

## The Syria INGO Regional Forum statement on impact of military developments on the civilian population in northeast Syria

The Syria INGO Regional Forum, comprising 73 INGOs responding to the Syria crisis, expressed deep concern at the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation since Turkey's military operation started on the 9 October. The UN estimates that more than 200,000 people have been displaced, and is planning to support up to 400,000 people with assistance and protection in the coming period.

Over three days Hasakeh city saw an estimated 60,000 new arrivals as a result of the violence, while hostilities in the area also damaged the main water station, leaving it out of service. 400,000 people, including 82,000 people in Al Hol and Areesha camps, now rely on the provisional solution of pumping water from a nearby dam that can only meet 50% of the needs previously supplied by the main water station. This water, which is of poorer quality, is only sufficient to support Hassakeh city for approximately 10-15 days. This leaves the population exposed to outbreaks of infectious diseases, especially as acute diarrhoea and typhoid were already two of the most reported illnesses in northeast Syria in August 2019.

To date, the most intense attacks have been on Tal Abyad, Ras al Ain and Quamishly. The use of air strikes and artillery in those areas, and in particular the 13 October attack on a convoy of civilians fleeing Tal Abyad, raise serious concerns that civilians have been targeted, which may amount to serious violations of international humanitarian law. Overall, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has led to mass forced displacement and disproportionate damage to vital civilian infrastructure. With the recently renovated hospital in Ras al Ain again out of service and three health care providers in Tal Abyad rendered non-functional, people in the most affected areas have no access to lifesaving support.

SIRF is concerned that several major humanitarian facilities fall within the 30 kilometre border area in which Turkey has established a growing military presence, such as Mabrouka camp (which had 3,170 residents) and Ain Issa camp (12,901 residents). Mabrouka camp has largely been evacuated and is no longer accessible. The majority of its residents relocated to Areesha camp, but several families were unable to leave and now have no access to food, water or shelter.

While the need for humanitarian aid has dramatically increased, the operation has forced many INGOs to suspend service delivery. In the last few days, SIRF members lost access to their offices in Ain Issa, 50 kilometres from the Turkey-Syria border, after the town came under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups. The local organisations that are continuing to deliver assistance face increasingly difficult circumstances and risks to their safety.

Many Syrian humanitarian workers, including the staff of local organisations, fear for their lives and the lives of their families, as they are unable to seek safety in government-controlled areas inside Syria or in neighbouring countries. Humanitarian organisations report widespread displacement of Syrian staff, as well as concerns about increased restrictions on their freedom of movement due to risk of conscription.

With humanitarian access already compromised, any further sudden shifts of control or shifts in the presence of troops could further destabilize the area and the routes that humanitarian organisations currently rely on to reach people in need. In light of the recently announced political agreement between Kurdish authorities and the government of Syria, we call on relevant authorities to make continued access for humanitarian organisations a priority.

The people of northeast Syria have already endured years of conflict, with many being repeatedly displaced, and have suffered unimaginable physical and psychological distress. SIRF is very concerned that many of these civilians are now forced to flee south and may have to seek refuge in areas that are heavily contaminated with explosive ordnance. Areas that were retaken from Islamic State, like Raqqa, are littered with improvised explosive devices and landmines.

The Syria INGO Regional Forum is also concerned that one of the objectives of the military operation is to facilitate the return of large numbers of refugees. SIRF notes that most of the refugees in Turkey do not originate from areas Turkey is seeking to control, and reminds Turkey of its obligation to respect the principle of *non-refoulement*.

SIRF believes that urgent action is needed and calls for:

- all parties to the conflict to fulfil their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law and refrain from targeting civilians and humanitarian workers, as well as to exercise restraint in order to protect water supplies, health facilities, schools and camps for displaced people;
- all parties to the conflict to immediately cease hostilities and start urgent dialogue, supported by the international community
- all parties to the conflict to stop the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas in compliance with international humanitarian law;
- all parties to the conflict and the international community to ensure that freedom of movement and humanitarian access are guaranteed;
- all parties to investigate possible violations of international humanitarian law, especially unlawful attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, and to ensure those responsible are held to account;
- the UN Security Council to renew Resolution 2165 to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid in northeast Syria;
- donor governments to be ready to provide the required level of flexible, emergency funding and assist humanitarian actors to respond effectively.