

# High-Level International Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria; Remarks by António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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By António Guterres | 30 January 2013

**Kuwait City, 30 January 2013**

*Written remarks distributed to delegates*

Mr. Secretary-General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Syria is without a doubt the most complex and dangerous of the terrible conflicts facing the world today. It has huge geostrategic implications and constitutes a serious threat to peace and security, both at the regional and at the global level. It is also the crisis with the worst humanitarian consequences.

Two factors make this crisis even more dramatic. One is the complete absence so far of a political solution. The other is the staggering pace at which the refugee crisis has escalated in recent months.

Until early April 2012, UNHCR had registered only 33,000 Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. As of Monday, their number across the Middle East and North Africa stood at more than 712,000 - over twenty times as high. Since November, refugee numbers have been growing by more than 100,000 every month, and in January alone, an average of 34,000 people fled Syria every week. Their number will keep on growing, and the bitter winter is only adding to the suffering.

In Lebanon, we know of nearly 230,000 Syrian refugees who are scattered across 700 municipalities. There are an estimated 150,000 Syrians more in the country who have not come forward for registration, bringing the total to some 380,000. They have largely been absorbed into local communities, and the government is leading efforts to expand accommodation options. Lebanese families hosting the refugees have shown remarkable generosity, but their resources are severely stretched.

In Jordan, the number of Syrian refugees who have come forward for registration is more than 222,000. 80% of them live in urban areas, thanks to the solidarity of local communities, while over 65,000 of the more recent arrivals have found shelter at the Za'atri refugee camp. A second site is expected to open shortly, as record numbers have been arriving in Jordan over the past ten days. The Government estimates that the total number of Syrians including those who have not come forward for registration is more than 300,000.

In southeastern Turkey, some 163,000 Syrians are now hosted in 15 camps built by the Turkish government. At least 70,000 more are living in urban areas and are now starting to be identified, which brings the total in Turkey to more than 230,000 Syrians.

In Iraq, still struggling with its own transition from conflict to stability, the number of Syrian refugees is now above 77,000 and about half of them live in camps. Some 14,000 more have already been registered in urban centers in Egypt.

The 712,000 refugees who are currently registered or being registered in the region correspond to our planning figures for the beginning of the year. However, we know that many more Syrians have not even come forward for registration. My estimate is that the real figure of people who have already fled Syria over the past two years is probably between 900,000 and one million.

The most tragic consequences of the crisis are obviously being felt inside Syria itself, and the Emergency Relief Coordinator has already outlined the suffering and the tremendous humanitarian needs there.

We must not forget another important aspect of the humanitarian situation in Syria, that of the Palestinian and Iraqi refugees who are also affected by the intensifying crisis. More than half a million Palestinian refugees are registered with UNRWA in Syria, of whom almost 400,000 need special assistance as a consequence of the conflict. Some have been compelled to flee abroad because of increased insecurity and hardship. Strong support to UNRWA's activities in Syria is essential to avoid further, devastating displacement, and I appeal to all parties to the conflict to respect and protect the Palestinian refugee population in the country.

I also appeal for greater support to UNRWA's efforts in Lebanon, where 20,000 Palestinians from Syria have sought refuge in existing, overcrowded camps; and for Palestinians fleeing Syria to be granted the protection they need.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The refugee numbers are stunning, but they will never convey the full extent of the tragedy. Three quarters of the refugees are women and children. Many of them have lost family members. Most of them have lost everything they once owned - businesses, homes, livelihoods. They are now trying to cope with the harsh conditions of living in exile, during one of the most severe winters the region has seen in many years.

The children pay the hardest price of all. In schools we visited, the drawings show bombs, weapons and dead bodies. Thousands of young lives have been shattered by this conflict. The future generation of an entire country is marked by violence and trauma for many years to come.

And people are angry - angry at the international community, for not having been able to solve a crisis that is now nearly two years old.

Humanitarian actors have been racing to keep pace with the accelerating crisis, and to assist a refugee population that grows by the thousands every single day. This is an enormously challenging operation - the pace and scale of the influx, the dispersal of the refugees, the harsh climatic conditions, the dramatic level of humanitarian need and vulnerability.

Strong and committed partnership is the only way we can manage this challenge and deliver what is needed to those who depend on it. Our response capacity has surged significantly since the escalation of the crisis over the summer, but we need urgent support to be able to continue this scale-up as refugees keep arriving in massive numbers.

The Regional Refugee Response Plan which you have before you is the joint appeal of 55 partners working to assist Syrian refugees in five countries - twelve UN agencies, 34 international NGOs and nine national partners. It is closely coordinated with the governments of the host countries. We have also worked hand in hand with the ERC and her regional team to ensure that the plans for assistance inside and outside Syria are perfectly aligned.

The plan calls for USD 1 billion to provide vital protection and assistance for up to 1.1 million Syrian refugees, from January to June 2013. It is currently about 11% funded, having received nearly USD 114 million.

The priorities for the partners participating in the plan include registration, food, shelter, health and education, as well as child protection, the prevention of sexual and gender based violence and support to SGBV survivors. The plan also includes assistance to refugees in urban areas, which make up about 70% of the registered refugee population in the region. Another priority is preparedness, building new camps and prepositioning emergency relief items. This is crucial, as the past few weeks have shown that the quality of our response depends on the quality of our preparedness.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The violent conflict in Syria and the massive refugee exodus it has caused are having a huge impact on the society, economy and security of the host countries. Iraqi,

Jordanian, Lebanese and Turkish families are sharing their homes and their increasingly meager resources with strangers. The economic cost of such a large-scale influx is significant, leads to complex social consequences, and has a serious impact on local infrastructure and the environment.

Nonetheless, they have kept their borders open to refugees. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and other countries of asylum are providing a very positive example to the world. But their capacities are being severely tested.

Lebanon is faced with its own complex political situation and economic difficulties, not to mention the negative implications which the Syria crisis has had on Lebanese economy and society. This tiny country has seen its population rise by a staggering 9% due to the

refugee influx. Apart from the obvious complex social consequences this has in a very heterogeneous society, it has put enormous pressure on available resources, in particular accommodation, health and education infrastructure.

Jordan, which just emerged from parliamentary elections, is also facing a very difficult economic situation. The government has had to adopt a very tight adjustment policy to qualify for a Standby Arrangement from the IMF, risking negative consequences for social stability. This situation is further aggravated by the impact of the Syria crisis, with revenue sources such as tourism and foreign investment badly affected. Amid all this, this past week has seen record numbers of refugees arriving, further stretching Jordan's limited resources, including energy and water, and putting additional pressure on the social service infrastructure.

Turkey's economic capacity is much stronger than those of other asylum countries, but the huge investments the country has made to assist Syrian refugees have taken a heavy toll. The government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to set up camps for the massive number of arrivals and is planning to open up to five more camps during the coming months. This far exceeds the amounts being requested for assistance in Turkey under the Regional Response Plan.

Everywhere in the region, prices for basic commodities such as bread and fuel have risen, schools and health infrastructure in many urban centers are becoming overcrowded, and local economies have taken a blow given the loss of important trade relations with Syria.

International solidarity in support of the host countries must be urgently reinforced, and that is also why we are here today. This is not a question of generosity, but rather one of enlightened self-interest. By taking in thousands and thousands of new refugees every day, the countries on the frontline of this crisis - Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt - are doing the region and indeed, the world, an extraordinary service. Their ability to continue to do so depends very much on the support they receive from the international community. Helping these countries deal with the consequences of the refugee crisis is imperative, as the preservation of their economic and social stability is in everyone's essential interest.

Several of the countries in the region have presented their own appeals to the international community, which complement the plans we are presenting here today and which I also urge you to support with generous funding. Just very recently, Jordan renewed its appeal for assistance to the international community to help the government in providing essential services such as education, health, energy and water to the communities hosting Syrian refugees. Lebanon's appeal focuses on protection, shelter, WASH, health and education and is currently being merged with our Regional Response Plan to ensure a fully complementary approach. Turkey has also presented the international community with the enormous costs it is incurring to assist the refugees, and has encouraged donors to help in the response.

One important way in which others can assist host countries and share the burden of the large refugee presence is resettlement. While it is premature to launch a large resettlement programme for Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict, UNHCR has called for resettlement spaces for a number of targeted cases, all of whom are vulnerable and at risk. In addition, we also urgently seek resettlement places for refugees from other countries out of the region, including many who have been staying in Syria but who are now at risk once more.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would be remiss not to mention here some of the most generous donors to last year's regional refugee response plan, which provided over USD 373 million, 77% of the requirements. All of us who participated in the joint appeal are immensely grateful to donors such as the United States, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, the European Commission, and many others for their strong and timely support, which has allowed us to scale up response in parallel as the refugee outflows accelerated.

But it is also important to underline that the major donors of this region have made substantial efforts to help Syrian refugees. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council have been providing, through their own channels, hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of aid to governments and communities affected by the crisis, to help them cope with the huge needs of the refugees they have taken in.

Our combined humanitarian capacity to help those in need will be even stronger if the aid provided by the different donors and the programs implemented by all humanitarian actors are better coordinated on the ground. If all of us unite our assistance efforts and work closely side by side to assist refugees and host communities through the various channels that exist, we will be able to target assistance with more precision, avoid duplication and instead fill gaps that could cost precious lives. Ultimately, humanitarian assistance to people in need is underpinned by the universal values of compassion and support to the vulnerable stranger, and we all share these values.

With the second-year anniversary of the Syria crisis approaching, we need to be prepared for the situation to get dramatically worse before it gets any better. If the existing worst-case scenarios materialize, the international community will need to be prepared to engage in an even more significant response.

All of us - host countries, partner agencies, and most importantly Syria's refugees themselves - count on the international donor community to continue doing its part in this effort and to share the enormous burden placed on the entire region by the terrible consequences of the Syria crisis.

Thank you very much.