

January 16, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Participation of Women and Civil Society at Geneva II

Dear President Obama:

We, the undersigned Oxfam America Sisters on the Planet Ambassadors, write to express our deep concern for the rapidly deteriorating crisis in Syria. With millions of people affected in Syria and throughout the region, we urge U.S. leadership to press for the humanitarian response to be adequately funded, and for the upcoming Geneva II peace talks to result in concrete and meaningful outcomes towards achieving lasting peace. As women have been especially impacted by this crisis, we urge you to ensure that women play a substantive role throughout the peace process and that their rights are protected.

Over 100,000 Syrians have died in this devastating conflict that has raged for nearly three years. The world's largest humanitarian crisis has resulted in over 6.5 million internally displaced people and more than 2.3 million refugees in the region, half of whom are children. Oxfam is working with refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, many of whom fled their country wearing only their thin summer clothes. Thousands of these men, women, and children are now sleeping on bare mats or thin mattresses on cold winter grounds, with few if any opportunities to support themselves and their families. Intensifying fighting will only cause more refugees to flee to neighboring countries that are already struggling to cope with providing assistance due to the large influx of Syrian refugees.

We are proud that the United States has provided \$1.6 billion in assistance for healthcare, clean water, and other necessities to the people of Syria. We urge you to ensure the U.S. continues to lead the world in funding not only vital humanitarian needs, but longer-term aid as well to support communities hosting refugees. Moreover, given growing reports of sexual violence and exploitation of women and girls, funding must be increased for programs, like those outlined in the new U.S. initiative *Safe from the Start*, aimed at protecting Syrian women and girls from sexual assault and other forms of violence.

While aid is essential, it can only ease, not end, the suffering. To put an end to the suffering, the U.S. must redouble efforts to end the conflict and achieve a peaceful political solution. In the days before Geneva II, concrete steps must be taken to increase the chances that the peace talks will be successful. One essential step is to fully implement the key principles of the Geneva Communique and ensure that a successful political transition is shared by all Syrians. For this to happen, there must be strong and meaningful representation of civil society at Geneva II from the outset, with women actively involved at all stages pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1325. As

women leaders from across the U.S., we support Syrian women who are working for peace and underscore the important contributions that women can make during peace negotiations and reconstruction. Experience demonstrates that the participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) increases the chances of successful negotiations and that these organizations will be instrumental in rebuilding and reconstructing the country going forward.

Mr. President, we urge you to continue providing urgently-needed humanitarian aid and to step-up efforts to ensure that the talks are a significant milestone in resolving the Syria crisis. Geneva II cannot be talks for the sake of talks that end with continued violence with no peaceful way forward. Ultimately ending the bloodshed will allow Syrian men and women to one day soon return home, rebuild their lives, and their country.

Sincerely,

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