



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

**Statement of
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At the hearing on

“Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis”

**Written Statement before the:
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Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you today to offer my perspectives and concerns regarding the humanitarian situation of displaced Syrians.

UNHCR currently has three offices inside Syria and 13 in the four neighboring countries that have been receiving the majority of Syrian refugees (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq). There are over 2,000 UNHCR staff working in these five countries. We lead and coordinate the response to the Syrian refugee situation in the host countries, working closely with the host governments and our UN and NGO partners. Of our partners, the two largest are the World Food Program, which supplies food rations and vouchers to the refugees, and UNICEF, which provides child protection services, education, and water and sanitation.

Inside Syria, UNHCR has been present since the early 1990s, initially to support Iraqi and other refugees which Syria has generously hosted for many years. Since mid-2011, when the crisis took a distinctly violent turn and started producing significant internal displacement, we have also been assisting persons uprooted inside the country with relief items and shelter assistance. We provide help wherever we are able to access people in need with a minimum of security. Unlike in refugee situations, there is no single agency with a mandate to protect internally displaced persons. Our assistance to Syrians who have fled inside their own country has therefore been part of a collective UN and NGO response effort led by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and OCHA.

My comments today will focus on the humanitarian situation of displaced Syrians, both refugees in the neighboring countries and those uprooted inside Syria. I returned just a couple of days ago from a week-long trip to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, where I met with refugees, government officials, host communities and staff of our partner organizations.

Mr. Chairman,

We are facing a tipping point in Syria. The humanitarian situation is dramatic beyond description. The refugee crisis has been accelerating since last summer, and has reached staggering proportions since the beginning of this year.

In early April 2012, UNHCR had registered about 33,000 Syrian refugees in the region. By December, this number had grown to half a million. Now, two years after the conflict started, we have registered – or given out registration appointments to – more than 1.1 million Syrians across the Middle East and North Africa. Daily arrival figures averaged 3,000 people in December, 5,000 in January, and 8,000 in February. In recent weeks, there were several days with as many as 14,000 people crossing the borders into neighboring countries in the space of 24 hours.

There are now nearly 360,000 registered Syrians in Lebanon, over 350,000 in Jordan, some 260,000 in Turkey and 115,000 in Iraq. Egypt has already registered over 40,000 and nearly 30,000 have fled to Europe. Many Syrians do not come forward for registration, either because they do not want to reveal their

identity for fear of reprisals back home, or because they do not need assistance. So there are probably hundreds of thousands more in the region who are not part of the official statistics.

It is important to note that while the most memorable media images are of the refugee camps, such as Za'atri camp in Jordan, more than 60% of the Syrian refugees in the region actually live in urban areas, generously sheltered by host communities. These refugees are largely a hidden population, but their needs are also tremendous, and addressing them presents another set of difficult challenges.

Back in December, when UNHCR drew up its Regional Response Plan together with some 55 UN and NGO partners (including five American NGOs), we expected to have 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees by June. But the situation has deteriorated so quickly in recent months that we reached this number already in mid-March. If no political solution to the conflict is found soon, the refugee number could double or even triple before the end of this year. In addition, the longer the fighting rages in Syria, the less will there be for refugees to return to after the conflict ends, meaning that many of them may not be able to go home immediately once peace is established.

The refugee numbers are staggering, but they cannot convey the full extent of the tragedy. Most refugees have lost family members and everything they once owned –homes, businesses, and livelihoods. Three quarters of them are women and children, and in Jordan alone, nearly one in five refugees is under the age of four. The children pay the hardest price of all, with millions of young lives shattered by this conflict, and the future generation of an entire country marked by violence and trauma for many years to come.

There are harrowing reports of rape and sexual abuse of women and children by actors to the conflict inside Syria. In the neighboring countries, we see the level of trauma in those who manage to flee, and struggle to scale up the capacity to provide psychosocial support to the victims. Refugees are also at risk, as some are forced into early marriages or even prostitution, often as a result of their families' despair and lack of income frequently coupled with the need to provide money for relatives who remained behind in Syria.

UNHCR and its UN and NGO partners are working closely with authorities, host communities and the refugees themselves, including religious leaders, to prevent sexual and gender based violence. In Jordan, for example, we are funding partner organizations that run women and youth centers in the Za'atri refugee camp, which provide awareness sessions and individual counseling. Several agencies working in the camp have protection staff manning hotlines and help desks for victims of sexual violence, providing support and carrying out home visits. When necessary, victims' physical security is ensured through relocation, including to a government shelter in Amman, such as for early marriage victims of domestic violence. In addition, UNHCR has recently agreed with the government to fund a comprehensive programme to step up security in Za'atri camp.

Across the region, we have initiated plans to expand assistance to survivors of violence and women at risk, for example through income generation projects so as to make them less vulnerable. However, these activities have not received sufficient funding so far.

Mr. Chairman,

The most tragic consequences of the crisis are being felt inside Syria itself. An estimated 3.6 million people are now displaced within their own country. They live with host families, in abandoned buildings and makeshift camps. Many of them are displaced over and over again as the fighting spreads. Some refugees in the neighboring countries told us they moved up to seven times within Syria before finally taking the decision to cross the border. As the devastation gets worse, ordinary people are finding it more difficult, and often even life-threatening, to access food, water, heating fuel or medicines.

In addition, we must not forget that there are half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria who are affected by the conflict. Some 32,000 have already been compelled to flee abroad, mainly to Lebanon. A massive displacement of Palestinian refugees from Syria would have devastating consequences on efforts to preserve asylum space in the region. Strong support to UNRWA's efforts is essential, and I have repeatedly appealed to all parties to the conflict to respect and protect the Palestinian refugee population in Syria.

As part of the inter-agency response inside Syria, UNHCR has focused on community services, shelter assistance and providing relief items to internally displaced people. Just since the beginning of this year, we have distributed basic items such as tents, blankets and plastic sheeting to nearly 430,000 displaced Syrians in various areas of the country. We have rehabilitated 39 collective shelters housing internally displaced Syrians and provided cash assistance to over 19,000 extremely vulnerable families since the programme was launched six months ago. UNHCR coordinates a collective protection response relying on the local knowledge and contacts of various community-based organizations. We regularly visit collective shelters and provide on-the-job training for Syrian outreach volunteers who assist the displaced. Along with other specialized partners, we support a network of five community centers in key cities to provide emergency social services, child protection and address grievances of victims of sexual violence. These centers provide psychosocial services, offer awareness sessions to help prevent sexual and gender based violence, and assist separated children.

Together with its partners, UNHCR has delivered aid to people in both opposition- and government-controlled areas. We launched a pioneer relief operation in northern Syria in January, when two convoys led by UNHCR international staff carried more than 300 metric tons of tents and blankets to help vulnerable people displaced between Aleppo and the Turkish border. That paved the way for several inter-agency UN convoys across frontlines. International NGOs have also been providing critical humanitarian support in these areas. UN agencies and the NGOs in Syria continue assisting displaced people wherever we can reach them, often in the face of very high security risks. In the past, convoys have been shot at, hijacked, warehouses destroyed and looted, and several UN-contracted truck drivers have been killed since the beginning of the conflict.

Mr. Chairman,

The violence in Syria and the massive refugee exodus it has caused are having a huge impact on the society, the economy and the security of the host countries, who are sharing their increasingly meager resources with the refugees. The economic cost of this is tremendous and leads to complex social consequences. Neighboring countries have been extremely generous and for the most part kept their borders open, but their capacity to continue to do so is under very severe pressure.

Lebanon, the smallest of the host countries and yet the one that has received the largest number of refugees, has seen its population rise by a staggering 10% following the refugee influx. Refugees are spread out across 900 different municipalities, rendering the task of providing assistance extremely challenging. Apart from the obvious impact this has in a complex political situation, it has also put enormous pressure on available resources, in particular accommodation, health and education infrastructure. Authorities are growing increasingly concerned in the face of the unrelenting influx of Syrians. The conflict in Syria is becoming an existential threat to Lebanon, and strong international solidarity is required to support the country.

Jordan is also facing a very difficult economic situation, aggravated by dwindling revenues from trade, tourism and foreign investment due to the Syria crisis. The country has also had to agree an adjustment policy with the International Monetary Fund. Its limited energy and water resources, social service infrastructure and public security forces are dramatically overstretched. Like Lebanon, Jordan also needs massive support to deal with the humanitarian tragedy caused by the conflict next door.

Turkey's economic capacity is much stronger than those of other host countries, but the huge investments the country has made to assist Syrian refugees have taken a heavy toll and increased support from the international community is needed. The government has spent more than USD 750 million to set up 17 camps and is planning to open three more during the coming months. It has now also started to register refugees in urban areas, and as the numbers continue to grow, authorities have asked for additional support to assist the urban population of Syrians.

Iraq is still struggling with its own transition to stability, and what happens in Syria has a direct impact on rising sectarian tensions in the country. There are warnings of a potential civil war if the Syria conflict continues, and recent events at the Iraqi-Syrian border are extremely worrying. In addition, the Al-Qaim border crossing remains partially closed to Syrians since October, preventing refugees from seeking safety.

International solidarity in support of the host countries must be urgently reinforced. This is not a question of generosity, but one of enlightened self-interest. By taking in thousands of new refugees every day, the countries on the frontline of this crisis are doing the region and indeed, the world, an extraordinary service. Helping them deal with the consequences of the refugee crisis is imperative, as the preservation of their economic and social stability is in everyone's essential interest.

UNHCR and its partners have been cooperating closely, including with governments in the neighboring countries, to ensure available resources are maximized in the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis. Our Regional Response Plan is currently being reviewed in light of the accelerating outflows, and apart from including nearly 60 other agencies – both national and international – in it, we are also aligning the host governments' own appeals with ours. We have made efforts to coordinate with other donors and actors, mainly from the Gulf countries, who have been providing very significant assistance to Syrian refugees. At the recent donor conference in Kuwait, I specifically encouraged non-traditional donors to ensure their aid is closely coordinated with the rest of the international response, to avoid duplication and ensure scarce resources are being targeted where they are most needed. We are currently waiting for feedback from the major donors of the region regarding their plans to disburse the substantial pledges they made at the Kuwait Conference two months ago.

As the refugee numbers are growing, there is a widening gap between needs and the resources available to support Syrian victims. UNHCR and its partners have received less than 30 per cent of the funding we need to assist the current number of refugees, let alone those who are yet to come. There is no way a gap of this magnitude can be filled with existing humanitarian budgets. That is why I have been appealing to donor governments and parliaments to urgently approve extraordinary funding for the victims of the Syria crisis, to ensure that their most basic needs can be met and the stability of the region preserved. All of the agencies involved in this humanitarian response are dramatically underfunded, with some fearing to run out of money as early as Easter. This would lead to an even worse disaster for vulnerable Syrians and those who have been sheltering them, and we cannot afford to run this risk.

Mr. Chairman,

Two years into this terrible crisis, we need to be prepared for the situation to deteriorate further before it gets any better. If the worst-case scenario materializes, the international community will not only need to engage in an even more significant humanitarian response. It will also need to be prepared to deal with unpredictable consequences should the situation in Syria lead to an explosion in the Middle East.

Combined with the real risk of this conflict spilling over across the region, as well as the challenges posed by other lingering crises nearby, what is happening in Syria today risks escalating very quickly into a disaster that could overwhelm the international response capacity – political, security-related and humanitarian. This must not be allowed to happen.

Thank you very much.