

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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November 23, 2020

Ms. Rosemary A. DiCarlo
Under-Secretary General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
The United Nations

Mr. Achim Steiner
Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme

Re: Request to Activate the UN Parameters and Principles in Syria

Dear Ms. DiCarlo and Mr. Steiner,

We write to urge you to ensure that the Parameters and Principles for UN Assistance in Syria are operationalized across all agencies in Syria.

As the co-chairs of the working group on the Parameters and Principles, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have a central role to play in ensuring that the delivery of assistance in Syria abides by humanitarian principles and the UN parameters and advances human rights.

Last year, Human Rights Watch published a report, "[Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria](#)," where we found that the Syrian government has developed a policy and legal framework that allows it to divert aid and reconstruction resources to fund atrocities, punish those perceived as opponents, and benefit those loyal to it.

Since then, the government has continued to restrict the access of humanitarian organizations to communities in need, selectively approve aid projects, and impose requirements to partner with local actors vetted by Syrian security. This has extended to humanitarian assistance under Covid-19, where Human Rights Watch found that humanitarians continue to face [significant longstanding obstacles in transporting materials and personnel from Damascus to nongovernment-controlled areas of northeast Syria](#) as well as within government-held areas, including delays in procuring permissions to transfer shipments, [blocking the collection of testing samples, and the discriminatory distribution of protective personal equipment](#).

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In July 2020, Oxfam and the Norwegian Refugee Council published a report that also describes the [difficulties that both humanitarian organizations when operating in government-held areas](#), including bureaucratic obstacles that can lead to months of delays to implement new work; difficulties negotiating certain types of humanitarian activities with government authorities; limits to engaging directly with communities; and lack of funding to scale up quickly.

The situation has become more urgent with the [closure of three of the four border crossings that were previously authorized by the UN Security Council](#), and upon which UN agencies relied to be able to deliver assistance to areas not under the control of the Syrian government. Now, UN agencies are increasingly dependent on the Syrian government's cooperation to deliver assistance to these areas. However, as a [February 2020 report from the UN Secretary-General](#) that assessed the impact of the border closures on the humanitarian response showed, a range of bureaucratic obstacles in late 2019 and early 2020 makes the “crossline delivery of medical items ... particularly restrictive,” and crossline operations from Damascus have not compensated for the closure of the cross-border operations.

These policies run counter to the UN Parameters and Principles and create undue pressure on humanitarian actors as well as a significant risk of co-optation and discriminatory distribution of humanitarian aid. In the absence of effective transparency, oversight, or guarantees, the UN, humanitarian actors, businesses, and donors have an enhanced obligation to mitigate the significant risk that aid and reconstruction funding will be redirected to empower abusive actors, exacerbate injustices against civilians, and prolong suffering in Syria.

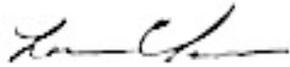
One step towards fulfilling that obligation is the full operationalization of the UN Parameters and Principles, which as you know, were developed by all relevant UN entities, and endorsed by the Secretary-General in recognition of the difficult operating environment that Syria poses. In October 2020, the UN Working Group on Transnational Business and Human Rights also [affirmed the UN Parameters and Principles as an example](#) of how forward planning for assistance in post-conflict settings should proceed.

Operationalization of the UN Parameters and Principles can start with:

- Ensuring that all agencies incorporate these principles into their operations, including at the program design, procurement, proposal development, and assessment stages, and monitoring their progress regarding implementation;

- Requiring UN agency staff in Syria to report back regularly and transparently on problems they face to the Working Group for the Parameters and Principles, the multi-disciplinary group mandated to monitor adherence to the parameters and principles;
- Ensuring that regional UN staff, the donor-humanitarian contact group, and external actors can also refer the problems with the humanitarian operations to the Working Group;
- Ensuring that the Working Group meets regularly and sets in place collective plans for resolving problems, with the guidance and support of donors and external experts.

Sincerely Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis Charbonneau". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Louis Charbonneau
United Nations Director
Human Rights Watch