

A Call to Ensure Relief to the Syrian People

The severe winter conditions across Syria and the surrounding region recently have brought new difficulties for refugees and other displaced people. Pax Christi International is very concerned about the humanitarian situation of the Syrian population. Therefore, Pax Christi International is calling the United Nations, the European Union, other intergovernmental bodies, national governments as well as non-governmental organisations to increase and diversify, despite the difficulties of access, the necessary and urgent aid to be given for the refugees and displaced people in Syria, as well as in the neighbouring countries.

1. According to UN estimates, currently 4 million civilians in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance. This number includes more than 1, 5 million internally displaced people. UNRWAⁱ estimates that 400.000 out of the 500.000 registered Palestinian refugees are in need of humanitarian assistance throughout the country.ⁱⁱ The humanitarian situation is deteriorating rapidly, yet the international community gives insufficient attention to addressing the causes and consequences of this man-made and unprecedented disaster.
2. Huge numbers of civilians are fleeing the armed conflict that has taken the lives of at least 60.000 people. The plight of the civilians is exacerbated by the shortages of food, water, and fuel.ⁱⁱⁱ These shortages have mainly been triggered by the government that has deliberately targeted infrastructure as a collective punishment of the civilian population. Towns are under siege; hospitals, schools, and bakeries are being bombed; electricity and water networks are being damaged.
3. Due to the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation, the international donor community has stepped up relief

efforts but with limited success. In September 2012, the UN launched an appeal of US \$348 million for the Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan; yet, it has only received 52% of its funding.^{iv} A second appeal, the Regional Refugee Response Plan, led by the UN Refugee Agency, has stated funding requirements of US \$193 million, of which 54% have been received. This appeal targets displaced people in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. To date, the UNHCR has registered more than 600.000 Syrian refugees, but this number is only an estimation seeing as not all refugees register with the UNHCR. Even if the UN did not manage to provide the needed funding, humanitarian agencies and partners announced in December that they need US \$1, 5 billion for life-saving emergency assistance.

4. The relief effort is facing several difficulties. One of the main problems is the lack of unfettered access to the populations in need. The Syrian government has not asked for international assistance. According to International Humanitarian Law, the governing authorities bear the responsibility for their civilians and external agencies must be invited in or given permission to access civilians, making it very difficult for the UN and international aid agencies to work officially in Syria.^v Many agencies are operating in the neighbouring countries by assisting refugees fleeing the crisis and are waiting to be granted authorised humanitarian access.
5. The Syrian government decided that official assistance needs to be channelled through the SARC, the local branch of the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (IFCRC). In 2012, the SARC granted formal approval to only 8 INGOs to work in Syria.^{vi} Consequently, very few international organizations are operating within Syria. Historically, the Syrian authorities have restricted access to international organizations to work in the country.^{vii}
6. Due to the restricted access of international organizations, the international community has primarily cooperated with the SARC or worked through UN agencies; however, the

SARC is an agency controlled by the government. Much of the aid has been confiscated by the authorities and redistributed to its constituency with a clear distinction between the top rank and the volunteers, who often are grass roots activists.^{viii} The UN agencies also depend on the Syrian government's approval of their activities and the places where they can work.

7. Consequently, a considerable amount of the aid does not reach the beneficiaries who need it most. To fill this gap, many local actors are active in this field and alleviate the needs of the population, often in extremely difficult and underground operations. Since the start of the uprising, networks of solidarity and grass roots activists spread all over the country. They are trying to organise life and provide the daily necessities such as cleaning neighbourhoods, reopening schools when possible, smuggling bread and opening secret bakeries instead of the bombarded ones, implementing field hospitals, and smuggling seriously injured people to the neighbouring countries in order to receive a proper treatment.
8. They need financial assistance to continue and step up their efforts. The problems that activists are facing, beyond the usual security threat, are primarily financial; it is difficult to find governments or NGOs willing to fund small initiatives unless they are adopted by recognized entities or registered NGOs. This is not realistic considering the current legislations in Syria that forbade the development of an effective civil society.

Pax Christi International and its member organisations active worldwide are urging:

- 1) The United Nations, the European Union and other intergovernmental bodies, as well as national governments, pressure Syrian authorities to accept responsibility for their civilians and give external humanitarian aid agencies permission to access the civilian population;
- 2) To humanitarian aid be increased and diversified;

- 3) That efforts aimed at delivering aid to the Syrian population include areas which are no longer under control of the Syrian government;^{ix}
- 4) That aid already given be reconsidered and new ways be explored to support local Syrian activists and groups that are not always officially registered in order to and assist their aid efforts;
- 5) That national governments working via liaison officers in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, facilitate such support and do more in terms of providing aid to refugees and to local activists.

The lives of all citizens should be respected and the hostilities should come to an end as soon as possible. The diplomatic efforts of H.E. Lakhdar Brahimi, the Special Representative for Syria of the United Nations and the Arab League, should be strengthened.

Pax Christi International is calling all its member organizations to write letters to their national authorities expressing concern about the winter conditions adding to hardships for more than 600.000 Syrian refugees.

Brussels, 15 January 2013

ⁱ United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)

ⁱⁱ Humanitarian bulletin Syria, OCHA, 25 December-7 January 2013,

ⁱⁱⁱ Humanitarian bulletin Syria, OCHA, 25 December-7 January 2013,

<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Humanitarian%20Bulletin%20-%20Issue%2016.pdf>

^{iv} Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan 2012,

<http://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emerg-emergencyDetails&emergID=16205>

^v Funding to the Syrian Crisis Global Humanitarian Initiative,

<http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/funding-to-the-syrian-crisis-3782.html>

^{vi} Action Contre La Faim, Première Urgence, Danish Refugee Council, International Medical Corps, Help, Institut Européen de Coopération et de Développement (IECD), Secours Islamique France, Terre des Hommes- Italy). Factsheet Syria ECHO,

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf

^{vii} There are a few exceptions such as Danish Refugee Council who were providing aid to Iraqi refugees and have since remained active in the country.

^{viii} Assad's war on the red crescent, <http://www.syrianassistance.com/6/post/2012/12/december-12th-2012.html>

^{ix} The Syrian opposition (led by the National Coalition for the Forces of Opposition and Revolution and the Free Syrian Army) are reportedly in control of significant areas of the country.