As Syria Marks Three Years of Conflict, International Medical Corps Continues to Respond to Escalating Challenges of a Regional Humanitarian Response

Lisa Ellis
Director of Global Communications
310.826.7800
lellis@InternationalMedicalCorps.org

March 17, 2014 - Los Angeles, Calif. – With nearly half of Syria’s 22 million people displaced and the intensity of a brutal civil war escalating as it enters a fourth year, International Medical Corps is adapting its response to address an escalating humanitarian disaster now spilling across the heart of the Middle East.

The evolving approach acknowledges the stark realities International Medical Corps has witnessed on the ground—that those in neighboring countries unwittingly touched by the conflict as well as those innocent civilians inside Syria are all deeply affected. Regardless of nationality, no matter where they are or what country they live in, these individuals, families and communities share a common experience, shoulder a common burden, and nurture a common goal: They seek safety, protection and the hope for a better life.

International Medical Corps is leading efforts to adapt how services are provided to both refugees and local residents by fostering a community of common purpose in the localities and cities struggling to deal with the conflict’s growing impact on their lives. It is an approach that addresses the needs of all those affected by the conflict as part of this community and calls on international organizations to address those most vulnerable, regardless of nationality.

International Medical Corps’ strategy to meet the escalating challenges of the crisis is shaped by three priorities:

• Maintaining the ability to rapidly respond to escalating humanitarian concerns through delivering needed humanitarian supplies and services as the conflict continues to impact the Syrian population, while at the same time building the capacity of national first responders;

• Empowering community support networks in both refugee settings and vulnerable host community environments to deliver assistance more efficiently; and

• Fostering national resilience to help support larger-scale health sector strengthening efforts with the goal to leave behind a more functional, “resilient” system once the conflict ends and stability returns.

The evolving strategy is important because the scale of the human tragedy unfolding in the region carries consequences that extend beyond human suffering. As an organization assisting both those displaced in and around Damascus as well as those seeking refuge in four neighboring countries, International Medical Corps sees that the humanitarian crisis spawned by Syria’s civil war has now also become a social and economic emergency affecting the entire region.
The arrival of an estimated 2.5 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries since 2011 is already straining essential services in host countries and the United Nations estimates that over a million or more refugees could follow this year. Increasingly, local families and communities in these countries must now share overburdened health and social services that are the only support available to them.

“We see the suffering this generates,” said Rabih Torbay, International Medical Corps’ Vice President of International Operations. “We feel the social and economic strains the crisis brings as we respond to humanitarian needs of those inside Syria and refugees and host communities throughout the region including those in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan.”

Estimates of those displaced within Syria run as high as 6.5 million. The UN predicts that by the end of 2014 the conflict could generate over 4 million refugees.

“The Syria crisis has forced host countries and humanitarian organizations to innovate and design new solutions to address what has become the largest global humanitarian disaster in history,” Torbay said. “Given the increasingly complex nature of the crisis, we are utilizing a flexible, adaptable and responsive strategy to meet the needs of those most vulnerable.”

International Medical Corps started its work in Syria in 2007, assisting Iraqi refugees in the Damascus area who had fled sectarian violence and a bitter insurgency at home. Its first humanitarian assistance programs in the Middle East began over a decade ago. Today, International Medical Corps is on the ground assisting those in all five countries most severely affected by the Syrian conflict, providing much needed medical and other health-related services. Programs include: rapid emergency response, health sector strengthening, mental health and psychosocial assistance, maternal and child health, protection, women’s empowerment, and water, sanitation and hygiene.

A wide network of long-standing relationships with local partners and government ministries is a key feature of the organization’s strong work in the region and has contributed to International Medical Corps’ role as a leading international NGO in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Gaza, Libya, Turkey and Yemen.

Since its inception 30 years ago, International Medical Corps’ mission has been consistent: relieve the suffering of those impacted by war, natural disaster, and disease, by delivering vital health care services and sustainable development projects that focus on training. This approach of helping people help themselves is critical to returning hardest-hit populations to self-reliance. For more information visit: www.InternationalMedicalCorps.org. Also see us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.