



**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing
on
The Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis in Syria**

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**Statement of Arnaud Queminn
Syria Country Director
Mercy Corps**

Introduction

Co-Chairs McGovern and Smith, and distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the ongoing conflict in Syria. I am grateful to the Commission for your leadership in organizing this important discussion about the humanitarian challenges facing the people of Syria. I will focus my testimony today on the dire situation in northwest Syria and will conclude by sharing recommendations for the international community and U.S. policymakers to address this urgent crisis.

Our work

Mercy Corps has been responding to the conflict in Syria since 2012. With a team of 400 national and international staff, our programming has supported those affected by the conflict in Syria by providing emergency assistance to meet basic needs, creating safe spaces for children and youth, and increasing economic opportunities for the most vulnerable. In 2018, we provided assistance to 1.5 million people across Syria. In northwest Syria, we have provided emergency and longer-term assistance since 2012. With the recent escalation in the conflict in the northwest, we have increased our emergency response, reaching 130,000 people.

Overview

In Syria, over eight years of brutal conflict across the country has resulted in a humanitarian crisis of staggering proportions: more than half a million lives have been lost, 6.2 million Syrians are internally displaced, and more than 80 percent of the population lives in poverty. Behind those numbers are millions of people who have seen and witnessed unspeakable atrocities. As the war continues to wage on, world leaders must not abandon support for the overwhelming and immediate needs of the Syrian people.

Northwest Syria

Since April, escalating violence in northwest Syria has threatened the safety and well-being of more than 3 million Syrians, half of whom have already been displaced from other parts of the country. The violence across Hama and Idlib provinces underlines the breakdown of the defunct



demilitarized zone negotiated by Turkey and Russia last year to avoid a military offensive by the Government of Syria. The escalation of violence between state and non-state armed actors vying for control of northwest Syria – including sanctioned groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – has left many civilians with nowhere to go to find safety. The latest ceasefire, which Russia unilaterally put into effect on August 30th, broke down on September 10th when airstrikes targeted the Kabanah axis. Even during this eleven day period of relative calm, shelling still occurred on a daily basis in southern Idlib. As fighting continues to intensify, innocent men, women and children are paying the price for the world’s failure to make progress toward a diplomatic solution.

Against this backdrop, humanitarian actors inside northwest Syria are risking their lives to deliver urgently needed food, water, and medicine to a traumatized population. According to the United Nations (UN), only cross-border humanitarian actors can reach the people of Idlib. This cross-border humanitarian delivery system is possible thanks to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2165 and subsequent resolutions allowing aid actors to use certain border crossings to get humanitarian support to Syrians through the most direct routes. As needs escalate, the UN Security Council must prioritize renewing the cross-border resolution to ensure humanitarian cross-border deliveries continue, particularly as access to northwest Syria from within the country is severely restricted.

The Government of Syria offensive in northwest Syria has had a significant impact on the safety of civilians in the region:

Mass displacement. Since April, over 600,000 people have been newly displaced, and dozens of villages and towns have been almost completely emptied and destroyed due to conflict. Areas in the northwest that were already hosting large populations of displaced people struggle to absorb more, increasing pressure on already strained resources. The Syrian government’s capture of the town of Khan Sheikoun has led to another large wave of IDPs towards northern Idlib and the western Aleppo countryside. We expect this trend of further displacement to continue in the foreseeable future.

Shelter needs are not being met. In northern Idlib, many displaced people are living out in the open, with no access to shelter or services. And for those who have shelter, many live in suboptimal conditions. For example, according to a recent assessment, of the communities surveyed, 24% of displaced households and 9% of resident households are living in overcrowded shelters. This same assessment found that the majority of displaced people are arriving to the area with furniture, suggesting that many expect to be displaced for a long period of time due to limited options for future movement.

Hospitals, civilian structures and humanitarian workers are being attacked in clear violation of international humanitarian law. According to the UN, 43 health facilities, 87 educational facilities, 29 water stations, and 7 markets have all been impacted by fighting since April. Airstrikes continue to hit hospitals and other civilian infrastructure, including facilities



whose coordinates have been shared with parties to the conflict via the UN deconfliction list. More than 500 civilians have been killed since the escalation began in April, and hundreds more have been injured. The recent establishment of the internal UN Board of Inquiry to review the destruction and damage of facilities is a welcome development and must be quickly followed by accountability for all violations of international humanitarian law.

Humanitarians continue to face access constraints. Fluctuating conflict levels and widespread insecurity has led to intermittent office closures and restrictions on aid workers' movements. In addition, state and non-state armed groups in northwest Syria have hindered humanitarian operations, at times blocking aid and slowing down the delivery of assistance. These challenges will be further exacerbated as areas return to government control.

The presence of sanctioned groups also poses additional challenges for the humanitarian response and our ability to access affected populations. Mercy Corps brings decades of experience balancing the humanitarian imperative to respond to the tremendous human suffering in areas under the control of sanctioned groups, and the need to protect U.S. taxpayer-funding from falling into the hands of such groups. To ensure maximum program impact and mitigation of risk, Mercy Corps has dedicated significant resources to analysis and enhanced due diligence and monitoring measures in Syria. Mercy Corps communicates these standards and rules of engagement to all armed actors in our areas of operations, and we will refrain from programming when our red lines are crossed. We sincerely appreciate the U.S. Treasury Department issuing an Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) license to allow humanitarians to continue life-saving support in northwest Syria and look forward to continued dialogue to address ongoing operational challenges.

Humanitarian workers face extreme risk as they bravely continue to respond to needs. Our team members and partners are part of a group of 15,000 humanitarian workers currently on the ground in the northwest. Despite the extreme dangers they face, these workers continue to provide lifesaving assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States – and the U.S. Congress – must use all of its diplomatic pressure to bring an immediate end to the offensive in northwest Syria, to ensure the protection of civilians and access to people in need of humanitarian assistance. The United States Government should:

Renew the diplomatic push for a serious political solution. While ceasefires would be the logical answer to immediately protect civilians caught in the conflict in northwest Syria, time and again, these ceasefires have failed to hold. The United States should use its role in the UN Security Council to fully support the Secretary General's Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen to engage parties and broker a peaceful resolution of the security situation in Idlib, as well as to work toward a broader political settlement.



In the immediate term, the United States should also urge Turkey and Russia to make serious diplomatic efforts to pressure parties to the conflict to end attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Publicly reaffirm the importance of international humanitarian law (IHL) and condemn any violations of it. The United States has been a key ally on these issues to date and should continue to use its voice in the UN Security Council to speak out when civilians and civilian and humanitarian structures are hit, as well as when humanitarian access is limited. Particularly given the situation in Idlib, it is important that the United States stresses that the fight against terrorist groups must be undertaken in accordance with IHL and international human rights law.

Provide high levels of funding for humanitarian assistance in the final FY20 State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs bill and urge the Administration to provide aid to Northwest Syria commensurate with need. Humanitarian actors expect the situation in Idlib to only worsen. The number of displaced persons continues to increase, putting additional strain on an already overstretched humanitarian response. Gauging from the course of the conflict thus far, it is likely that the humanitarian crisis will be protracted. In addition, winter is rapidly approaching and with major gaps in shelter still prevalent, support to prepare civilians for the cold weather ahead will be critical.

Push for the renewal of the UN cross-border resolution. The humanitarian needs in Syria remain immense, with a large portion of the population still most accessible from cross-border modalities. Particularly as the conflict in Idlib worsens, cross-border assistance will be the sole lifeline for hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

Support the continuation of the Whole of Syria humanitarian architecture, particularly the role of the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator. This architecture allows for a response that most efficiently reaches those in need; supports a principled humanitarian response plan; and allows for continued advocacy on issues such as access, protection and needs assessments. Crucial to the Whole of Syria architecture is the continuation of the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator role at the Assistant Secretary General level.

Ensure that the recently established UN Board of Inquiry to investigate destruction and damage to facilities on the UN's deconfliction list and other UN-supported facilities is effective and can begin without delay. The Security Council must act to ensure transparent, consistent, and independent investigative processes are initiated when deconflicted structures are attacked. The Secretary General's recent creation of a Board of Inquiry is a welcome first step, but not sufficient. The United States should call for the prompt appointment of Board members with expertise in IHL to ensure that the inquiry is carried out in a timely manner. The United States should also push for the Secretary General to release a public summary of the Board of Inquiry's report with a specific section on attribution, as was the case with the summary of the Board of Inquiry's Big Orem review. This information should be used to ensure that the parties



responsible for violations of international humanitarian law are truly held accountable for their actions.

In conclusion, I wish to sincerely thank the Commission for its focus on this important issue and for extending me the privilege of testifying today.