

Open Letter to UN Security Council Ambassadors

August 21, 2012

Dear Ambassador

Syria: No time to lose for those in need

Over one and a half million people inside Syria are now internally displaced persons (IDPs), uprooted from their homes as a result of the conflict in Syria. Most are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The continuing violence and extreme restrictions on humanitarian access are placing hundreds of thousands of people at risk. Pregnant women, children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable as family assets dry up and as social support networks fragment. Displacement is separating vulnerable people from the essential services they need most in times of great stress and hardship, such as health services, exacerbating their vulnerability.

Looking at this human tragedy, we feel it is critical to reach an agreement with Syrian authorities on securing humanitarian access inside Syria and to ensure that funds are available to respond to the needs on the ground. This is a pivotal moment given the expiration of the mandate of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) on August 19, and Lakhdar Brahimi's appointment as Joint UN-Arab League Special Representative for Syria, following Kofi Annan's decision not to seek the renewal of his mandate as Joint Special Envoy.

The current displacement crisis started in the countryside in the spring of 2011, following the protests in Damascus and the southern city of Daraa. Escalating violence forced many villagers to flee to neighbouring towns and cities such as Aleppo, Homs and Damascus. It has now engulfed whole towns and cities, driving hundreds of thousands of people into further displacement, some people for the third or fourth time. Many displaced people are being hosted by local communities who spontaneously offered shelter and relief despite the severe pressure that they were also suffering. However, the growing number of displaced people has now outstripped the capacity of local communities to support them. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people are now living in very insecure conditions in public buildings such as schools, universities, mosques and churches.

The large numbers of displaced people seeking refuge are placing severe strain on host communities as the displaced vie with the local population for increasingly scarce jobs and resources to support their families. The possibility of finding employment is increasingly slim given the economic crisis triggered by the violence, economic sanctions and internal displacement have severely disrupted agricultural activities resulting in an impending food crisis. According to a joint Rapid Food Security Needs Assessment carried out by the FAO, the WFP, and the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, close to three million people are in need of food, crops and livestock assistance over the next three to six months, especially in areas that have seen the greatest conflict and population displacement. As a result of economic stagnation and few employment opportunities, food reserves are running out and IDPs have limited access to water and sanitation at a time of year when dehydration is a real concern for the most vulnerable.

We urge you not to allow the welfare of thousands of displaced people in Syria to be held hostage to the ongoing deadlock at the political level. We ask that you:

- Remind all parties to the conflict in Syria of their legal obligation to prevent displacement and, where this is not possible, to ensure protection of IDPs through the provision and preservation of

access to the people most affected, in line with common article 3 of the International Geneva Convention.

- Encourage all parties to abide by Principles 25 (2) and (3) of the Guiding Principle on International Displacement and provide protection and humanitarian assistance to internally displaced people.
- Urge the Syrian Government to allow humanitarian agencies access to Syria as agreed under the terms of Kofi Annan's Six Point Plan and to implement the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan. All parties should ensure that access to the most affected populations is granted.
- Ensure the necessary funding is made available to support the humanitarian effort inside Syria. As access increases, the flow of funds must keep pace with the ability of aid organizations to operate. This will require a rapid assessment of humanitarian needs inside Syria as soon as possible.

The number of IDPs inside Syria is currently ten times greater than the number of refugees in neighboring countries, but the funding requests for both responses are comparable. To date, the \$189 million appeal for assistance for the response inside Syria is only 20 per cent funded. The \$193 million appeal for the response to assist refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, though only 33 per cent funded (most recent information as of 15 July 2012), is a much greater allocation in proportion to the scale of humanitarian needs. In light of this difference, the funding request for the humanitarian response inside the country significantly underestimates the resources needed to protect and assist civilians in Syria. Both the Regional Humanitarian Response Plan and the Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan need to be fully funded in order to ensure an effective response to the needs of Syrian IDPs and refugees.

We urge you to take action now to stem a burgeoning humanitarian crisis,

- Elisabeth Rasmusson, Secretary General, Norwegian Refugee Council
- Michel Gabaudan, President, Refugees International
- Mike Penrose, Humanitarian Director, Save the Children
- Ela Bhatt, founder of India's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), member of The Elders
- Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway, member of The Elders
- Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former President of Brazil, member of The Elders
- Graça Machel, former Education Minister of Mozambique, member of The Elders
- Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, member of The Elders