

Emergency briefing on Idlib, northwest Syria

21 FEBRUARY 2020: More than 3.5 million civilians are trapped in the province of Idlib, the largest remaining enclave of Syria outside regime control, under Russian and Syrian regime bombardment with nowhere left to flee. **War crimes are being committed with absolute impunity.** 932,000 people have been displaced since 1 December alone into freezing, overcrowded camps, while funding for the local groups responding to the emergency is pitiful. The humanitarian crisis is the worst Syria has seen in the last nine years and the UN's Mark Lowcock has warned that Idlib poses "the biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st century" if world powers don't force a cease-fire¹. **It's time for serious steps to end the suffering of Syrian civilians.**

BRIEFING:

1. **Idlib is home to 3.5 million civilians who have nowhere left to go.** At least half of these people have already been forcibly displaced from other parts of Syria and endured violence and starvation sieges, including Aleppo, Homs and Ghouta. In 2020 Russia and the Syrian regime have launched thousands of attacks on civilian targets in Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama, including 2,201 airstrikes, 32 internationally prohibited cluster bomb attacks, 605 barrel bombs from regime helicopters, in addition to more than 8,000 missiles and artillery shells².
2. **Between 1 January and 19 February 2020 alone, at least 369 civilians were killed** in Idlib, including 97 children (almost two each day) and two White Helmets volunteers. In 2019 Syrian forces killed 1,328 civilians, including 324 children, while Russia killed 320 civilians, including 68 children³.
3. **Within Idlib, more than 932,000 people - over 512,000 of them children - have been displaced into the freezing winter between 1 December and 19 February⁴.** This compounds an already dire humanitarian situation and the numbers are rising. The highly populated cities of Khan Sheikhoun, Jarjanaz, Kafranbel and Maarat al-Numan have been emptied.
4. **Displacement camps on the Turkish border are stretched to breaking point.** On the night of 10 February, the temperatures dropped to minus 7 degrees Celsius, yet 82,000 people are sleeping outdoors, under olive trees in the open with little access to running water or basic services⁵. Mothers are burning plastic to keep babies warm and in the last week twelve people have died of exposure⁶. Over 2.8 million civilians⁷ need humanitarian assistance but every sector is underfunded.
5. **Hospitals, schools, civil defence centres, displacement camps, and those fleeing on the road too⁸ are being deliberately and systematically targeted by the Syrian regime and Russia.** In just 48 hours, three hospitals were bombed by Russian warplanes; the Public Health Centre in Sarmin, Sarmin Hospital, and al-Nour hospital in Taftanaz⁹. 72 hospitals have been forced to suspend services since the beginning of the year¹⁰ and 12 White Helmets centres (Syrian Civil Defence) have been targeted¹¹. Since December there have been at least three strikes against formal IDP camps, with at least six more hitting informal IDP settlements set up to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of newly displaced people. Six of these strikes were in the last week alone¹².
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. Concerns about aid money being diverted to extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have caused foreign governments to decrease or halt funding for civil society, including educational programmes – a grievous blow to those leading the non-violent struggle against extremism.
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. **Moscow continues to cover up its actions and obstruct international action at the United Nations Security Council.** Russian diplomats claim that their operations are targeting "terrorists" – yet their assaults have targeted schools, healthcare services, farms and public facilities. Russia has repeatedly abused its veto power at the UN Security Council to block measures to protect and aid Syrian civilians and hold all perpetrators of war crimes accountable.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **The most immediate priority is protecting civilians, humanitarians, and medical personnel and facilities in Idlib.** The regime and Russia continue to violate numerous UN Security Council resolutions and ceasefire agreements that demand a halt to violence and attacks. The international community must explore all options for a meaningful cessation of the aerial attacks on Idlib.
2. **Humanitarian aid to Idlib must be increased and Syrian civil society must be supported.** While the world fails to protect Syrian civilians, its heroic civil society made up of the White Helmets (Syria Civil Defence), medics, and aid workers are doing all they can to help. Donor governments must immediately allocate funding to allow these organisations to respond to the ongoing emergency as hundreds of thousands flee their homes due to the bombing. Aid delivery into Idlib through border crossings with Turkey must continue and attempts by Russia to politicise the delivery of humanitarian aid must not be allowed to affect millions in dire need.
3. **Turkey should open its borders and allow safe passage to those fleeing for their lives, and the EU, US and other governments must offer to resettle their fair share of refugees.**
4. **Governments must make it clear that the Syrian regime and Russia will be held accountable** for their ongoing war crimes against Syrian civilians. UN investigators probing attacks on hospitals in northern Syria have delayed their publication, sending a message of impunity to the Syrian regime and Russia as they continue to deliberately target hospitals and civilians. **The UN Secretary General must release the findings on attacks on hospitals promptly and make them public and assign responsibility for perpetrators.**
5. **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 visit Idlib, like he and his predecessors have visited Bangladesh and other humanitarian crisis areas before.
6. **Efforts must be reinvested in a long-term negotiated settlement.** UNSC members must reinvest efforts in credible peace talks for a sustainable peace. Genuine negotiations for peace cannot happen while Syrian civilians are being bombed.

"It's like the end of the world. The biggest problem is shelter. Even if you have money you will not find anything to rent or buy. Tents are full and there are no more camps."
Fouad Sayed Issa, the founder of Violet, a Syrian nonprofit relief organization

CASE STUDY: KESH MALEK

Kesh Malek is one of the most respected civil society groups operating in northwest Syria, working in education, child protection, women's empowerment, human rights and advocacy. Since 2018 Kesh Malek has had their funding cut from the US, EU, and the Netherlands. The impact has been devastating.

"We believe that in order to reach a sustainable solution in Syria we need to tackle the root causes of the conflict in addition to its implications, and this cannot be achieved only through delivering lifesaving humanitarian assistance. It's not easy to lose three of your donors in one year. Such decisions are putting extra burden on the civil society organisations who are pushing against extremist ideologies and dealing with complicated social problems and responding to community needs in the absence of an official state in opposition-controlled areas." Isam Khatib, Executive Director, Kesh Malek

**Update as of 5th February 2020: Kesh Malek has had to suspend all of its activities in the western countryside of Aleppo due to the intensity of the Syrian regime and Russian military campaign and concerns for the safety of its team and partners. Most team members have now left their homes to go towards the Turkish border, like hundreds of thousands of civilians looking for safe shelter.*

For more information from Idlib, please contact info@thesyriacampaign.org

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES CAN ASK THE GOVERNMENT

- What efforts is the government taking to cease the aerial bombardment and hostilities by the Russian and Syrian governments on civilians in Idlib, Northern Syria?
- What plans does the government have for the 932,000 Syrians who have been displaced in Idlib province, northern Syria, between 1 December 2019 and 18 February 2020 alone, including over 500,000 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?
- Given the growing humanitarian crisis in Idlib, Northern Syria, what steps is the government taking to ensure that multiple UN Security Council resolutions, demanding a halt to the violence and attacks in Syria, are enacted and to address non-compliance of the resolution?
- What steps is the government taking to ensure that Russia and the Syrian authorities stop targeting medical facilities, schools and other civilian facilities, in violation of international law and multiple UN Security Council resolutions?

We would be happy to assist in writing a different question

END NOTES

1. Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/under-secretary-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator>

2. 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, 3, 11. Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) figures, 19 February 2020

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

Over half a million children in northwest Syria forced to flee amid continued violence and harsh weather, UNICEF, 18 February 2020

5, 10. OCHA Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, 13 February 2020 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/nws_sitrep8_20200213.pdf

6. Turkey-Russia Standoff in Syria Leaves Millions of Refugees Caught in Chaos, Wall Street Journal, 17 February 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-russia-standoff-in-syria-leaves-millions-of-refugees-caught-in-chaos-11581969539>

7. Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 7 - As of 29 January 2020, 29 January 2020,

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-recent-developments-northwestern-syria-situation-12>

8. Syrian regime airstrikes 'target civilian cars trying to flee fighting' in rebel-held Idlib, 28 January 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/01/28/syrian-forces-target-civilian-cars-trying-flee-fighting-rebel/>

9. According to Mohamad Katoub, former advocacy manager at the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), 4 February 2020

12. SYRIA IN CONTEXT Weekly Briefing - 07/2020 ISSUE 87 - WEEK 7/2020, 18 February 2020