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Words of support from world leaders won't help Syrian refugees

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Watching the endless stream of dismal news from Syria, we can feel at a loss at how to help. The truth is that much more can be done to help millions bearing the brunt of the conflict; all that is missing is the political will to do it.

Countries across the world can take concrete measures to alleviate the suffering of those who have been displaced by the conflict. More than 4.25 million have been displaced inside Syria and two million are refugees abroad, this amounts to nearly a third of the population. There is little political controversy in helping them, no bickering in the United Nations Security Council, no public disagreement between Russia and the USA. So why is it not happening?

The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Syria is barely imaginable. The United Nations expects that by the end of the year, more than 10 million people will be in need of humanitarian assistance: that is half of the population. The scale of the destruction in the country, the sectarian element of the conflict and the multiple factions fighting all but guarantee that the humanitarian crisis will continue for years, even after the conflict ends.

There has been some help, but not nearly enough. The \$5 billion United Nations humanitarian appeal for Syria has received less than half of its funding. The UK newspaper the Guardian has published an informative [infographic](#) showing the contributions various countries have made relative to their GDPs. It makes it painfully clear how much more we could help, especially the difference between the money pledged and how much of it has actually been paid.

So what must be done?

First: Borders must stay open to those escaping the conflict. Neighbouring countries have taken very large numbers of refugees but there have been some unfortunate exceptions. Jordan is not letting in, among others, Palestinian refugees who have been resident in Syria for decades. Egypt has turned away Syrians arriving in the country and deported several hundred others.

Second: The international community – particularly EU countries, Gulf countries Russia, China, India, the USA and others that have the economic means – must fully fund the UN humanitarian appeal for Syria. Humanitarian support must be sustained and not a one off contribution; there should be a clear commitment from individual countries and groupings like the G20 to ensure that humanitarian appeals continue to be funded.

Neighbouring countries, in particular Jordan and Lebanon, will need ongoing support to be able to continue hosting large numbers of refugees and providing them with essential services, such as schooling and health care. Lebanon is now hosting 759,000 refugees from Syria; one in every six people in the country. Jordan, one of the most water-stressed countries in the world is now home to 525,000 refugees from Syria, a twelfth of the country's population. Here again, the role of the international community is critical.

Third: Anyone fleeing Syria should be considered in need of international protection. The vast majority of refugees from Syria, including Palestinian refugees, are likely to meet the criteria for refugee status under international law. They should be able to access refugee protection

and the benefits afforded by refugee status. Key to this is that refugees from Syria should not be restricted to short residency periods or excluded from family reunification.

Fourth: Refugees from Syria, like all refugees, should not be subject to immigration detention. Refugees from Syria have been detained in various countries including Bulgaria, Egypt and Greece. Immigration detention of refugees is unlawful under international law.

Fifth: European countries, which resettle a relatively small number of refugees, should take vulnerable refugees out of the region, either by offering to resettle them or through humanitarian admission programmes. These must be over and above paltry existing refugee resettlement programmes. And it must be a serious effort of resettling thousands of refugees, not just token numbers. Resettlement and humanitarian admission will only make a small dent in the very large number of refugees hosted by Syria's neighbours, but it can be a very effective way of assisting those that are most vulnerable.

The human suffering in the Syrian conflict is clear for all to see. Knowing there are concrete steps that can be taken to alleviate this suffering, the Arab and international community can and must do better. A failure to act will complicate and delay the eventual rebuilding of Syria and aggravate the consequences of the conflict on neighbouring countries.

Government representatives are meeting in Geneva from 30 September for the annual Executive Committee meeting of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to discuss international refugee protection.