

Emergency briefing on Idlib, northwest Syria

5 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.** The humanitarian crisis is the worst Syria has seen in the last nine years, with almost a million people internally displaced and living in muddy, overcrowded camps, while funding for the local groups responding to the emergency is pitiful. 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. They are being bombed by indiscriminate and banned weapons including barrel bombs, cluster bombs¹, high-explosive missiles and shells. Syrian and Russian warplanes are even targeting those fleeing on the road and in tents².
2. **In 2020 alone, at least 241 civilians have been killed** in Idlib, including 71 children (more than two each day) and two White Helmets volunteers. In 2019 Syrian forces killed 1,328 civilians, including 324 children, while their Russian allies killed 320 civilians, including 68 children³.
3. **Within Idlib, more than 1.5 million people have been displaced into the freezing winter**⁴. Between 1 December 2019 and 3 February alone, 520,000 people have been displaced⁵, including 140,000 children⁶, and this number will only rise if the Syrian and Russian attacks continue. The highly populated cities of Khan Sheikhou, Jarjanaz, Kafranbel and Maarat al-Numan have been emptied.
4. **Displacement camps on the Turkish border are stretched to breaking point.** Families are forced to shelter under olive trees in the open with little access to running water or basic services. The UN estimates 2.8 million civilians⁷ are in need of humanitarian assistance to survive, everything is scarce.
5. **Hospitals, schools and civil defence centres are being deliberately and systematically targeted by the Syrian regime and Russia.** In just 48 hours, three hospitals have been bombed by Russian warplanes; the Public Health Centre in Sarmin, Sarmin Hospital, and al-Nour hospital in Taftanaz⁸, adding to the 53 hospitals forced to suspend services since the beginning of the year⁹. The UN verified 145 attacks on schools and 82 attacks on medical infrastructure in 2019, in flagrant violation of international law¹⁰. In January four White Helmets centres (Syrian Civil Defence) were targeted¹¹.
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 be not be allowed to affect millions in dire need of lifesaving relief. The current cross-border resolution does not impact this route, but Russia used discord as a pressure point in January and could obstruct proceedings again in six months time.
4. **Governments must make it clear that the Syrian regime and Russia will be held accountable** for their ongoing war crimes against Syrian civilians. Last week UN investigators probing attacks on hospitals in northern Syria delayed their publication, pushing justice for civilians further into the long grass and sending a message of impunity to the Syrian regime and Russia as they continue to deliberately target hospitals. **The UN Secretary General must release the findings on attacks on hospitals promptly and make them public and assign responsibility for perpetrators.**
5. **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.

We should all heed the words of one of Syria's greatest activists Raed Fares, who was believed to be killed by members of the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al Sham

"The only way to create a new Syria is through civil society. There's no other way. It can't happen through weapons, it can't happen through realities that others are trying to impose. What will get us to the Syria we dream of is the collective power of civil society through their different work and visions."

CASE STUDY: KESH MALEK

Kesh Malek is one of the most respected civil society groups operating in northwest Syria, working in education and child protection, women's empowerment, human rights and advocacy. Since 2018 Kesh Malek has had their funding cut from multiple sources, including 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

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

**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 tens of thousands of civilians looking for safe shelter.*

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 520,000 Syrians who have been displaced in Idlib province, northern Syria, between 1 December 2019 and 3 February 2020 alone, including 140,000 children, and the one million more people expected to be displaced shortly? 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 Britain?
- 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. 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. Syrian regime air strikes '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/>

3, 4 & 11. Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) figures, 4 February 2020

5. Syria: UN health agency highlights 'critical health threats' facing Idlib civilians, 3 February 2020 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1056552>

6 & 10. Aid Agency Warns Of Humanitarian Disaster, 35 Killed Yesterday By Airstrikes In Syria, 22 January 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/aid-agency-warns-humanitarian-disaster-35-killed-yesterday-airstrikes>

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

9. Northwest Syria: WHO raises alarm as more than 50 health facilities are forced to cease operations amid mass displacement and hostilities, World Health Organisation, 3 February 2020 <http://www.emro.who.int/syr/syria-news/northwest-syria-who-raises-alarm-as-more-than-50-health-facilities-are-forced-to-cease-operations-amid-mass-displacement-and-hostilities.html>