



## **Syria crisis: the humanitarian response**

31 August 2012 – Roundtable 2, London

### **INTRODUCTION**

On 31 August, 2012 the Humanitarian Policy Group brought together participants involved in the response to the crisis in Syria to pool information and analysis of the humanitarian implications of the conflict that has claimed an estimated 17,000 lives, most of them civilian. This event follows a previous [Syria roundtable](#) held on 15 June at the Overseas Development Institute. Since then humanitarian challenges have significantly escalated following the spread of war to the two major cities, Damascus and Aleppo. This has displaced thousands – many for the second time – and contributed to the flight of an estimated 230,000 refugees to neighbouring countries. This second roundtable again brought together senior representatives of the leading aid agencies in Syria and neighbouring countries via video/audio conference with policy makers in donor capitals and colleagues gathered in London to explore the humanitarian response within Syria and consider the regional humanitarian dimensions of the conflict. The discussion was again held under the **Chatham House rule** and participation was by invitation. What follows is a summary of that discussion.

### **UPDATE ON THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION INSIDE SYRIA**

#### Key threats facing the population

Since June the humanitarian situation has further deteriorated. Violence has spread to Aleppo and Damascus and has intensified across the country. The loss of safe havens in the main urban areas has resulted in unprecedented levels of displacement. There are now more than a million IDPs and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the government are not prepared for such high numbers. Participants described huge numbers of displaced families from Aleppo carrying few possessions and being directed into public buildings and a large sports complex in Lattakia. Conditions in public buildings are difficult: their movements are restricted to the immediate area and they have no access to primary healthcare. The number of refugees in neighbouring countries reached 230,000 (at the end of August 2012).

In mid-July the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) made public its reading that the situation is one of a **non-international conflict country-wide** - a deterioration from April 2012 when this assessment was restricted to Homs, Idlib and Hama specifically.

The conflict is seen to have entered a **deadlier phase**, characterised by widespread use of heavy weapons including fixed wing aircraft on the part of the Syrian government. The regime and armed groups have committed serious crimes, as has been recently found by the [UN Independent Commission](#). All sides are unwilling to implement the ceasefire, a part of the UN-led peace agreement plan. The principal concerns about the conduct of the conflict by all sides arise from disregard of the principles of military distinction and proportionality. Identifying a clear structure of hierarchy with which to engage with the **armed opposition** about the protection of civilians remains a fundamental challenge for humanitarian organisations. To date ICRC has only visited two prisons, in Damascus and Aleppo. A point was also made that children in particular have been the specific targets of abuse, as highlighted by the UN Secretary General's report on [Children in Armed Conflict in April 2012](#). Also a new and growing threat is **crime** in the form of kidnapping for ransom and car-jacking.

The humanitarian situation is dire and there is pressing need among millions of Syrians for a range of goods and services. People are having extreme difficulties in accessing clinics and healthcare centres. Some of those that remain active are government facilities, of which the population has a high degree of distrust. Due to the encroachment of the conflict into the two big cities the **provision of medical supplies** from the pharmaceutical companies has been affected because the factories were located in the cities. SARC and others are providing mobile first aid clinics but there are too few of them compared to the existing needs.

According to government sources **one million people are living in over 800 schools** where they have been forced to flee following violence. The school year started on September 16<sup>th</sup> 2012 and these people urgently need to be transferred to other locations. This issue goes beyond the capacity of the UN to address given the numbers involved and the government has taken little action despite promises. There have been water shortages in Damascus, Homs and Idlib. Medicines, sanitation, shelter and basic household items are all sorely needed and there are growing concerns about food security. It has been difficult conducting nutrition assessments, with concerns that IDP children are not being monitored and **anecdotal reports of malnutrition** particularly around the areas of Homs and Hama.

#### Current humanitarian activities

**UN OCHA** (Syria) is now in the process of revising the **Humanitarian Response Plan** which was officially launched in June 2012. The plan is predicated on the basis that **3 million Syrians are affected, of whom 2.5 million are in need of assistance and of those, 1.2 million are IDPs**. Funding requirements are estimated to be in the range of \$330-350 million. With the exception of the food sector, **all sectors are underfunded** including vital areas such as water, sanitation, and shelter.

The small number of INGOs now operating in Syria have been able to deliver some humanitarian assistance. The World Food Programme has scaled up food provision – to 850,000 rations - and is planning to serve 1.5 million Syrians by September. UNHCR and UNICEF have distributed non-food items (NFIs) to large numbers of people. Medical assistance has also been provided to 700,000. UNICEF reached 500,000 to administer vaccinations and food support to children. SARC is the main distributor of food and NFIs, which primarily go to the IDP population. However, current activities still **fall vastly short of the needs, which remain outpaced by the rapidly deteriorating situation.**

Efforts to gain permission for more INGOs are still being delayed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs despite the successful efforts of some agencies to establish a relationship with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). For those inside Syria, bureaucracy and freedom of movement remain problematic. During the previous six weeks, international aid workers had rarely left Damascus city or rural Damascus. At the moment Aleppo is largely out of bounds for agencies. A lot of activities are now being managed remotely.

Operational challenges also include rising transports costs and threats on the roads, such as car jacking and drivers being arrested or harassed at checkpoints. The number of contractors willing to go to certain parts of the country is declining.

Participants noted that it remains important to have a separate and distinct channel of delivery from SARC but also to support their work. The suggestion was made of alleviating some of the **pressure that is on the small number of SARC staff** through supporting training or recuperation outside Syria. It was also raised that international agencies' **national staff** may be traumatised by the effects of the conflict.

The **Emergency Relief Coordinator** visited Syria on 14 and 15 August to assess the humanitarian situation and discuss with the government ways of increasing assistance. These meetings confirmed that the government continues to present the situation as one characterised by the presence of armed groups which need to be rooted out. Damascus asserts that the Gulf States, Turkey and others are importing them with the objective of destabilising the country.

A new development is that the government of Syria has recognised the scale of the humanitarian crisis for Syrians. While it still wishes to maintain full control of humanitarian operations and keep a predominant role for SARC, there is some opening with regard to other national NGOs, including local and community organisations. The government has encouraged the UN team to work more with local NGOs and to consider more partnerships with local entities, and the GoS has provided a list of **local charities and NGOS** that they already are working with. This is seen as a positive development and a potential entrée for the UN to establish partnerships. SARC has informed one agency that it will have permission to work with NGOs to meet 10% of food aid to beneficiaries. Other agencies have already begun work. Since the ERC's visit the UN now has access to technical level staff working in the ministries of education, social affairs and local administration. These state authorities seem willing to meaningfully cooperate with the UN.

## FOOD SECURITY

Food security analysts provided a useful snapshot of the structural reasons for the likelihood of a large food shortage in Syria if the crisis continues. Syria has a very centralised and industrialised food security framework. It is almost 50% reliant on cereal imports, which are managed entirely by government organisations. Its agricultural sector provides the additional 50% of cereals and the bulk of its exports. These exports are used to finance purchase of cereal imports. This food security system is very productive in peacetime but is also very fragile: the government controls ports, seed production, fertiliser distribution, and almost all other infrastructure. This infrastructure is now breaking down.

There are several other weaknesses in the agricultural system. Half of all food production in the country is in labour intensive products such as olives, tomatoes and nuts. Migrant labour usually employed for harvesting export and cereal crops has not been available because of the conflict and displacement. Farming methods are highly mechanised and much machinery is now unavailable. Electricity – affected by fuel shortages - powers irrigation systems needed to grow 65% of all cereals produced in the country. A combination of various factors is also now resulting in high **food price inflation** of around 40%.

The consequence of the sophistication of Syria's agricultural system is that traditional humanitarian assistance will have limited effectiveness, both due to the scale of need if the system goes into crisis and the inputs it will need. The bulk of food security for 22 million in Syria cannot be met by food assistance alone and machinery cannot be replaced by inputs like seeds and tools. The failure of irrigated cereal crops alone could result in **10-15 million people in need of food assistance**. The grain requirement of about 3.7 million tonnes has a huge expected **shortfall of approximately 1.5 million tonnes**.

There is already cause for alarm given the findings of a shared assistance assessment undertaken with the WFP, FAO and the Syrian government's Ministry of Agriculture in June 2012. The assessment, which is likely to be an underestimate, established that there are large numbers of people in need of food assistance. To make matters worse the situation has become substantially worse since the assessment report was compiled. On a related point, a participant added that there were, optimistically, unconfirmed reports that low harvests are an indication that people are managing to revert to subsistence agriculture and keep food for their families, and that the government has made commitments to meet the country's bread requirements. It was also later suggested that the impossibility of meeting all food needs through food assistance – in the event of a system crisis - underscored the need for more market- and cash-based forms of assistance.

## REGIONAL REFUGEE CRISIS

Several participants were able to contribute to a description of the challenges facing Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and the assistance they are receiving. Large numbers of refugees are currently residing in Jordan and Lebanon (which concerned most of the discussion), Turkey and Iraq. **Funding** for refugees – as for those inside Syria – is poor. The \$193 million Regional Refugee Response appeal has only been 33% funded. NGOs in Lebanon are not receiving much funding, limiting what they can do in terms of preparation and planning for an influx of refugees. Some participants pointed out that though refugees were more accessible, the principal needs are within Syria. Another, unconfirmed, cause for

concern is that lot of people crossing the borders are predominantly the families of fighters who are seeking a 'safe haven' for them, which is why most of those crossing are women and children.

In **Jordan**, it is estimated that **170,000** Syrians are in need of assistance. Until recently some of those refugees had been hosted by families but the Jordanian government has now taken the position that new arrivals will be taken to camps. Concerns have been raised about the restrictions on movement in the Zaatari camp as residents are angry about the treatment they are receiving. There is also fear of persecution and a lack of documentation, which means that registration is very difficult. No formal process of registration has to date been set up with information about service provision within the camp. Refugees receive only one meal a day. Primary and surgical health services are available in the camp but as yet there is no medical screening upon arrival. At least one INGO is providing child protection programming, psycho-social support, emergency education and is expanding into food provision, nutrition and NFIs. Several participants expressed concern at the conditions of refugees in Jordan. The Jordanian government is considering building smaller camps in different locations. It was also reported that the Government of Jordan is considering implementing stricter controls over its border, should there be any expulsion of the 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria towards Jordan.

In **Lebanon** there are an estimated 55,000 refugees – 78% of them women and children concentrated in the east in Bekaa and in the north of the country. The government of Lebanon does not want Syrian refugee camps so many refugees are hosted by local families. Those that are not hosted must rent costly accommodation or shelter in sub-SPHERE standard abandoned property or schools. Settlement in schools raises concerns about eviction as the school year begins. Pre-existing inter-ethnic and religious tensions and cross-border violence have added to concerns about the impact of the refugees arrival, along with concerns about **tensions arising in the poorer northern and eastern areas of the country, as there are scarcer resources for hosts and refugees** to share. Core humanitarian needs have been identified as shelter, WASH, nutrition and NFIs.

## **ADVOCACY**

The central question of the previous Syria roundtable was again raised: is it time for more public advocacy? It was noted that the last roundtable on Syria had arrived at a consensus that the time was not right for engaging in **public advocacy**, which could put the humanitarian response at risk. Several views were expressed on this topic. A speaker from a rights based organisation explained that it is appropriate sometimes to speak out and *temoignage* can in itself be seen as a means of driving change, but that this rested on having enough information about the situation to make the correct analysis. Cautioning against speaking out a speaker raised doubts that this information base existed, arguing that humanitarian organisations were not sure which actions advocacy should compel. Others reinforced this point and stressed that organisations that are able to have a meaningful presence inside Syria – even if it is limited – have a responsibility to maintain that presence for the sake of beneficiaries. In the same vein it was suggested that it is not a lack of awareness that is at the root of inaction about abuses taking place in Syria, but rather it is the lack of political will to take action.

## A NEW MODEL?

Throughout the event a discussion was weaved about whether or not **new models** are emerging in the response to Syria, and similarly if the status quo was the best that can be hoped for given the security and political constraints on any humanitarian intervention. This was primarily discussed in relation to the lack of access of international agencies to the majority of those in need in Syria and the question of whether or how INGOs and agencies could/should invest more in working with local groups.

In a presentation that was illustrative of how these groups might work, a participant described how the work of a coalition of UK-based Syrian charities had been effective at providing aid to people within Syria, such as food, shelter and medical services with a particular focus on the provision of medical equipment to doctors. This worked through a network of contacts, which enabled the coalition to operate through strong links to extended family and civil society. The coalition had taken a neutral position, which it wanted to sustain.

Others described the work of other loose networks of medical professionals who are providing assistance. A network of doctors is predominantly working with the private, non-governmental hospitals in the cities with which they coordinate supplies of medical equipment and drugs. Local agencies enable the supplies into Syria through the Turkish border. Makeshift clinics on the other hand had been set up clandestinely in rural areas.

In response to a call for new models of response, it was suggested that other humanitarian crises (such as South Kordofan) could be explored further where local groups had worked effectively in cross-border operations, while bearing in mind the implications of this approach in terms of humanitarian principles.

A range of different views were expressed raising doubts about how the traditional humanitarian system could work through these groups. Several agreed that it was worth exploring working with local groups but thought that issues could arise concerning humanitarian principles and acting in a manner consistent with impartiality and neutrality. One speaker said challenges could arise because some activities are so sensitive that they cannot be openly shared. For the UN in particular it was noted that it would be particularly challenging to gather and share information about the activities of these groups.

Frustration was expressed about the international humanitarian funding system that demands results-based, evidence-based proof of effectiveness and other requirements which would preclude funding groups such as the coalition of charities described above, and even constantly doubted the integrity of established entities such as the main western INGOs and UN agencies.

With concern, a speaker described models based on local networks as being antithetical to the UN and the state, and entirely underground. A speaker questioned whether the current response could be more accurately characterised as a desperate response to a desperate situation which is not meeting the needs of the people of Syria, than a new model. Another participant drew a historical parallel with Eritrea where the western churches shipped aid

into rebel-held territory with limited accountability to stakeholders, some of which was misallocated to combatants.

### **DONOR ATTITUDES**

Donor support for the humanitarian response had been ambiguous. On the one hand there had been donor support for a UN-led initiative for neutral, impartial humanitarian assistance secured through negotiated access with the government in Damascus. But donors were also channelling assistance to previously inaccessible areas without neutrality and with partiality. It was stressed that there is a collective need to think through the risk of continued and widespread partiality.

### **WAYS TO MOVE FORWARD**

In addition to ongoing discussions about advocacy and 'new models', several speakers emphasised aspects of the humanitarian response that should be paid attention to. The humanitarian community needs to think about the implications of outcomes such as regime change, long term displacement, the failure of the UN-led effort, and to consider a coordinated contingency planning process. An absence of effective communication on securing a coordinated effort was also raised as a major problem to be addressed.