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UNHCR warns Mosul situation deteriorating as fighting rages

The displacement crisis in Mosul is likely to become more acute in the near term, as fighting intensifies in the densely populated western parts of the city, according to Bruno Geddo, the Representative of UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in Iraq.

An estimated 400,000 people are thought to be living in the Old City in western Mosul, with about 600,000 still in all the neighbourhoods of the Western side of the Tigris River, Geddo said on a call with reporters on Thursday (March 23).

The area lies on the frontline of a renewed offensive by Iraqi-led forces against extremists who are well dug in, Geddo said, noting that the fighting has been more intense than during the battle for the less densely populated east of the city, which ended in January.

"The worst is yet to come," he said, "400,000 people trapped in the Old City in that situation of panic and penury may inevitably lead to the cork popping somewhere, sometime - presenting us with a fresh outflow of large-scale proportions."

Geddo was speaking by phone from the UNHCR transit and reception centre at Hammam al-Alil, about 25 kilometres south of the city. He highlighted the risks for those who remain in west Mosul, who could become casualties of the fighting and must cope with a lack of food, clean water and fuel to keep themselves warm when temperatures drop at night.

At the same time, there are grave dangers should they attempt to flee. Those leaving their homes risk being shot on site by extremists. Some have tried to leave during prayers or under cover of fog at first light. And some did not make it to safety.

"People are stuck between a rock and a hard place," Geddo added. "There's fighting shelling, bombing."

UNHCR has 13 camps open or under construction with capacity to host up to 145,000 people. Hammam al-Alil currently comprises a screening and transit site and government-built camp. UNHCR has almost completed a second camp to house 30,000 people. The first section of the camp is due to open next week, with capacity for 10,000 people.

The number of people moving through Hammam al-Alil has surged in recent days, with around 8,000-12,000 arrivals daily. Work will soon begin in another UNHCR camp, As Salamiyah 2, south east of Mosul, with projected capacity for up to 60,000 people.

In all, 340,000 people have been displaced by the fighting in Mosul, which started in October. Of that number, about 72,000 have returned home, primarily to eastern parts of Iraq's second city and villages nearby. But the

process of returns to the east was not always smooth, with some returnees heading back into camps amid fears about security and the lack of amenities.

Geddo highlighted the recent trend of people leaving western Mosul, seeking sanctuary outside of camps, either with relatives and friends, or by squatting in unfinished buildings in areas of southern and eastern Ninewa.

UNHCR, and its partners have been assisting those outside of camps with mobile protection and distribution teams. The UN Refugee Agency has distributed 33,309 core relief kits, including essentials like stoves, utensils and jerry cans, reaching over 120,000 outside of camps and some 320,000 people in total.

Geddo stressed that the protection of civilians should be uppermost and that all parties must ensure civilians are not prevented from leaving areas of conflict and can access safe areas. Equally, civilians must not be forced to return to unsafe areas, he said.

"Liberating Mosul is necessary but not sufficient", Geddo said. "We equally have to get it right with the protection of civilians and in the humanitarian response."

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