

## Is Aleppo the grave of the United Nations?

Aleppo is to Syria today what Guernica was to Spain during its civil war, a martyred city and the harbinger of more disasters to come. Equally, the United Nations (UN) risks becoming in the 21st century what the League of Nations became in the 20th: irrelevant.

We cannot turn a blind eye. Along with a terrible human cost, at stake is not only Syria's future but the credibility of the UN. According to UN reports, the Syrian Government and its allies are bombing hospitals, homes, nurseries, schools, and entire neighbourhoods.<sup>1,2</sup> New incendiary arms and "bunker-busting" munitions that can knock down entire buildings have turned basements, which were traditionally places of safety during bombardment, into tombs for the unrecoverable bodies of infants, children, and adults. The use of such weapons against underground hospitals and civilian shelters should come as no surprise from a regime accused of attacking its people with chlorine gas and barrel bombs.<sup>3</sup> Fewer than 30 medical doctors remain to serve 275 000 residents, including 100 000 children, while only six of the eight hospitals functioning in mid-July are still in operation, and medical facilities have insufficient staff, space, and supplies (such as anaesthetics, intravenous fluids, and blood bank orthopaedic, intensive care unit, surgery, and trauma supplies) to treat the injured, let alone the routine medical needs of the population.<sup>2,4-8</sup> Water stations have been damaged, and potable water and food grow scarce under the state of siege.<sup>1,8-10</sup>

The use of advanced weaponry in civilian areas and the reported deliberate attacks on hospitals have been denounced as war crimes before the Security Council and other UN arenas.<sup>11,12</sup> But then what? The UN has been unable to access East Aleppo since July; doing so would require the regime's agreement. When the

government finally authorised the UN to deliver food and supplies relief, an air strike took place on Sept 19, 2016, on a clearly marked UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy, killing civilians and aid workers. To many, this demonstrated that the regime and its allies considered ceasefire negotiations to be a smokescreen. The regime seems determined to starve and bomb the population until it reaches its goal: the eradication of all opposition.

The UN has reached a moment of truth. At the political level, with Russia's veto ruling out any substantive agreement on a ceasefire, the blockages of the Security Council bring the UN to the edge of irrelevance. On the ground, its humanitarian operations are asked to do the impossible, and are treated as a salve for guilty consciences. The recent election of a strong new Secretary General provides hope for the UN. But one person's election is not enough. If nothing is done to prevent Aleppo's destruction, and to end the impunity of those—from all parties—pursuing it and obstructing humanitarian action, these weeks will mark a resounding defeat of diplomacy and the triumph of brute force.

It is the UN as a whole that needs to act to save Aleppo—and in doing so, save itself.

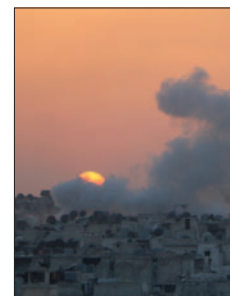
LA is Visiting Professor at Columbia University, Professor, IRD UMR 912 (INSERM/IRD/AMU)—LESC (Paris University/CNRS), and a former Senior Advisor for Humanitarian Affairs to the United Nations. FD is the French Ambassador to the United Nations. We declare no competing interests.

*\*Laëtitia Atlani-Duault,  
François Delattre  
lae2617@cumc.columbia.edu  
laetitia.atlani-duault@ird.fr*

Department of Socio-Medical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 West 168th St, New York, NY, 10032, USA (LA); and the French Mission to the United Nations (FD)

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