

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Syria's internally displaced – 'The world has forgotten us'

On a recent visit to a camp near Atmeh, just inside Syria near the Turkish border, some 21,000 people were sheltering amid hellish conditions.

Heavy rain leaked into the tents and had turned the clay soil into thick slippery mud, raw sewage flowed 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.

"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 Atmeh told Amnesty International in March.

Her family's story is indicative of the dire situation facing many of the close to 6 million people who have been displaced by the conflict in Syria – while death and destruction continue on a daily basis.

Much has been reported about the dire situation faced by refugees who fled across the border to neighbouring countries. But the vast majority – 4.25 million – of those forced from their homes by the spiralling violence are displaced within Syria itself.

These internally displaced people (IDPs) remain extremely vulnerable, and their numbers continue to swell.

"IDPs have often been the invisible and forgotten victims of this brutal conflict that has raged since 2011, out of the media spotlight and largely sidelined by the political wrangling between all parties to the conflict and their international backers," said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's Senior Crisis Response Adviser.

Refugees in all but name, the millions of women, children and men displaced within Syria 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.

In each of the dozens of Syrian towns and villages Amnesty International has visited over the past 15 months, there have been large numbers of IDPs.

None of them wanted to leave home, putting distance between them and their loved ones and livelihoods. But, given the continued aerial bombardments and shifting frontlines in the ongoing fighting, they have been left with no option.

"I didn't want to leave my home and become a refugee," said Umm Husam. "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,” said Umm Husam.

And the carnage often catches up with those who flee.

In one of the villages Amnesty International visited, four members of a family of IDPs had been among six civilians killed in a recent air strike. A neighbour explained:

“Four members of the Khalluf family were killed, together with a 60-year-old woman and a 4-year-old boy from the village. The Khalluf had come here from Maaret al-Na’aman, because of the fighting there. They came to be safe and found death.”

Many of Syria’s IDPs initially sought shelter with relatives or friends, but have since tried to flee the country altogether, heading for neighbouring countries. After Turkey closed its border with Syria last August-September, tens of thousands of IDPs have settled in sprawling makeshift camps like the one at Atmeh, which have sprung up along the border.

While these camps provide relative safety – Syrian government forces generally do not bombard the border areas – the humanitarian conditions are dire. There is little food, medical and sanitation facilities are virtually non-existent, and shelters are overcrowded and do not provide protection against the elements.

With Syria’s death toll approaching 100,000 and no sign of the fighting abating, for many IDPs returning home remains an unattainable dream.

Given this backdrop, Amnesty International urges neighbouring countries and the international community to do more to help the millions of Syrian refugees and IDPs.

“Neighbouring countries, including Turkey, must keep their borders open at all times to anyone fleeing Syria, and all parties to the conflict must keep access open to provide vital humanitarian aid to IDPs inside the country,” said Rovera.

“World leaders – especially in the European Union – must commit to sharing responsibility for Syrian refugees in real, tangible terms, including, for example, by agreeing to resettle much greater numbers of 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.”