

The inside story: internal displacement in Syria

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With IDPs currently constituting two-thirds of those uprooted by the conflict, the ‘inside story’ of displacement in Syria requires much greater attention.

With nearly 9.5 million people forced to flee because of conflict in Syria, more than two-thirds – a staggering 6.45 million people – are displaced inside the country.¹ Indeed, Syria now is the country with the most IDPs worldwide. Many have been uprooted multiple times. New displacements are ongoing; every minute, one family flees, on average 9,500 people a day.² At least half of the displaced are children.

The UN Human Rights Council’s International Commission of Inquiry has detailed “widespread attacks on civilians” including: murder, summary executions, massacres, detention of civilians including children, systematic torture, rape and other sexual violence, recruitment and use of children in hostilities, enforced disappearance, hostage taking, sniper attacks, chemical weapons attacks against civilians, and targeted attacks on hospitals, medical personnel and journalists – committed with impunity by government forces as well as by non-state armed groups.³ Unsurprisingly, many civilians flee in fear for their lives.

In addition, the Commission speaks of “extensive arbitrary displacement” directly

caused by “indiscriminate and disproportionate aerial bombardment and shelling” of civilian-inhabited areas, coupled with warring parties having failed to fulfil obligations under international humanitarian law to take all possible measures to protect and provide assistance to displaced civilians and to ensure family members are not separated. The Commission also documents cases of the war crime of deliberate displacement by some non-state armed groups, such as issuing public ultimatums to particular ethnic groups in the civilian population to leave or face immediate attack; in several such cases, many civilians who subsequently fled were then abducted at checkpoints, while the property of those who fled was looted and burned.

Fleeing itself thus can be risky, with abuses and attacks continuing en route. Safe access to food, water, shelter, medical care and other essentials is a daily struggle. For example, fewer than 3% of IDPs find shelter in official collective centres set up by the government. The rest live with host families, or in private accommodation for as long as their resources will permit, or in makeshift camps and scattered informal settlements where security risks are rampant.

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Meanwhile, siege warfare – a tactic used by warring parties on all sides of the conflict – means that many civilians (241,000 currently) are literally trapped in their communities, largely cut off from assistance and unable to flee. Indeed, IDPs are a large part of a larger group of 10.8 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance inside the country.

An estimated 4.6 million people in need of assistance inside Syria are in what the UN terms “hard-to-reach” areas for humanitarian actors. More than 50 aid workers have been killed since the start of the conflict, including 36 from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. In addition to the security risks, humanitarian deliveries must pass onerous bureaucratic and administrative hurdles for approval, resulting in critical delays. Once en route, convoys can encounter outright obstruction by warring parties. The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator reported, for example, that it was only after almost two years and more than 20 requests by the UN that food and medical care could be delivered in July 2014 to the 24,000 people living in the besieged town of Madamyiet El-Sham in Rural Damascus; they had not received assistance since October 2012. The World Food Programme (WFP) reached a community of 10,000 people in dire need in Dara’á in July 2014 who had received no external assistance at all since the conflict began in March 2011. Until mid-July 2014, cross-border humanitarian convoys – allowing more direct lines of delivery to persons in need – were not authorised. Meanwhile, requests from the Commission of Inquiry and several other UN human rights experts for access to the country remain pending.

Despite the constraints, aid is getting through when and where it can. For example, WFP aims to deliver food to 3.7 million people monthly, both in government- and opposition-controlled areas. In July 2014 medicines, vaccines and urgently needed medical supplies for more than half a million people were distributed by the World Health Organization, while UNICEF helped 16.5 million people have access to safe water.

Funding remains a challenge; of the US\$2.28 billion appealed for to implement the Syria

Humanitarian Response Plan for 2014, only 30% of required funds had been received by the end of August. Some critical sectors, including protection, shelter and education, are funded at less than 15%.

Until there is an end to the conflict, the already immense number of people (currently 9.5 million people, almost half of the pre-war population of Syria) forced to flee, whether inside or outside Syria, inevitably will continue to rise. The internal dimension of the displacement crisis is particularly significant and it risks becoming even greater also because it is increasingly difficult, especially for Palestine refugees in Syria, to cross into and stay in some neighbouring countries: for example, more than 100 have been deported from Jordan back to war-torn Syria since January 2013.⁴ Moreover, most of the nearly 3 million refugees who have sought asylum in other countries were first displaced internally, en route to crossing a border. For the people forced to flee, the internal and external displacement crises are often intersecting parts of the same story. While much of the attention – of the international community, media, and also researchers – has focused on the very tragic and much more visible external dimension, i.e. the refugee crisis (now the largest in the world), more than twice as many people are displaced **inside** Syria, where they and other civilians remain in extreme peril. Responding effectively to ‘the Syria displacement crisis’ requires a comprehensive approach of ensuring protection for people on both sides of the border.

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all figures cited are from the UN and current as of end of August 2014. For regularly updated figures and analysis on the humanitarian situation inside Syria, see www.unocha.org/syria

2. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 14 May 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/IDMC-Syria-every-60-seconds>

3. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry for the Syrian Arab Republic was established by the UN Human Rights Council in August 2011. See their 7th report, 12 February 2014, and 8th report, 27 August 2014, at <http://tinyurl.com/OHCHR-SyriaCommission>

4. Human Rights Watch <http://tinyurl.com/HRW070814-turned-away>