

*What the Women Say*  
**Voices from the Ground: Syria's Humanitarian Crisis**

**An Action Brief: Winter 2013**

In recent months ICAN's staff have held regular in-person and online consultations with Syrian civil society activists based inside the country or those who have recently left. They are providing relief and development support to refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). They speak of the humanitarian threats, security, political, economic and psychosocial challenges that people are facing and the emergence of a nascent but committed civil society. The international community must recognize their resilience, and aspirations for the future, and support their efforts to withstand the impact of war. Their work is a testament to the dignity and humanity of Syrians and provides a glimpse of a peaceful pluralistic Syria for which they are striving. **This brief summarizes key priorities and recommendations on immediate humanitarian issues that must be addressed by the international community.**

**1. International aid is not getting through, Syrians have self-organized to provide relief, they need support:**

Many Syrians are involved in organizing relief assistance inside and outside the country. They are working independently, with limited access to international funds, yet with access and human capacity to provide assistance (health, shelter, food, education etc) in creative and collaborative ways. They repeatedly state that international aid is not getting through. In some cases corrupt networks are diverting it. In other instances—particularly inside the country—there is insufficient allocation to key areas notably Aleppo and Homs. They mention that “overheads” are taken such that far less aid reaches the most needy. Supporting Syrian NGOs directly has multiple benefits. They have the ability to make effective use of smaller grants (up to US\$100,000). With help they can reinforce their management and institutional capacities to ensure longer-term sustainability. They can develop additional skills and the sectoral expertise needed for the transition and recovery period. Syrian NGOs supported by the international community could be one means of countering the influence of extremists in the country.

**The situation in Aleppo is dire and getting worse, but local NGOs can make a difference:** Aleppo is facing a dire situation, made worse by the attacks on the university campus where many IDPs had sought shelter and refuge. Essential services are lacking and assistance is not getting through. There is fear of spikes in disease due to a sanitation crisis, death, illness, and child mortality. Local health professionals have established a hospital to provide healthcare and are planning to establish basic 'health points' to provide care. They are in desperate need of funds, medical supplies, medicines, vaccines and insecticide to stop the mass outbreak of Leishmaniasis. (Leishmaniasis is a parasitic infection transmitted by the bite of an infected female sand fly whose hosts are animals, such as dogs or rodents, or human beings. It is [spreading in Aleppo](#) due to sand flies breeding in uncollected trash.)

**2. Most refugees are not in the camps, and they are in legal and economic limbo:** Across Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, only an estimated 20-30 percent of Syrian refugees are actually in the camps. The majority has sought temporary housing outside the camps, many in the border towns. In part this is due to the poor living conditions within the camps and the lack of safety.

- √ **Legal Issues:** Refugees outside the camps are in a state of legal limbo. They can neither return home nor register for refugee status and benefits. Those in Turkey often stay on a three-month visitor visa, which forbids them from working or attending school. Since they are viewed as guests of the Turkish government they cannot register with UNHCR to repatriate to third countries. Their uncertain residency status generates much fear and insecurity.
- √ **Human trafficking including sexual exploitation:** According to various reports, human trafficking is on the rise, especially for those who want to go to European countries. Entire families have been imprisoned for illegal entry into third countries. Reports indicate that young women and girls being bought by Saudis and others from the Arab Gulf states. Merchants are scouting camps in search of younger virgin girls aged between 14-15. Some women and girls are given promises of marriage and sent to other countries once they lose their virginity. Some are sent back to Turkey but they are ashamed to return to their families so they fall into prostitution. Child marriages are also becoming more prevalent (reports from camps in Jordan and Turkey) among poorer families. For girls' families these marriages (often informal and unregistered) is justified as giving protection to their daughters (from sexual harassment in camps) but it is also a means of bringing money in and getting rid of an extra mouth to feed.
- √ **Economic:** Syrians are unable to get work permits in Turkey or Jordan. Yet they are desperate to earn incomes and support their families. Joblessness among men is a key source of frustration, emasculation and leading to gender based violence. Those who find employment are vulnerable to exploitation (low pay, etc.) by their employers and have no legal recourse as they fear deportation if they report incidences to the police. Women heads of households face serious problems providing for their families.
- √ **Education:** Most Syrian refugees have no access to education. Many children and university aged youth have lost up to two years of their education. Even when they register and pay for a class (rare as often they lack the appropriate identification papers) they receive no certificate upon completion. Language differences are also a challenge, especially in Turkey. To alleviate the situation, Syrians have tried to set up schools with support from Western (Canada) and Gulf States. At least one religious school was set up. In Antab, Syrians worked with the mayor to set up a school for four grades offering Turkish language.

**4. Camp conditions vary between the countries but they are dire, especially in the IDP camps:** There is a pervasive lack of basic necessities including food, blankets, adequate shelter and services such as basic health care, education, and psychosocial support (Zaatari camp in Jordan is notable).

- √ **Physical Safety:**
  - **Fear of sexual harassment and violence:** In Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon refugees speak of the fear of sexual harassment and violence in the camps. Anecdotally, the incidences involve the security and civilian camp personnel. The cramped living conditions are also giving rise to sexual abuse. In Jordan where Syrian refugees are more conservative and impoverished, there are anecdotal reports of early marriages of young girls to local Jordanians (to “protect” them from sexual harassment).
  - **Pressures on men, burdens on women:** For many of the men, dependency on handouts is intolerable, so they refuse to seek help or collect the supplies. Women have to get the supplies. But for more conservative families, the public exposure of women is a challenge too. This is causing trauma and domestic violence. For widows it is particularly difficult and anecdotally some are opting to marry as the second wife to get male protection. But this is creating new societal problems. Some women household heads and widows may go for days without food because they do not feel comfortable and don't have the skills to negotiate assistance.

- **Political fear:** because there is a mix of people at camps, including members of the government security forces, political activists and those seeking asylum feel unsafe as they fear political infiltration and threats in the camps.
- **Fear of local police and authorities (risk of harassment and deportation):** Because of their precarious residency status fear of deportation and lack of police support, Syrians who are victims of crime or exploitation in host countries (Turkey, Jordan, Iraq etc.), rarely report it to the authorities. In addition, in Turkey, since registration with the authorities limits their freedom of movement, many avoid doing so. But this also makes them more vulnerable.
- √ **Health:** There is a profound lack of basic health care and other services. In one camp in Jordan, water pollution was so high (the color was red) that the refugees feared for their children's wellbeing. Syrians in Turkey lack health insurance so in cases of serious illness (e.g. cancer) they either go untreated as they cannot afford treatment, or are forced to return back to Syria,
- √ **Restrictions on movement—impact on women and men.** In camps there are restrictions on the movement of people. To leave the camps, Syrians need a guarantor who is a national of the host country. This creates a new form of exploitation as locals can extort money from the desperate Syrian refugees. Given traditional practices it is typically the men who are able to leave the camps. Women face even greater limitations on movement.

**5. IDP camps (on the borders):** The situation in the IDP camps is dire. Often run by the Free Syrian Army, they are at times subject to bombings and attacks. Atma Camp inside Syria—the last stop before Turkey—is a case in point. Overcrowding is a critical issue with some 17,000 refugees sharing just 1,300 tents. There are virtually no toilet facilities (one bathroom for the women), so people have to use the fields. The tents are cold, small, and there is a lack of basic necessities including food and blankets. There is no paving and the mud becomes unmanageable with rain and snow. There are no health services or school. Children have died because of the cold and accidental fires.

#### **Recommendations:**

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1. **End the legal limbo for Syrians:** Change laws to allow for residency, work permits, and access to health and educational services in host countries. Allow Syrians outside the camps to register for refugee status with UNHCR, access benefits, and seek assistance for third-country settlement.
2. **Support media and community based programs to raise awareness about human trafficking and reducing the stigma of sexual violence:** Through radio programs and outreach via Syrian NGOs and others to refugee populations (in/out of camps), raise awareness about the signs and risks of human trafficking (illegal immigrants, sex trafficking, etc). Tackle the stigma of sexual violence to shift the shame away from victims, and provide them (and their families) with care and counseling.
3. **Fund and support activists and human rights defenders:** These activists are critical to the struggle and to Syria's future but are facing immense financial, legal and other challenges. In some instances they have been denied Syrian passports so they cannot travel. Set up special funds and mechanisms offering financial support, visas for medical treatment, respites, and education to support human rights and civil society activists who face persecution or chronic illness. Germany, for example, has provided five-year special visas to activists from other countries. The resources could be channeled through existing international NGOs supporting human rights defenders and civil/political activists.
4. **Work through Syrian civil society to ensure that IDP and refugee camp residents are involved in service provision and have access to the assistance.** Set up male/female committees in camps to monitor distribution of aid. Diversify implementing partners so that Syrian NGOs have direct access to

international aid. Reach out through Syrian NGOs to determine humanitarian needs of communities inside the country. **Syrian NGOs are cost effective, active and quick to respond.** Funds could be passed through international NGOs working with Syrian partners or made directly available to Syrian NGOs.

5. **Host and neighboring countries should ease the way for Syrian NGOs to register and establish themselves in order to receive funds and support from the international community.** This will also provide greater accountability and transparency. Currently many Syrian NGOs (especially those active inside the country) are in a state of limbo and uncertainty. They cannot register, and thus cannot open organizational bank accounts. Yet there is immense need for their services.
6. **Identify and work with Syrian civil society and professionals (lawyers, doctors, engineers, social workers, teachers, etc.) to provide the necessary care and assistance:** Syrians do not want to become dependent on aid. They want help to help themselves. To sustain their resilience and social capital, the international community must identify Syrians to provide the basic services. Where organizations already exist (e.g. Aleppo, Homs, among refugee communities), they should channel resources to them.
7. **Allow Syrians to enter neighboring countries:** The international community must support regional states in allowing Syrians fleeing the war to gain refuge outside their countries. The borders should not be closed. They should be opened and service provision increased.
8. **Improve camp infrastructure (in host countries and in Syria) and get refugees to do the work:** Pave the areas around and inside the camps, replace tents with premade (prefab) rooms, build toilets, set up basic health and social service facilities.
9. **Support economic empowerment and employment generation projects for women and men including youth.** Training (basic and more complex skills) for women (especially widows and female heads of household) who don't have education is needed urgently. Male employment (building, infrastructural work) is also critical, to enable them to provide for their families, maintain dignity and reduce gender-based violence. Working in partnership with Syrian civil society and NGOs to implement these programs is key to building the capacity of local civil society and to ensuring the success of such programs. Some NGOs are providing this, but there is a need to upscale and diversify.
10. **Set up medical centers to address war injuries including sexual violence in border areas:** The Kilis refugee camp in Turkey has seen an influx of injured Syrians, with no medical care. The Antab city hospital is already full, because the injured are being brought into the camps and the cities around. Medical services inside the camp and near borders are essential to treat the injured and those who get sick. Resources should be channeled to Syrian CSOs providing medical care inside the country.
11. **Set up schools with Syrian NGOs and hire Syrian teachers:** Draw on Syrian teachers, to provide education in these new schools and to teach in camps. Work with local Syrian NGOs in Syria or in border countries to set up schools and kindergartens at low cost (US\$30,000-\$50,000). These should be schools that are registered and provide certifications for completion.
12. **Scale up, support and set up psychosocial support centers working with NGOs:** A number of small NGOs are providing psychosocial support to refugees and IDPs. They need resources to scale up their efforts. They also want to build their own capacities to tackle trauma (war-related, sexual trauma, children's issues, etc.). Schools can serve as centers to provide these services. Increase opportunities for children to play and recover from trauma (build on existing programs).