

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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People on the Move: ‘For many displaced Syrians, going back home is out of the question’

This is part of a special ‘People on the Move’ series, highlighting the human rights violations faced by migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in every part of the world. These profiles are being published around the launch of Amnesty International’s [Annual Report 2013](#).

Syria’s brutal conflict has forced millions of men, women and children to seek shelter in other parts of the country and abroad.

More than 1.5 million have fled Syria and taken refuge abroad, mainly in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. And three times as many are displaced within Syria, some crowding in with relatives and friends, and others stranded in makeshift camps of internally displaced people (IDPs) near the border with Turkey, where conditions are dire.

Amnesty International’s Donatella Rovera has visited some IDP camps, most recently in March.

Why do people end up in these camps?

Those who are sheltering in the IDP camps fled the indiscriminate bombardments by government forces that have killed and maimed tens of thousands of civilians in villages and towns across Syria.

Some of them have been displaced several times before reaching the IDP camps near the border. Every time they fled to what they thought was a safe place, that place too came under bombardment and so they had to flee again and again.

One of the women I spoke to had sought shelter in five different places, all of which came under attack, before eventually reaching the IDP camp.

What did you see in the camps in Syria?

The conditions are dire. There is little food, little or no hygiene and sanitation facilities, and very poor accommodation.

Many of the displaced people in the camp hoped to cross into Turkey and find a place in the refugee camps there (where conditions are much better) but unfortunately since August last year entry into Turkey has been restricted so people are stuck in these spontaneously created sprawling IDP camps near the border. The situation is desperate because very little aid gets to these camps inside Syria.

Families fled with hardly anything, often with only the clothes on their backs. Those whose homes were destroyed had nothing to take; others left, thinking they would be away only for a few days; others simply could not take anything because they had to carry children, were on foot or crammed into overcrowded vehicles.

When I last visited in March it was cold and pouring with rain, which had turned the clay soil into thick, slippery mud. There weren’t enough tents and many were leaking or were so flimsy that they were getting blown away by the wind. People complained of food shortages. The meal I saw being distributed consisted of a small portion of liquid lentil soup.

Who are the most affected?

Most of the refugees and IDPs are children, women and elderly people.

This is because men often stay behind to take part in the fighting or, as they say, to look after their property, which they fear – rightly – would be looted if left unattended.

What do people fear the most?

The conflict is their biggest concern, of course. People fear for their and their loved ones' safety. The situation has been deteriorating very rapidly over the last few months with a large number of civilians being killed and injured every single day. Since government forces started to carry out daily air strikes last August the number of civilians killed and injured has increased dramatically and so has the number of displaced.

Many of the people I met in towns and villages in northern Syria have now been displaced; some within Syria, while others have left Syria and become refugees. They fear for their relatives who remain in other parts of the country where the conflict is raging.

What is the situation of refugees outside of Syria?

More than 1.5 million Syrians have become refugees, mostly in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Some are in refugee camps, while others are staying with friends and relatives or in rented accommodation.

Conditions in refugee camps vary; in Turkey they are comparatively better while in Jordan they are much more challenging. UN humanitarian agencies have repeatedly expressed concern about the challenge they are facing to raise the necessary funds to look after the growing number of Syrian refugees. The majority of the refugees are children and women who may be particularly vulnerable and often have specialised needs.

But the problem of the refugees and IDPs is a symptom. The fundamental problem is the manner in which this conflict is being fought -- with utter disregard for the rules of international humanitarian law and thereby causing so much death, suffering and destruction.

How would you evaluate what the world is doing on Syria?

When it comes to the conflict itself, the international community has failed spectacularly to take concrete measures to bring pressure to the relevant parties. Concerted pressure early on, at the beginning of the uprising could have prevented the situation from sliding into the dangerous armed conflict we are witnessing today.

In terms of providing assistance to refugees, once again it is the neighbouring countries that are the ones shouldering the lion's share of the burden. The way they have been able to respond is varied. The international community, on the whole, has thus far failed to effectively share responsibility and assist in meeting the needs of the rapidly growing refugee population.

As for getting relief and assistance to those who have become internally displaced, the international community has also failed to reach many of those most in need, notably those in areas controlled by opposition forces.

This is for a number of reasons: the insecurity resulting from the conflict and from the behaviour of all the parties involved, as well as the restrictions imposed by the Syrian government, which does not allow UN agencies to move freely within the country or to access opposition-controlled areas from across the border through Turkey – which according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs would be the safest and most effective way.

What should governments do?

In order to improve delivery of desperately needed relief and assistance to IDPs in Syria, the international community should be more forceful in exerting pressure on the Syrian authorities to allow UN agencies and other international humanitarian organizations unfettered access to all those in need, including by allowing them to access the relevant areas from other countries, as well as across front-lines.

At the same time, the international community should exercise pressure on the political and military leadership of all armed opposition groups in Syria to ensure that armed groups operating on the ground do not hinder humanitarian organizations' relief operations or threaten the safety of these organizations' staff.

As for those who have managed to flee Syria into neighbouring countries, protecting and assisting those who have made it out of Syria with their lives is the very least that the international community can do. It is imperative for the international community to act decisively by providing financial and other support to the region and by resettling the most vulnerable refugees to safe third countries.

What does the future hold for Syrians?

A year ago the situation was considered extremely difficult and, while there was speculation about it worsening further, no one quite predicted it would deteriorate to the extent that it has. There are no signs for now of that negative trend being reversed in the near future.

Areas under the control of opposition forces are being relentlessly bombarded by government forces, with civilians being at the receiving end of such attacks and at the same time also being subjected to abuses by armed opposition groups and getting caught in the crossfire between the two sides. Those who have been displaced cannot go back and more are being forced out of their homes every day. Many have lost everything. The human and material cost is staggering.

In spite of endless discussions about political initiatives to resolve the conflict, world leaders have been unable to overcome their differences. The Syrian civilian population continues to pay the price of this failure.

For that to change, the protection of civilians and accountability for crimes under international law – such as a referral of the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court - must be put at the top of the agenda of any initiative. They must not be held hostage to an elusive deal or used as a bargaining chip for the various sides to score political points.
