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Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee today about “Six Years of War in Syria: The Human Cost.”

I am here in my capacity as Chief Executive Officer of the global organization Mercy Corps. In more than 40 countries around the world, we meet the urgent needs of today through emergency humanitarian assistance and disaster risk reduction, and help build stronger tomorrows by connecting people to the resources they need to strengthen their communities from within. Last year alone, we reached about 30 million people around the world.

Mercy Corps’ global headquarters are in Portland, Oregon, and I would like to thank Senator Merkley for his outstanding and devoted support of our agency and our mission.

Mercy Corps has been working in the Middle East and North Africa for more than three decades. For almost the entire duration of the conflict in Syria, we have conducted one of the largest humanitarian operations to help innocent Syrians trapped in the crossfire. We have worked through Syrian employees and partner organizations who have risked everything, even their own lives, to bring relief to civilians in their war-torn country. I talk to our teams there daily and visit the region often. We stand alongside the people inside Syria and support Syrians who are trying to rebuild their lives in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Greece, in addition to the communities hosting them.

While the situation on the ground has changed over the last year, the unacceptable levels of suffering of the Syrian people have remained constant. I would like to express my great appreciation and sincere respect for Drs. Farida, Abdulkhalek, Rajab, and their colleagues, as well as the White Helmets, all of whom have risked their lives and sacrificed greatly for the Syrian people.

On behalf of my team and the hundreds of thousands of Syrians we’ve served over the last five years, I would like to express our deep appreciation for your attention to the intense suffering and human toll of this horrific war. Through the generous support of Congress, through robust funding of the International Affairs budget, the United States is helping save the lives of millions of the world’s most vulnerable people. Your continued attention is also essential to keeping this war in the headlines in this country, and making sure that finding a political solution to resolving this conflict is the top priority of American diplomats.

Report on Mercy Corps’ Turkey Operations

I would like to begin by updating you on Mercy Corps’ situation in Turkey, from where we have delivered lifesaving aid to Syrians, with the permission and cooperation of the Turkish government, for the past five years. As you may be aware, just a few weeks ago, the Turkish government suddenly revoked Mercy Corps’ registration allowing us to operate in Turkey. This action disrupts lifesaving assistance to 360,000 Syrians every month inside Syria and effectively ends our support to 100,000 Syrian refugees and Turkish children, women and men in Turkey.

To date, our situation is not resolved, and we continue to seek a dialogue with Turkish officials so that we may resume our operations as soon as possible. In the meantime, we are shutting down our presence in Turkey while working closely with our partners and donors, including USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and the State Department's Bureau for Population, Refugee and Migration- both of which have been extremely helpful-, to quickly fill any gaps in our assistance to Syrians in Syria and to identify solutions for refugee services in Turkey.

As you can imagine, this is a tough time for our team. I just received a note from one of our team members who has worked on the border for four years helping deliver almost 1 million food kits in Syria. He said: *"We are sure that these problems will end soon just we ask you not to give up, please don't say we have done our best and it didn't work. We are sure that you will get that registration. We are proud of this work, we are proud of Mercy Corps, we have not done anything wrong, and this is why we all have a clear conscious [sic]."*

Principled Humanitarianism in Peril

The revocation of our Turkish registration is a deeply disturbing turn of events.

Turkey has been a generous global leader in humanitarian action. A country of almost 80 million people, it has welcomed more than 3 million Syrian refugees and boasts one of the world's most progressive policies on refugees, allowing them to earn a living for their families and offering them a clear path to citizenship. Like the United States, Turkey is a signatory to international humanitarian laws and the U.N. refugee convention, requiring it to protect civilians caught in or fleeing conflict. It is an important ally of the United States and NATO and an essential partner in the fight against ISIS.

We have not been given any official justification by Turkey for the closure of our program. And we are worried by the many news reports that other international aid groups may also soon be ordered to cease working in Turkey.

It is important you know that as an independent and impartial humanitarian organization, Mercy Corps' mandate is to deliver essential aid to civilians in need in Syria on all sides of the conflict. If we were to appear to take sides, our credibility and our ability to reach the people in greatest need, as well as the safety of our staff, would be in grave jeopardy. We have lost count of the occasions when our staff had to cross as many as a dozen armed checkpoints and multiple lines of control when driving just 20 miles to deliver food. We were only able to do this because we had proven to all parties to the conflict that our assistance was going to vulnerable families – widows, children, elderly citizens and others enduring the direst of circumstances.

Our situation raises the very real specter that principled humanitarianism is imperiled. I fear that it might no longer be just irregular militias or non-state actors blocking urgent assistance, but also members of the community of nations, even those most concerned about the well-being of the Syrian people. In 2014, despite UN Security Council resolutions requiring access to humanitarian aid be granted for all Syrians, we were forced out of working in Damascus because we stuck by our humanitarian principals and refused to stop providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in opposition controlled areas. The reality is Syria is a cauldron of the world's conflicting political and military agendas, and humanitarian aid, with its fundamental principles of impartiality and independence, risks becoming another casualty of this horrifying war.

Syria would not be the first time principled humanitarian aid has been threatened. For two decades, we have witnessed an alarming trend in which humanitarian assistance falls victim to political and military calculations. But the degradation of the safeguards has accelerated, and Syria has become a laboratory for how that infringement of this space can lead to devastating consequences for innocent men, women and children.

These grave challenges are not in the power of humanitarians like Mercy Corps to solve. They are political, and only member states of the United Nations can resolve them. We ask you, distinguished Senators, and the United States government to resolutely push for a lasting peace in Syria. After six years and hundreds of thousands lives lost and millions more ruined, finding a way out of this conflict must be a top priority for politicians and diplomats. Until then, we also urge you to continue America's strong financial support of the lifesaving assistance to the Syrian people and to exercise your political power to ensure that aid is provided to all innocent civilians in need, no matter who they are or where they have found safety.

A Great Human Catastrophe

The scale of the human toll of the war in Syria defies description – the dark statistics are staggering. More than 400,000 people have been killed; 13.5 million are in desperate need of food, clean water and other humanitarian assistance – half of these are children. According to the United Nations, an estimated 6.3 million Syrians have fled their homes and are trying to survive inside Syria. Every day, another 6,000 or more people are displaced and 5 million people have fled to safety in neighboring countries.

Mercy Corps continues to deliver lifesaving food, clean water and other essential supplies to about 470,000 innocent Syrian civilians each month. Our team members do this at great personal risk and with unwavering courage – we have lost five team members to this conflict and family members too. Just last week a Mercy Corps driver lost a son and a nephew to an airstrike.

In December, as the Syrian government and Russian forces pounded the city of Aleppo, we received scant reports from our remaining 19 team members in the city, who were delivering the last of our food stocks at night during the short lulls in the bombing. They were too afraid to turn on their lights, and made deliveries door-to-door carrying boxes of food in wheelbarrows. Everyone eventually made it out of the city – six of our team members were on the very the last green evacuation buses. We are so thankful they are now safe.

The toll on our team has been great and we thank the many great heroes of this conflict, like the doctors sitting next to me, for their unwavering devotion and courage under these extremely dangerous conditions.

Although the shape of the conflict has changed significantly over the past year, Syrians are still suffering enormously and in ways we cannot begin to express. Civilian protection remains the number one challenge with people caught up in the fighting, facing death every day. There have been few tangible advances by the international community to end the misery and deliver a sustainable and inclusive peace that reflects the needs and desires of the Syrian people.

These headline descriptions of the human cost of the war are, I'm sure, familiar to everyone here. I find that the scale of the crisis is so massive that it is too much to take in. So I will break it down into four

areas of focus: hotspots where the humanitarian crisis is most acute; access to food, clean water and sanitation; the impact of the war on adolescents and youth; and the effect on livelihoods.

Hotspots and Critical Issues

In central Syria, the government of Syria is using similar tactics in Eastern Ghouta as it did in Aleppo. Eastern Ghouta is facing a tightening siege designed to force the armed opposition groups and the 350,000 plus civilians to surrender and accept some sort of 'reconciliation' agreement¹. In the lead up to such an agreement, already limited humanitarian access will be further restricted, and fighting is expected to displace a large number of people. We expect people to be in desperate need of shelter, water and sanitation, in addition to food and medical supplies.

In Idleb governorate, many of the people evacuated from communities that have previously “reconciled” with the government are now caught in the middle of armed opposition groups vying for control of this area. No-one knows exactly what will happen in Idleb, but the fighting will inevitably catalyze more displacement of people and affect access for both commercial and humanitarian supplies, with severe implications for the well-being of the innocent people trapped there.

In Raqqa, various military forces are launching an offensive with the aim of pushing ISIS out of the city and surrounding areas. Current humanitarian projections expect more than 432,000 people to be in need of humanitarian assistance in Raqqa governorate, with upwards of 300,000 people potentially being displaced by the fighting.

In southern Syria, the government of Syria and opposition forces are fighting over control of the Jordan-Syria border crossing. Simultaneously, airstrikes are targeting ISIS and ISIS affiliates. Both of these developments are forcing large numbers of people to flee their homes. They urgently need shelter, food, and other basic supplies, in addition to small amounts of cash assistance so that they can buy what they need from local markets.

In short, countless innocent children, women and men across Syria continue to bear the brunt of the war.

For years now we, as humanitarians, have delivered these same reports:

- Indiscriminate attacks are killing civilians and damaging civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools.
- All parties to the conflict are using humanitarian assistance as a pawn, by withholding permission to reach communities under siege and leveraging humanitarian access as a bargaining chip at the negotiating table.
- Humanitarian access is denied or heavily obstructed even though unfettered access is required under international law.
- Syrian humanitarian workers, who account for almost the entirety of the humanitarian response inside Syria, are targeted and criminalized for trying to help their communities survive.

¹ In this context, “reconciliation” is the process by which the government of Syria reasserts its control over an area by negotiating an agreement that centralizes local political groups, civil society and humanitarian bodies under its authority, and forcibly evacuates individuals and armed opposition fighters who are not willing to engage with this process.

I wish to be clear: These actions are illegal. They violate the laws of armed conflict and international humanitarian law. This flagrant violation of international law by warring parties in Syria sets the world back by decades, and undermines the moral authority of the international community. We need the international community, including strong US leadership, to exert all possible leverage to ensure that civilians are protected, that humanitarian assistance is allowed without any precondition or obstruction, and that humanitarians are allowed to continue to work legally in support of their communities, with their safety guaranteed.

Food, Water and Sanitation: The Basics of Life

War tears down humanity in many different ways. As I share examples, I wish to highlight how Syrians are trying to maintain their humanity and dignity.

Food insecurity and the risk of hunger is one of the most serious issues in Syria, with an estimated 7 million people currently food insecure and a further 2 million at risk of food insecurity. A note of hope from our food security experts is that despite the real threat of food insecurity and hunger, levels of malnutrition where food aid has reached people are relatively low in comparison to malnutrition in other conflict zones. This shows that the food assistance provided by the United States and other nations – through partners like Mercy Corps – is working.

With no end to the conflict in sight, inaccessibility, besiegement and displacement will continue to cause food insecurity on a massive scale. In response to these needs, since 2012 Mercy Corps has partnered with USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and Food for Peace – funded by the International Affairs budget and specifically the International Disaster Assistance and Food for Peace Accounts. Thanks to authorities and funding Congress has provided – and which Chairman Corker has championed – Mercy Corps has been able to locally procure large quantities of wheat in Turkey to deliver into Syria.

Among many interventions, since 2013, Mercy Corps has provided flour to bakeries in order to ensure affordable bread prices for families, keep bakers in business and support a functioning local economy. At one point we were providing 19 bakeries with 50 percent of their monthly flour needs, targeting communities in greatest need. Bread is a staple of the Syrian diet, and one bakery alone – which serves 40-some villages – requires some 14 metric tons of flour per day to keep pace with the needs of their residents. Thanks to our deliveries of flour, the price of bread was kept to 65 Syrian pounds, whereas in other areas the price was more than twice as high, closer to 150 Syrian pounds. Separately, it is worth noting that by purchasing food in the region, American taxpayers achieved more impact for their dollar, and supplies were delivered quickly and at a lower cost, while stimulating local markets.

Another basic need of human life is clean water, sanitation and hygiene. Because of disrepair and destruction, water and sewage systems are only functioning at a fraction of their previous capacity, and shortages of electricity limit their operation in many places. As a result, nearly 15 million people in Syria urgently need access to water, sanitation and hygiene services.

One of the people we helped through our water and sanitation programming is Mahmoud, a father of five. The family lives in a small camp just outside of Aleppo, where they found relative safety after fleeing attacks by Syrian government forces and ISIS. When they arrived, they found that water was more expensive than they could afford. It had to be trucked in from distant areas and was inconsistent in quality. There were few latrines or washing facilities in the camp, which led to the spread of disease, the inability to wash clothing or cooking utensils, or to practice personal hygiene. As we all would be as

parents, Mahmoud was desperately concerned for the safety and health of his children, and he could not afford the water they needed to stay healthy.

In response to the needs of people like Mahmoud and his children, Mercy Corps quickly provided toilets and showers, as well as clean water to cover the needs of the camp. After our intervention, Mahmoud said he and his family are less worried about the spread of disease since they now have access to sanitation and hygiene facilities. Mercy Corps continues to work hard to help families like Mahmoud's to strengthen access to clean water and sanitation services. Although Mahmoud's family and others like them continue to face enormous challenges, interventions like ours show it is possible to make their lives a little better and a little safer.

A Generation We Can't Afford to Lose

An entire generation of Syrian children, teenagers and young people are growing up in a war zone. Nearly half the 4.8 million Syrian refugees in the region are children, and more than 8.5 million children and young people in Syria need immediate humanitarian support. Nearly one in four of these young people is a teenager. The impact of the war on them is horrific: a recent report found that 652 children were killed last year, 255 in or near a school. Children's deaths rose 20 percent and injuries rose by 25 percent in 2016. Instead of worrying about their schoolwork, they are terrified they or their families might be killed, and worry about whether they will have food to eat and clean water to drink. They are frustrated and isolated – young women in particular rarely leave their homes. Young men and women both experience a sense of powerlessness and constant humiliation.

We fear two related consequences of this situation: a lost generation of youth and social instability. Widespread deprivation and prolonged stress among Syrian youth seriously affects their well-being. Young people are suffering from mental health issues and are more likely to take part in high-risk behavior. Isolation and hopelessness, combined with experiences of violence and injustice, are also pervasive among Syrian adolescents. These make a dangerous recipe for producing violent attitudes and actions. Without positive social connections and prospects for their future, young people affected by conflict and displacement may become a destabilizing force in their communities and in the region.

But it is possible to address these issues. In collaboration with UNICEF's No Lost Generation initiative launched in 2013, Mercy Corps has been working hard to empower and address the needs of adolescents impacted by the crisis in Syria. Through years of hands-on experience, we know that the key to supporting this generation is to promote learning and psychosocial resilience, build social understanding and peace and help youth set their own goals for the future. We also know that if you fail to address the effects that years of trauma have had on young people's mental health, other efforts, such as education and vocational training, will not be as effective.

Mercy Corps has developed a model for helping young people's psychosocial needs, but these interventions need support. I urge the Committee to increase funding for programming that meets psychosocial and mental health needs of adolescents, including through fully funding humanitarian accounts and Economic Support Funds in the FY 2018 budget process.

At the Helsinki Conference in January, Humam, a young Syrian and one of our Mercy Corps team members, told the assembly: *"For me, I'm waiting for the war to stop so I can go back and rebuild Syria. I believe that we can rebuild Syria better than before. I have a lot of power that I bring from my skills. I can now speak out and lead. I want the same for other youth too."*

As Humam expressed, the young Syrians of today will build the Syria of tomorrow. They are at a crossroads in their lives – because of their age and because of the hardship they face every day. Although they are living in the darkest of hours, Mercy Corps sees immense possibility in Syrian youth. We see changemakers full of incredible strength and resilience, and capable of creating peace. They will decide today the fate of our world tomorrow, and have the ability to drive lasting change.

Helping Syrians Regain Control of Their Lives

A bright spot amid this misery is our success helping Syrians regain a measure of control over their own lives, which they tell us is their deepest desire. It is imperative that we do much better at learning from Syrians who have found positive ways to cope with this disaster and to support themselves. Right now, Mercy Corps is conducting a study to identify positive strategies that Syrians are using, so that we can support their adoption across the country.

Already we are using our deep understanding of the local context and the needs of the people we serve to undertake longer-term, sustainable programming. And we have been able to do this even in the midst of siege by working with small-business owners to build “siege-resistant businesses.” Abdulaziz, a blacksmith, was forced out of business by a siege on his community; he couldn’t continue because of shortages in the electricity and fuel he relied on, as well as increases in the price of the raw materials he needed. Thanks to a grant from one of Mercy Corps’ partners, Abdulaziz has been able to open a new grocery store, which he hopes will be less vulnerable to the impacts of siege than the blacksmith business; there is a greater demand for groceries, and the business itself is less reliant on electricity and fuel.

Across Syria, there are similar opportunities for longer-term programming. Our experience shows us that it is critical to take a holistic, multi-faceted approach to livelihoods and economic opportunities. We have to work across the individual, business and market levels. Vocational training alone is not enough. For example, providing agricultural supplies to farmers as well as small loans to start new businesses and get businesses back into operation will support market development and provide individuals the means to support themselves and their families.

Recommendations for Congress

Although the situation is bleak, there are a number of concrete steps that Congress can take now to help the people of Syria. I would like to leave the Committee with the following five key recommendations that we hope will lessen their suffering:

1. **Access:** We ask that you continue to raise the primacy of humanitarian access with all actors inside and around Syria.
2. **Funding.** Provide adequate funding for the U.S. government to lead globally and reject any cuts in the President’s FY 2018 International Affairs request. Diplomacy, development and lifesaving humanitarian aid supported through the foreign aid budget are critical to help not only the people of Syria, but also communities around the world that are suffering severely. We ask that you fight in FY 2018 for no less than \$60 billion for the International Affairs budget, which would still be only 1 percent of the federal budget. With growing needs, it is more important than ever to shore up funding for the various humanitarian and development accounts in the FY18 budget. We ask that you fight for funding in the FY 2018 appropriations bills for:
 - International Disaster Assistance (IDA), and Food for Peace (FFP) and the Migration and Refugee Account, which are critical to providing lifesaving aid; and

- Economic Support Funds, which provide development assistance to fragile states and, in the case of Syria, can lay the groundwork for community-level reconciliation and livelihoods.
3. **Continue to provide and expand authorities to allow for the appropriate response, including local and regional procurement, cash and vouchers.** We would appreciate continued support for letting our field team members, in partnership with USAID, utilize the most effective response possible to incredibly complex crises. We appreciate that the Chair has been a champion of using the most effective interventions possible in foreign aid, which in many cases are through local and regional procurement of commodities or providing cash or vouchers to vulnerable families. The use of vouchers and cash for internally displaced people and Syrian refugees has not only empowered families with the dignity to buy what they most need, but also helps to keep markets functioning, allowing for some degree of normalcy in a completely abnormal environment.
 4. **Increase support for adolescents.** Increase funding for psychosocial, livelihoods and education for adolescents and others to help them recover from years of trauma and harness their energy for building a bright future.
 5. **Diplomacy.** Humanitarians are not the solution to the Syrian crisis. I urge you to work with the Trump administration to urgently seek a political solution to the war in Syria in line with the Geneva Communique and UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Our world leaders must take decisive action and push for a lasting peace. The Syrian people have paid too high of a price for six long years. The human misery must end.

Our Call to Action

Less than a year ago, I stood with the global humanitarian community in Istanbul at the United Nations' first-ever World Humanitarian Summit. There in Turkey, world leaders from government, civil society and business stood up for our common humanity and action to prevent and reduce human suffering. Then, as now, the government and people of Turkey demonstrated their hospitality, and their indispensable role at the forefront of humanitarian action. At this historic summit, President Erdoğan stated in his closing remarks, "As the participants of this summit, we all know very well that pain knows no color, ethnicity, language or religion." We could not agree more and want to continue to support Turkey in what Mr. Erdoğan rightfully called its "vital role in the name of humanity."

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Members of the Committee, we hope that the spirit of that summit will endure and its promises will be realized. We thank this Committee, the United States government and, most of all, the American people for your lifesaving support for the people of Syria. We know that principled humanitarianism is directly connected to our deeply held American values about what is right and good in the world. Know that Mercy Corps stands firmly committed to alleviating the long, intense suffering of the millions of Syrians trapped in this great human catastrophe.

Thank you.