

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### Syria – no respite for the millions displaced by the conflict

*“I didn’t want to leave my home and become a refugee. We had a beautiful home and plenty of land which gave us a good life. Even when the bombardments intensified and our relatives and neighbours started to flee, we stayed. But then it became impossible; there was nowhere to keep my children safe any more. I would have stayed and died in my home but I had to save my children. When we got here we found that it was impossible to cross into Turkey because the border is closed. So we’ve been stuck here all winter with nothing. There is little food, we don’t even have clothes and blankets to keep warm, we can’t keep the rain out, and everything is wet. The children get sick all the time. The world has forgotten us. What will become of us?”*

Umm Husam, a mother of five young children sheltering in an IDP camp in Atmeh, March 2013

*“The children are traumatized by the extreme horrors they witnessed back home – the constant bombardments, the neighbours blown to pieces and the villages destroyed. They need specialized care and attention but here this does not exist, everything is lacking and the miserable conditions make matters worse for the children. I’m their father, I am supposed to protect them and provide for them but I can’t do either. I have nothing to give them. All I can do is cuddle them but when they ask for something – very basic things, like food or being warm – I feel frustrated and ashamed that I cannot provide even this for them. So I end up staying away from them because I cannot bear to see them sick and upset. These miserable conditions we are living in are traumatizing the children and damaging family life. I pray to God that someone will help us.”*

Abu Khaled, a father of nine children sheltering in an IDP camp in Atmeh, March 2013

Close to six million Syrians have been displaced by the conflict in their country, which continues to cause more death and destruction every day.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority – 4.25 million – of those forced from their homes by the spiralling violence are displaced within Syria (the rest are refugees, mainly in neighbouring countries). These internally displaced people (IDPs) are extremely vulnerable. Many IDPs are trapped in areas under the control of opposition forces, which are being relentlessly bombarded by government forces, and receive little or no international aid. Most have been displaced several times – each time hoping to find safety only to come under attack again and again. Indeed many of the men, women and children who were killed in recent months perished in the very places where they had gone to look for safety.

Tens of thousands of Syrian IDPs are sheltering in sprawling makeshift IDP camps which have sprung up near the Turkish border since August-September 2012, when the Turkish government effectively closed its borders to Syrian refugees.<sup>2</sup>

While these camps provide relative safety, as Syrian government forces generally do not bombard the border areas, the humanitarian conditions are dire. There is little food, medical and sanitation

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/syria-8-things-you-need-know-about-syrian-humanitarian-crisis>

<sup>2</sup> Since July 2012 Turkey’s border has been open only to Syrians with passports (who can enter as visitors and do not receive any of the assistance available to refugees) or those with serious medical needs.

facilities are virtually non-existent, and shelters are overcrowded and do not provide protection against the elements.

When, in March 2013, Amnesty International visited the largest IDP camp in Atmeh, where some 21,000 people are sheltering, heavy rain was leaking into the tents, and had turned the clay soil into thick slippery mud, raw sewage was flowing between the tents, the food being distributed was insufficient and of very poor quality and large numbers of people complained of medical conditions for which they were receiving no treatment.

Many said they had come to the border in the hope of crossing the border to Turkey and others had taken refuge near the border in search of temporary respite from the bombardments, in the hope that the attacks would stop and they could return home. However, with bombardments continuing unabated and shifting frontlines in the ongoing fighting, for many IDPs returning home remains an unattainable dream.

While the IDP camps are perhaps the most visible manifestation of displacement, they only house a tiny percentage of IDPs, and even for this small percentage resources for basic services are lacking and there is little or no capacity for taking in more IDPs desperately in need of a safe refuge.

Indeed the overwhelming majority of IDPs – some 4.25 million according to UN estimates, but possibly many more – are not in IDP camps. They are living in cramped conditions with relatives and friends or sheltering in rented or abandoned apartments, or in schools and other buildings, in unfinished structures or even in old Roman caves in the countryside. The priority is to find a shelter which they hope will be even just a bit safer than the homes they lost or were forced to abandon. Food, water, electricity and other basic services are for many now a luxury.

In every single one of the dozens of Syrian towns and villages it has visited over the past 15 months Amnesty International has found large numbers of IDPs. The IDP camps along the Turkish border keep growing in size (see satellite images of the Atmeh camp for details of the IDP camp's population growth). As the scale and intensity of aerial bombardments and other attacks has continued to increase, especially since August 2012, the number of displaced Syrians has increased by several times.

For example, Maaret al-Na'aman, a town of some 100,000 residents which was sheltering many IDPs from surrounding areas until late last year, was virtually emptied when much of it came under opposition control and under attack by government forces. Two air strikes on the town on 30 October and 6 November 2012 killed some 35 civilians, most of them children and women. A man who lost his five young children in one of the attacks told Amnesty International that among the victims were several IDPs:

*“Several members of a family from Homs were killed in the strike on 30 October. They were displaced people; they came from Homs to a village near here in Wadi Dheif, and when the fighting got to Wadi Dheif they came here to the town. They lived in the basement. After the strike we found the bodies of their two girls, aged about 10-12 years, in the rubble. I don't know if their parents and siblings were all killed or if some survived. Everybody fled because our homes are destroyed and the bombings continue.”*

In the nearby al-Haas village, four members of a family displaced from Maaret al-Na'aman were among six civilians killed in an air strike in the afternoon of 8 December 2012. One of their neighbours told Amnesty International:

*“Four members of the Khalluf family were killed, together with a 60-year old woman and a four-year-old boy from the village. The Khalluf had come here from Maaret al-Na’aman, because of the fighting there. They came here to be safe and found death.”*

Many IDPs lost their lives in the very place where they sought refuge. Lu’ay Da’abul, a 46-year-old father of three who worked in one of the IDP camps (al-Qah camp) near the border with Turkey was killed with his wife and their two youngest children, a boy of 14 and a girl of 11, when a car bomb exploded at the Syria-Turkey border crossing (the Bab al-Hawa / Cilvegözü crossing) in the afternoon of 11 February. Lu’ay had been forced to flee his home town of Idlib a year earlier because he feared being arrested due to his peaceful anti-government activities. His wife and children had remained in Idlib but they too had to leave at the beginning of 2013, fearing that the boy would be arrested to pressure his father into giving himself up. They were sheltering temporarily in Turkey while Lu’ay stayed at the IDP camp in Syria where he worked.

Two days before the explosion at the border, Lu’ay had told Amnesty International that his wife and children were about to join him at the IDP camp where he lived and worked because they could not afford to stay in Turkey and so that they could be together. He was happy at the prospect that after a year of living apart they could once again live together as a family, albeit in such difficult circumstances. They were passing through the border crossing when the explosion occurred, killing the four of them as well as several other people. During the year since he had fled from Idlib, Lu’ay had been living in nearby Maaret Misrin, which prior to the conflict was home to some 40,000 residents and by mid-2012 was hosting as many IDPs, but by September 2012 daily artillery strikes and air bombardments had forced the town’s residents and the IDPs to abandon the town.

In Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, about half the population has been displaced – they have fled in some cases out of fear of arrest and in others because of the frequent bombardments which have reduced entire areas to rubble. On 18 and 22 February 2013, more than 160 residents of three districts in the east of the city were killed and hundreds injured in three ballistic missile strikes which reduced three neighbourhoods to rubble, making hundreds of residents homeless. In the Jabal Badro district of Aleppo, where the first of the strikes occurred, on 18 February 2013, Hussein al-Saghir, a 15-year-old boy, told Amnesty International that his five brothers, sisters-in-law and nephews and nieces were all killed in the strike; 16 of them in all. He pointed to a mountain of rubble, where their home used to be:

*“All my extended family lived here, we had 10 houses. My mother was badly injured and is now in hospital in Turkey. She does not know that her sons are dead. My uncle, Mohamed Ali, lost 27 members of his family. He has lost his mind; he doesn’t know anything any more. He is in the countryside; everyone who survived has gone to stay with relatives or friends somewhere. Here there is only rubble left.”*

Forty-year-old Hammoudeh al-Hussein lost his wife and five of their seven children in the strike on the Ard al-Hamra area of Aleppo on 22 February 2013. Two weeks later Amnesty International found him lying injured on the floor of a nearby garage. He said:

*“I heard my daughter Amani call her little brother and then I don’t remember anything. I don’t know how long I lay under the rubble before I was pulled out. The bodies of my wife and my daughter Amani were not found until six days later. I lost my wife and five of my children. God left me two of my children and I don’t know how we can rebuild our lives. I have nothing to give to my children.”*

Many IDPs, especially those in areas controlled by the opposition, receive little or no international aid, partly because they are in dangerous and difficult-to-access areas and partly due to

restrictions imposed by the Syrian government on the movement of international humanitarian agencies. UN humanitarian agencies have called on the Syrian government to allow them to access opposition-controlled areas – where IDPs are in much greater need and the risk to their lives much higher because of relentless and indiscriminate bombardments by government forces. However, so far the Syrian government has not granted UN and other humanitarian agencies permission for cross-border relief operations, which according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) would be the safest and most effective way to reach those most in need.

IDPs have often been the invisible and forgotten victims of this brutal conflict, with the media spotlight focused on the more striking aspects of the conflict – the fighting and large-scale attacks – and on the political wrangling of the Syrian government and opposition, and their international backers.

This month, on 7 June, recognizing that it is ordinary men, women and children who are bearing the brunt of the conflict in Syria, UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations launched the largest ever humanitarian appeal for emergency aid to Syrians, including the growing number of IDPs. It is as yet unclear if and when the funds called for in this appeal will be made available by the international community to the humanitarian agencies tasked with providing relief to those Syrians most in need. In the meantime, concerted and effective pressure must be exerted on the Syrian authorities to allow UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations unfettered access to IDPs and others in need throughout the country, including allowing access to the relevant areas from other countries, as well as across front lines within Syria. Pressure must also be put on the Syrian armed opposition not to hinder relief operations in the areas under their control.

At the same time, in line with international obligations, all neighbouring countries, including Turkey, must keep their borders open at all times to anyone fleeing Syria. The international community, and in particular the EU and its member states, must commit to sharing responsibility for Syrian refugees in real, tangible terms, including, for example, by agreeing to resettle much greater numbers of Syrian refugees, as well as by providing urgent financial and technical support to Turkey and other neighbouring countries hosting the overwhelming majority of those who have managed to flee from Syria.

World leaders must find ways to overcome their differences, end the international paralysis which has allowed the Syrian conflict to spiral so dramatically, and agree on robust measures to pressure the parties in the conflict. One concrete step to do so would be to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, thus sending an unequivocal message to the parties that anyone committing or ordering war crimes or crimes against humanity will be held accountable.