

Syria faces Humanitarian Catastrophe

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After two years of escalating civil war, the people of Syria confront a humanitarian catastrophe, with an estimated four million people—roughly 20 percent of the population—lacking adequate food and shelter. Hundreds of thousands have left for refugee camps in neighboring countries, and as many as three million are displaced within Syria itself.

The United Nations reported Tuesday that its relief operations have been compelled to cut food rations provided to 1.5 million Syrians because of dwindling resources and rising demand.

“The humanitarian community in Syria is struggling,” said UN relief official John Ging. “People are losing hope because they just see more violence on the horizon, they just see deterioration.”

“It’s becoming more and more difficult just to do the very basic things to help people to survive,” said Ging, who is director of operations at the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Conditions have grown increasingly desperate as the Syrian winter sets in, and many families are living in tents or unheated dwellings without adequate clothing.

“As the Syrian conflict drags on, shelters are filling up, support systems are breaking down, savings are running out and violence is engulfing an increasing number of communities,” the UN news service IRIN reported. “As a result refuge is increasingly hard to find for hundreds of thousands of people fleeing violence, some of them zigzagging across the country in search of safety—often in vain.”

The crisis of Syria’s health care system, which previously was one of the most effective in the region, is especially acute. According to the World Health Organization, the fighting has partly or completely destroyed half of the country’s 88 public hospitals and 186 of its 1,919 local health care centers.

Particularly devastating has been the attack on Syria’s pharmaceutical industry, which previously met 90 percent of the country’s need for drugs. The industry is now down to barely one third of its previous production, with factories in many cases having been targeted by the Western-backed rebels for attack and looting. “Other factories are struggling to import raw materials due to sanctions imposed on Syria by Western countries,” IRIN reports.

The British daily *Guardian* Thursday carried a report from a correspondent in Aleppo

detailing the extent of the looting, which it said “has become a way of life” for the so-called rebels. “‘Spoils’ have now become the main drive for many units as battalion commanders seek to increase their power.”

The report quoted a pharmacist who explained why he was running out of penicillin. The “rebels” had seized a pharmaceutical company’s warehouse in Aleppo and then re-sold its contents, shipping all of the drugs out of the city.

“I went to the warehouse to tell them they had no right to the medicine and that it should be given to the people and not re-sold,” the pharmacist said. “They detained me and said they would break both my legs if I ever went back.”

Basic medicines have become unavailable, and the price for drugs that are available has risen so steeply as to place them out of the reach of most of the population. The result is that people are dying from chronic conditions that could otherwise be treated.

Elizabeth Hoff, the WHO’s representative in Syria, reported that insulin is no longer available in many areas and that insulin pens that public health centers previously provided to some 40,000 diabetic children have run out, forcing them to resort to more painful and difficult methods.

Meanwhile, as a result of the fighting, access to medical care has been sharply curtailed. “Many doctors have left the country,” a recent WHO report stated, noting that “over 50 percent of the medical doctors have left Homs.”

“In Damascus, Aleppo and Homs at least 70 percent of the health providers live in rural areas and therefore frequently cannot access their work place due to irregular public transportation, blocked and unsafe roads with an increasing number of military check points, snipers and the unpredictable occurrence of street fights,” the report added.

The UN recently announced that it is launching its biggest ever fundraising drive for relief in Syria, with a target of \$1.5 billion. The problem, however, is that existing appeals have raised less than half of their targets.

The United States, Britain, France and the monarchical regimes in Saudi Arabia and Qatar are all stepping up their aid to the rebels.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has announced that he will seek approval at an upcoming European Union meeting for a lifting of the arms embargo on Syria to allow the UK to directly arm the anti-Assad militias. While Washington has publicly claimed it is not providing weapons, it has set up a CIA station on the Turkish-Syrian border to coordinate the flow of arms from the reactionary Gulf states, the bulk of which have gone to Islamist forces, including those linked to Al Qaeda.

Washington and its allies routinely invoke supposed humanitarian and democratic concerns to justify their fomenting of a sectarian-based civil war and the devastation of Syrian society for the purpose of installing a regime more aligned with US geo-strategic interests. Yet none of them have shown any inclination to devote resources to aid the millions who have been left homeless, hungry, sick and wounded as a result of this predatory military intervention.

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