climate change have caused the world's largest hunger crisis, with 14.1 million women, children and men at risk of hunger and looming famine. A total of 18.8 million people need assistance: they fear for their safety as civilians, and civilian infrastructure is targeted as a deliberate war tactic.

A devastating drought in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia is putting 15 million people's lives and livelihoods in jeopardy. In Ethiopia alone, 5.6 million people face hunger unless they can access food assistance, while 300,000 children are at risk of malnutrition.

Boko Haram-related violence in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and north-eastern Nigeria, the four countries that border Lake Chad, has affected 30 million people, forced 11 million people to need urgent assistance and left tens of thousands of people facing famine in north-east Nigeria. Homes have been torched, possessions looted and livelihoods destroyed, forcing people to flee, blocking them from farming and fishing, and leading to border closures. The UN is seeking \$1.5 billion to help 8.2 million acutely vulnerable people across the Lake Chad region.

Interview by Boris Martin, chief editor

Biography • Stephen O'Brien

United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, at the head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) since June 2015.

As a former Conservative Member of Parliament in the UK for 16 years, Stephen O'Brien was the Prime Minister's Envoy and Special Representative for the Sahel 2012-2015. He brings extensive experience in multilateral diplomacy and advocacy, gained over 35 years of global

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leadership in the campaign to control Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases, for which he was awarded the 2014 Champions Action Award in Washington DC.

Before his political career, he was an entrepreneur and practised as a lawyer in the City of London. Born in Mtwara, Tanzania, and schooled in Mombasa, Kenya and the UK, he gained his MA (Law) at Emmanuel College, Cambridge University. In 2013, Stephen O'Brien was appointed a Privy Counsellor by the Queen Elizabeth II.

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