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Needs soar as number of Syrian refugees tops 3 million



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GENEVA, August 29 (UNHCR) -The UN refugee agency reports that Syria's intensifying refugee crisis will today pass a record 3 million people, amid reports of horrifying conditions inside the country. These include cities where populations are surrounded, people are going hungry and civilians are being indiscriminantly killed.

"Almost half of all Syrians have now been forced to abandon their homes and flee for their lives. One in every eight Syrians has fled across the border, fully a million more than a year ago. A further 6.5 million are displaced within Syria.

Over half of those uprooted are children," UNHCR said in a statement released on Friday in Geneva.



This Syrian family used to lead a happy life in Aleppo. Now the parents and children sleep on the streets of Istanbul in Turkey. They are among the 3 million refugees from Syria, many of whom live in desperate conditions.

UNHCR and other aid agencies say increasing numbers of families are arriving in a shocking state, exhausted, scared and with their savings depleted. Most have been on the run for a year or more, fleeing from village to village before taking the final decision to leave.

"There are worrying signs too that the journey out of Syria is becoming tougher, with many people forced to pay bribes at armed checkpoints proliferating along the borders. Refugees crossing the desert into eastern Jordan are being forced to pay smugglers hefty sums (US\$100 a head or more) to take them to safety," the statement said.

UNHCR said most of the refugees remain in countries neighbouring Syria, with the highest concentrations in Lebanon (1.14 million), Jordan (608,000) and Turkey (815,000). This has led to an enormous strain on their economies, infrastructure and resources. More than four in five refugees are struggling to make a living in urban areas, with 38 per cent living in sub-standard shelter, according to a recent survey.

"Syrians are now the world's largest refugee population under UNHCR care, second only in number to the decades-long Palestinian crisis. The Syria operation is now the largest in UNHCR's 64-year history," the statement said.

António Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said the Syrian crisis "has become the biggest humanitarian emergency of our era, yet the world is failing to meet the needs of refugees and the countries hosting them." He added that the response to the Syrian crisis had been generous, "but the bitter truth is that it falls far short of what's needed."

A recent upsurge in fighting appears to be worsening an already desperate situation. As frontlines shift, new areas are emptying out. Recent arrivals to Jordan, for example, are running from attacks in the areas of Raqaa and Aleppo.

UNHCR is also deeply concerned for the well-being of several hundred Syrians trapped inside the Al Obaidy refugee camp in Al Qa'im, Iraq, after UN agencies and international NGOs were forced to abandon their offices and warehouses. UNHCR says national partners are continuing to provide supplies and maintenance, but the situation is volatile.

Many newly arriving refugees say they only left Syria as a last resort. A growing number, including more than half of those coming to Lebanon, have moved at least once before fleeing, and one in 10 have moved more than three times. One woman told UNHCR she had moved 20 times before crossing into Lebanon.

In addition to worsening security, the latest refugee arrivals report increasing difficulty in finding work; rocketing food and commodity prices; and failing services. A packet of bread in one village near the city of Idlib costs ten times more this year than last, according to a new arrival in Jordan.

The UNHCR statement said a growing share of new arrivals – up to 15 per cent in Jordan, for example – were suffering from long-term medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, and left because they were no longer able to get adequate health care at home.

UNHCR is working with 150 other agencies and aid groups, together with the governments of neighbouring countries, to help refugees pay their rent and get food, education and medical care, as well as giving basic goods such as tents, mattresses and plastic sheeting.

In the past year alone, 1.7 million refugees received food aid, 350,000 children were enrolled in school, and shelter in camps was provided for more than 400,000 refugees. Since the beginning of the crisis in March 2011, UNHCR has registered refugees faster than at any time in its history.

Donors have contributed more than US\$4.1 billion to successive regional response plans since 2012. However more than US\$2 billion more is needed by the end of this year to meet the urgent needs of refugees. Most urgently, more than 2.4 million people are expected to need support in the coming weeks to prepare for winter.