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‘Highly explosive’ escalation of conflict and displacement across Syria’s Idlib, says top UN official



UNICEF/Giovanni Diffidenti | Boys pass rubble and destroyed buildings on their way to a nearby school offering basic lessons, in the city of Maarat al-Numaan, Idlib Governorate.

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The situation inside Syria’s Idlib threatens to become “highly explosive” amid an uptick in conflict between armed groups and a spike in the number of people displaced inside the war-torn country, a top UN aid official said on Monday.

Panos Moutmtzis, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis (<http://www.unocha.org/syria>), told journalists in Geneva that 1.2 million of the governorate’s more than 2.5 million population are now displaced; many of them multiple times.

The situation was “heartbreaking” and complicated by the fact that Idlib has become a haven for belligerents forced out of former strongholds by government forces and their allies, said the UN official.

He told journalists in Geneva that every part of Idlib had been in constant upheaval with fresh waves of fighters being forced to seek refuge there.

“We have seen in the last few weeks an escalation of even fighting between these groups that has taken place,” he said, noting that fighting had been occurring around health facilities and other civilian areas.

“A special solution needs to be found for all these groups inside Idlib, because the current composition makes it highly explosive.”

The first four months of the year have seen more than 900,000 people flee their homes inside Syria.

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This is “the highest displacement number since the conflict started”, Mr. Moutzidis said, adding that eight in 10 people had come from Rural Damascus and Afrin in the north, while others had been displaced within Idlib governorate itself.

Across Syria, more than two million people are in so-called hard-to-reach areas and around 11,000 are still under siege in three opposition-controlled locations.

Some 6.2 million people are internally displaced and a further 5.6 million have fled the country amid ongoing conflict that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and destroyed basic infrastructure.

Response to the seven-year conflict ‘at a breaking point’

With the \$1.8 billion appeal for Syria only 26 per cent funded, the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator said on Monday that the international response to the seven-year conflict was “really at a breaking point”.

The shortage of funding meant that aid teams could not deliver “basic life-saving” aid where it was needed, despite having full access to areas such as Idlib, Mr. Moutzidis added, while calling for pledges made at a recent EU-hosted conference in Brussels, Belgium, to be disbursed promptly.

In an appeal for the belligerents – and international Member States with responsibility for preventing an escalation of conflict – the UN official stressed that every effort needed to be made to prevent the situation in Idlib deteriorating further and turning into a repeat of the devastation experienced in East Aleppo and East Ghouta:

Across the governorate, he said, “protection of civilians is of major concern, in particular given the composition; given the fact that there is a sizeable number of women, children, families living there.”

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