



WHOLE OF SYRIA PROTECTION SECTOR MESSAGE ON EAST GHOUTA

The Whole of Syria Protection Sector calls for immediate and urgent action to protect hundreds of thousands of civilians, half of whom are believed to be children, living under siege and facing enormous security threats and life-threatening hardships in East Ghouta. Despite the unanimous adoption of Resolution No. 2401 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 24 February 2018, calling for a 30-day cessation of hostilities, the situation for the civilian population in East Ghouta is worsening by the day. Armed hostilities, involving airstrikes as well as rocket and mortar exchanges continued to hit the urban areas of Eastern Ghouta, Damascus city and Rural Damascus suburbs **causing numerous deaths and injuries among the civilians, in addition to serious damage to civilian infrastructure.** It is estimated that more than 1,100 civilians have been killed and 4,000 injured since the escalation in February, including two staff working for cross-border organizations which are members of the protection sector. Similarly, retaliatory rocket and mortar attacks on neighborhoods of Damascus and Rural Damascus have killed 70 civilians and injured more than 400 during the same period.

The situation in East Ghouta was already a severe protection crisis after months of besiegement, restricted humanitarian access and depletion of basic services. On February 26, the UN Secretary General described eastern Ghouta as a “hell on Earth.”

After months of denial of humanitarian access, only two humanitarian convoys have been able to enter the area, on 14th February and 5th March, bringing aid for almost 35,000 people. However, some critical medical items were not allowed on those convoys and not all items could be offloaded on March 5th due to the security situation. Humanitarian staff present on the convoy directly witnessed the far-reaching effects of the current situation on the civilian population.

DIRE PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, HEALTH, HYGIENE AND ACCESS CONDITIONS

- Constant physical danger has compelled families to move into basements or makeshift corridors dug from mud, under buildings which are overcrowded, unventilated, and have limited privacy and dire hygienic conditions. *“They [civilians] are afraid all the time; they are hungry...if they do not die from the shelling, they will die from hunger or disease.”* Humanitarian actors working in East Ghouta liken these living conditions to a giant grave.
- Safe routes for civilians to leave the city are not viable, due to ongoing aerial bombardment but also reports of sniper fire from around the areas. The humanitarian corridor established by UNSC Resolution 2401 has not yet been used since the humanitarian pause and since the unilateral call failed to satisfy the condition of complete cessation of hostilities requested, many civilians fear being targeted en route and have exposed their intention to remain in the enclave, in order to stay close to their relatives, protect or simply avoid to abandon their property, or because they cannot afford the cost of restarting their lives after relocation.
- Reports are emerging of civilians who are willing to leave but fear retaliation by local armed groups and therefore remain, confined. At the same time, protection risks in government-controlled territory cannot be excluded, including compulsory military drafting and the fear of retribution.
- The use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas, with indiscriminate effects and without any evident practice of civilian harm mitigation has meant that even if health facilities have not been destroyed or closed, civilians cannot safely reach them. 14 hospitals and three health centers in East Ghouta were impacted by aerial bombardment between 18-24 February while of 24 health facilities in the area, 12 are currently closed. Medical supplies and equipment, including for trauma and chronic illness are also in severely short supply.
- The first medical evacuations only occurred several days after the UNSC Resolution was adopted, despite the urgency of the cases.
- Civilians in East Ghouta are suffering from severe hunger. A complete choke on markets and the entry of commercial goods has provoked a spike in food price, often outside the purchasing powers of the residents. Parents forgo what meager food they have to ensure more regular meals for their children.
- In the absence of a proper sewage system or water source, as well as poor ventilation within civilians’ basement shelters, people’s hygiene and health conditions are rapidly deteriorating.
- The prolonged exposure to the effects of shelling and intensity of hostilities has caused extreme psychological distress among the community, particularly in the case of children. Opportunities for provision of psychological first aid are very limited given that many of those in need are confined to basements and partners cannot access them or can merely support children with recreational activities to try and provide some respite and mitigate anxiety and fear. Children, adolescents and youth face tremendous dangers on a daily basis. They are at constant risk of being separated from their parents, killed or maimed. They are seeing family members killed and they are terrified by the constant shelling.
- Child recruitment, particularly of out of school adolescents, is a common phenomenon. During the convoys children and adolescents have been observed in supporting military operations inside East Ghouta, fulfilling different roles and responsibilities, such as support functions, checkpoint manning or even active fighting. Recruitment is reportedly also driven by economic considerations, as well as societal and community pressure.
- The dire situation has had a direct impact on lives of women and girls. There are now more and more female-headed households due to the conflict, possibly representing up to 70% in certain locations within the enclave. Women and girls are at increased risk of sexual harassment and violence, including due to sub-standard living conditions. While measures to improve privacy are sometimes put in place in the dilapidated basements, exposure to risks cannot be avoided.
- The dire physical and psychological conditions have negatively affected the incidence of miscarriages or premature births while capacities to provide reproductive health services inside East Ghouta are extremely limited. Consulted women have reported that early marriage is on the rise and at progressively lower ages (15-16), as family negative coping strategies to decrease the number of children in need of support, or as a form of “protection” in families headed by women after the loss of male family members.

THE PROTECTION SECTOR:

- ➔ Joins the numerous appeals made by the UN Secretary General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Emergency Relief Coordinator, and the humanitarian leadership within Syria for an immediate implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2401, reminding Member States of their commitment under this resolution:
 - “use their influence with the parties to ensure implementation of the cessation of hostilities” to provide a much needed respite in the extreme violence and terror to which populations in several areas in Syria are exposed;
 - allow for “safe, unimpeded and sustained access each week for United Nations and their implementing partners humanitarian convoys... to all requested areas and populations...” to enable humanitarian aid deliveries and “undertake safe, unconditional medical evacuation based on medical need and urgency”;
 - Ensure the safety of humanitarian aid workers, assets and supplies.
- ➔ Advocates in line with International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and International Criminal Law:
 - Respect the principle of distinction, proportionality and precaution enshrined in International Humanitarian Law and ensure that civilians and civilian objects such as hospitals and schools are protected against direct attacks and the effects of hostilities;
 - Afford special protection to children, including those associated with armed groups or armed forces;
 - Allow civilians to move in safety and voluntarily to safe places inside or outside East Ghouta and protect civilians at all times before, during and after any voluntary evacuation;
- ➔ Recalls that under international law:
 - The arbitrary displacement of civilian populations for reasons related to the conflict is prohibited and reminds all parties to the conflict of their obligation to take every measure to prevent and avoid conditions that lead to displacement.
 - Evacuations are considered as a life-saving measure of last resort for civilians and persons of concern facing an immediate threat of harm.
 - Civilians’ right to freedom of movement must be preserved and civilians must be protected and assisted regardless the choice. Civilians have the right to remain in or leave East Ghouta without fear of reprisals or adverse distinction.
- ➔ Urges the parties, in case evacuations are deemed necessary as an option of last resort, to respect minimum standards as prepared by the Protection Sector and other humanitarian actors in Syria. These include,¹ inter-alia:
 - Guarantees for the security, safety and dignity of the civilian population, as well as of the humanitarian and medical personnel at all stages of the evacuation.
 - Freedom of movement for the population to be able to access needed protection services once in areas outside Ghouta.
 - The presence of independent and neutral humanitarian actors throughout evacuations conducted in line with minimum standards for engagement, including in IDP sites, to provide assistance and services;
- ➔ Encourages donors to generously fund the Humanitarian Response Plan 2018, to ensure the continuation of activities to serve people in need throughout Syria, including in areas around Ghouta where immediate support can be provided to the evacuated population. Allow essential flexibility with their partners working in East Ghouta, given the current operational circumstances, through reallocation of resources and budget lines for priority activities and de-linking of reporting requirements to fund disbursement;
- ➔ Exhorts to put an end to sieges and other tactics to deliberately deny civilians food and other goods and services essential to their survival and welcomes initiatives that prevent or reduce the violence and end the relentless suffering of civilians in Syria, particularly in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, such as East Ghouta, Fouah/Kafraya, Idlib, Afrin and Yarmouk.

¹ “Standards on Evacuations”, endorsed by the HCT in March 2018