

Urgent recommendations on Idlib, northwest Syria

18 MARCH 2020: 3.5 million civilians are trapped in the province of Idlib, the largest remaining enclave of Syria outside regime control. **War crimes have been committed with absolute impunity.** Under Russian and Syrian regime bombardment, over a million people have been displaced since 1 December into overcrowded camps, while funding for local groups responding to the emergency is pitiful. **The World Health Organization will start testing for coronavirus in northwest Syria later this week**, and is "very concerned" about the spread of the pandemic to a region where the health system has been wrecked by a long civil war¹. **It's time for serious steps to end the suffering of Syrian civilians.**

BRIEFING:

1. **On 5 March Turkey and Russia announced a ceasefire** but it does not address the fate of a million civilians forcibly displaced from their homes, hold parties accountable for war crimes, or enable civilians to return to cities that have been heavily bombed over the past months. The ceasefire is holding for the most part, although the regime continues artillery shelling and its threats to take Idlib.
2. **Since the breaking of the previous ceasefire on 15 January, Syrian regime and Russian forces have killed 445 civilians** including 105 children (two each day), 61 women and two White Helmets volunteers in Idlib². In 2019 Syrian forces killed 1,328 civilians, including 324 children, while Russia killed 320 civilians, including 68 children³. In 2020 Russia and the Syrian regime have launched 2,201 airstrikes, 32 internationally prohibited cluster bomb attacks, 605 barrel bombs from regime helicopters and more than 8,000 missiles and artillery shells on thousands of civilian targets⁴.
3. **Idlib is home to 3.5 million civilians who have nowhere left to go. Within Idlib, more than 1,041,000 people, over 562,000 of them children, have been displaced since 1 December⁵ and displacement camps on the Turkish border are stretched to breaking point.** The highly populated cities of Khan Sheikhou, Jarjanaz, Kafranbel & Maarat al-Numan are emptied. The WHO has noted a spike in respiratory tract infections, particularly amongst children and the elderly⁶. Mothers are burning plastic to keep babies warm and children have died in freezing temperatures. \$250 million is still required to meet the needs of 1.1 million people displaced or at imminent risk of displacement for six months. Shelter and sanitation are particularly acute needs⁷.
4. **81% of the displaced people are women and children. Humanitarian actors are reporting incidents of exploitation and abuse,** women not being able to shower for weeks due to lack of privacy, and refusing to eat or drink in order not to go to the bathroom. The violence and displacement have also significantly affected breastfeeding and the diets of children and women and increased their exposure to infection and stunting, a largely irreversible form of malnutrition⁸.
5. **Prior to this week's ceasefire, hospitals, schools, civil defence centres and displacement camps have been systematically targeted by the Syrian regime and Russia.** On 30 January, an attack that destroyed Al-Shami Surgical Hospital in Ariha killed 10 people and injured 30 more. 84 health services have been forced to suspend services in 2020⁹ and 12 White Helmets centres have been targeted¹⁰. There have been at least nine strikes against IDP camps. On 25 February eight schools and two kindergartens were hit in one day due to intense shelling, as reported by Save the Children¹¹.
6. **Civil society groups in Idlib continue to suffer from international funding cuts.** The greatest bulwark against the extremist groups is the vibrant civil society that has been serving Idlib since 2011, establishing local councils, free media, social entrepreneurship and education.
7. **The presence of prohibited groups cannot justify war crimes.** Senior UN officials have emphasised that "combating terrorism cannot be allowed to supercede obligations under international law". Civilians far outnumber combatants and their protection must be paramount.
8. **Despite the UN finding that Russia has committed war crimes, Moscow continues to obstruct international action at the United Nations Security Council¹².** Russia repeatedly abuses its veto power to block measures to protect civilians and hold perpetrators of war crimes accountable.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) **The UK must do all it can to protect the current fragile ceasefire between Russia and Turkey.** The most immediate priority is protecting civilians, humanitarians, and medical personnel and facilities in Idlib. Without an internationally-backed ceasefire, many more people are at risk of being displaced from their homes during this time of international vigilance against coronavirus. The UK must also pressure Russia and the Syrian regime to enable the one million civilians already displaced to return to their homes.
- 2) **An innovative humanitarian response is urgently needed to prevent coronavirus in Idlib's overcrowded displacement camps and in the squalid refugee camps on the Greek islands (the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Lesbos last week).** While the world is told to wash its hands, hundreds of thousands of people have no access to soap and water. The consequences of a Corona outbreak are unimaginable.
- 3) **Humanitarian aid to Idlib must be increased and Syrian civil society supported.** While the world fails to protect Syrian civilians, its heroic civil society made up of the White Helmets, medics, and aid workers are helping hundreds of thousands. Attempts by Russia to obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid must not be allowed to harm millions in dire need.
- 4) **The EU, US and other governments must treat refugees with dignity and offer to resettle their fair share,** and Turkey should open its borders and allow safe passage to those fleeing for their lives.
- 5) **Governments must make it clear that the Syrian regime and Russia will be held accountable for their ongoing war crimes, including imposing sanctions on Russian individuals implicated in war crimes.** Ensuring accountability will help create the conditions for credible talks for a long-term peace settlement.
- 6) **The UN Secretary General must show greater leadership at a time when UN agencies and member states are failing the Syrian people.** He should respond to the invite from doctors and humanitarians on the ground to stand with them, and he must make public the findings on Russian and Syrian regime attacks on hospitals and assign responsibility for perpetrators.

WE ASKED CIVILIANS IN IDLIB FOR THEIR VIEWS ON THE CURRENT CEASEFIRE

"There's no doubt that people are a little relieved, but at the same time, nobody here trusts the Syrian regime and Russia. A battle can start at any minute. The civilians who were displaced over the past months and weeks still can't go back to their homes and the humanitarian situation is dire. There is a huge absence of emergency response from INGOs to the displacement crisis." **Ahlam Rashid, humanitarian and community leader in northern Idlib**

"As a citizen living in Idlib, I refuse this temporary ceasefire because it disregards the crimes that have been committed against civilians over the past months. It disregards the villages that have been ruined and emptied of their residents. These people's rights are now lost under the pretext of a ceasefire, as if all the killing and forced displacement are completely forgotten. Those who were killed, injured, forced to flee and lost everything, who's going to give them their rights back? Who's going to bring them justice?" **Laith Abdullah, a White Helmets volunteer who was displaced from Saraqeb, now under regime control**

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES CAN ASK THE GOVERNMENT

- Is the government prepared to protect the current fragile ceasefire in Idlib to stop Assad and Putin's planes from bombing any more civilians?
- Given that the WHO has noted an increase in respiratory illnesses in overcrowded displacement camps in Northern Idlib, and given the risk of a deadly outbreak of Coronavirus in the camps, what steps is the government taking to urgently protect civilians in Idlib's displacement camps?
- Is the government prepared to impose sanctions on Russian individuals for committing war crimes in Syria?
- What plans does the government have for the 1,041,000 Syrians who have been displaced in Idlib province, northern Syria, between 1 December 2019 and 9 March 2020 alone, including over 560,000 children? What steps is the government taking to pressure Turkey to open its borders and allow safe passage to those fleeing for their lives, and to offer resettlement for its fair share of refugees in our country?
- What steps is the government taking to hold the Russia and the Syrian authorities accountable for targeting medical facilities, schools and other civilian facilities, in violation of international law and multiple UN Security Council resolutions?
- Given the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and the shocking images we have seen of refugees being pushed back in the mediterranean and shot at, will the government commit to welcoming more refugees and treating those who are fleeing war with dignity?

We would be happy to assist in writing a different question

END NOTES

1. WHO to start coronavirus testing in rebel Syria, Reuters, 16 March 2020
<https://news.trust.org/item/20200316201122-i8bmb/>

4. Fields of destruction: Assad's cluster munitions crimes, 16 January 2020,
<https://www.aljazeera.net/en/content/fields-destruction-assad%E2%80%99s-cluster-munitions-crimes>

2, 4, 5. Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) figures, 9 March

3, 10. Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) figures, 19 February 2020

6, 7, 9. OCHA Humanitarian Update Syrian Arab Republic - Issue 09, 10 March 2020
<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-update-syrian-arab-republic-issue-09-10-march-2020>

8. OCHA Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 10, 12 March 2020

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200312_nws_sitrep_10_002.pdf

11. Idlib, Syria: Two schools a day damaged or abandoned during escalation in fighting, Save the Children, 16 March 2020
<https://www.savethechildren.net/news/idlib-syria-two-schools-day-damaged-or-abandoned-during-escalation-fighting>

12. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2 March 2020
<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/57>

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