

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**PRESENTATION TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE AND DEFENCE
DUBLIN, 26 JANUARY 2017**

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished members of the Joint Committee, on behalf of UNHCR I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you this morning on subject of our work in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in particular in the response to the Syrian refugee crisis. My name is Grainne O Hara and I am the Head of UNHCR's Protection Service for the MENA region based in Amman, Jordan. Protection as understood by UNHCR encompasses the range of legal, material and physical interventions required to ensure that refugees, and other persons of concern to UNHCR – namely internally displaced persons, stateless persons and returnees, are able to enjoy the range of rights extended to them under international law. The team that I head in Amman comprises experts in registration, refugee status determination, child protection, education, prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and other key thematic functions. Our geographical area of coverage spans the countries of Northern Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf Cooperation Council. In my comments to you this morning I will focus on two of the largest operations within that region, Syria and Iraq.

SYRIA

- Syria is one of the largest humanitarian crisis of our time – now in its sixth year of conflict, the fighting in Syria has led to unprecedented levels of humanitarian need. The disregard for human life and acts of inhumanity on an unimaginable scale that have been seen in Syria, and in neighbouring Iraq, have led to enormous suffering, destruction. Displacement is a significant characteristic of the crisis, both inside Syria, regionally and beyond, including to Europe.
- An estimated 13.5 million people inside Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 6.3 million people who have been internally displaced. 4.6 million live in areas which are hard for humanitarian actors to reach, including up to 700,000 people in besieged areas, where they are exposed to grave protection threats.
- The consequences of the situation in Syria have a regional dimension, highlighted by the fact that there are currently over 4.8 million registered Syrian refugees hosted in the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Turkey hosts more refugees than any other country – some 2.8 million, accounting for around 3.5 per cent of the population of Turkey. In Lebanon, the over one million registered Syrian refugees are equivalent to over 20 per cent of the population, and the 655,000 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan is equivalent to nearly 9 per cent of the population. Iraq hosts nearly 230,000 Syrian refugees. Iraq is at the same time responding to the needs of over 3 million of its own citizens who have been internally displaced in recent years. Egypt hosts around 116,000 Syrian refugees along with refugees from many other countries.
- Syrian refugees continue to need international protection. Host governments, local communities and humanitarian partners are working to support respect of basic rights, protection and physical security of all affected populations, including those stranded at borders.
- Syrian refugees in the region are descending deeper and deeper into poverty – 93 per cent of Syrian refugees living outside of camps in Jordan are living below the poverty line, more than 71 per cent of refugees are below the poverty line in Lebanon, 65 per cent in Egypt, and 37 per cent in Iraq. Overall, 70 per cent of people in need are women and children.
- The refugee crisis has had an enormous impact on host countries and communities, affecting all aspects of daily life, from housing and unemployment to general price levels and public sanitation. There must be more international support to refugees and to their hosts, and humanitarian assistance has to match the level of the needs.

- Over the past year, a number of events including the World Humanitarian Summit, in Istanbul in February 2016, have highlighted the need for changes in the way humanitarian crises are responded to, for example by progressively shifting towards multi-year predictable funding. At the London conference on Supporting Syria and the Region, in February 2016, commitments were made to mobilize the necessary financial resources and domestic political support to create up to 1.1 million jobs by 2018 and private sector actors signalled their willingness to provide new investment. Almost a year on, the full realization of the aspirations of the London Conference have yet to be realized.
- The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP 2017-2018) consolidates the activities and funding needs of 240 partners responding to the needs of 4.8 million Syrian refugees and over 4.4 million members of the communities that host them. The 3RP interagency appeal is for USD 4.63 billion in 2017.
- Funding continues to be crucial to meet refugee needs. Donors have generously contributed some USD 10 billion to the international response plans for Syrian refugees since 2012. However, in recent years the response plans have only been around 60 per cent funded. Greater support is needed in 2017, including the early disbursement of funds so that agencies can better plan interventions, allocate resources and provide consistent assistance to beneficiaries. Flexible funding, including broadly earmarked contributions, further assists partners to respond to the most pressing needs and to create capacity to reorient activities in response to a changing situation.

IRAQ

Allow me to say some words specific to Iraq which, alongside Syria constitutes a major humanitarian challenge in the region.

- Since January 2014, escalating violence in Iraq has led to the internal displacement of 3 million people across the country. In addition 245,000 registered Iraqi refugees have crossed borders to seek asylum in the region, over half of these hosted by Turkey. At the same returns are taking place with nearly 1.4 million people returned to their places of origin since 2015. However, the sustainability of returns is hampered by widespread destruction of infrastructure and the presence of mines and unexploded ordnance.
- Currently the focus of the humanitarian response is concentrated on the situation affecting Mosul. Over 162,000 people have been displaced from Mosul and surrounding areas since the start of the military offensive in October 2016 to retake the city from extremist elements. As part of the emergency response for Mosul, UNHCR has established new camps, upgraded existing camps, increased the capacity for protection interventions, and provided core relief items.

KEY REGIONAL PROGRAMMES AND RESPONSES

- **Biometric registration:** Accurate data on the number of profile of refugees is an essential component of their protection. Credible registration data is the foundation of effective programming. In 2016, the registration records of over two million Syrian refugees were updated to include iris scan enrolment.
- **Winter assistance:** UNHCR's regional winter assistance plan for 2016-2017 addresses the needs of 4.72 million vulnerable Syrian and Iraqi internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt with an overall budget of USD 347 million. Since September 2016, UNHCR has provided winter assistance to more than 3.24 million Syrian IDPs and refugees and more than 155,000 Iraqi IDPs and refugees. Assistance is intended to meet the winter needs of the vulnerable refugees and includes the distribution of core relief items specific to winter, and shelter insulation support, provided in coordination with government agencies, partners, and community outreach volunteers.

- **Cash assistance:** The expanded use of cash assistance aims to meet the most critical needs of refugees in the most cost effective manner. It takes into account the dignity and agency of individual refugees and their families. In 2016, donor support allowed UNHCR to provide cash assistance to the value of USD 325 million to over two million Syrian refugees. In Lebanon, refugee response partners are rolling out a common cash card which will be used by multiple agencies to deliver assistance jointly. In Jordan, iris scan technology enables refugees to access their funds without the need for a bank card or PIN code. In Iraq, UNHCR is piloting mobile payment solutions, which will greatly enhance the ability to deliver assistance quickly and reliably.
- **Innovation:** UNHCR together with the partners are working together across the region finding new ways to collaborate, develop good practices and encourage innovative thinking. Some of the key innovation approaches adopted by UNHCR, which I have already mentioned, include biometric registration including iris recognition technology and the use of iris recognition for cash assistance. Other innovations like the use of SMS communications and call centres to communicate effectively with refugees in a two-way conversation which takes account of their views, are helping to improve the overall effectiveness of the humanitarian response.
- **Global Responsibility Sharing:** The use of resettlement and other forms of admission, both as a protection tool and as a visible means of global responsibility sharing is significant in the Syria and Iraq operations. A high-level meeting convened by UNHCR on this topic on 30 March 2016, set an ambitious target of achieving capacity for resettlement and other forms of admission for 10% of the Syrian refugee population over the course of 3 years. In 2016 over 96,000 refugees in the MENA region and Turkey were submitted for resettlement including Syrians and non-Syrians.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE SYRIA RESPONSE

- The only solution to the plight of the Syrian people is a negotiated political settlement. Notwithstanding the numerous challenges and anticipated setbacks on the ground, efforts must be redoubled to find a political solution to the crisis.

UNHCR

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