

Worst 'humanitarian tragedy' of the century looms in Idlib, UN aid agencies warn

A full-scale military offensive on Syria's Idlib risks creating the worst humanitarian tragedy of the 21st century, UN aid agencies have said, amid concerns that a severe funding shortfall threatens the "most vulnerable" victims of the conflict.

"We as humanitarian advocates must raise our voice," said Jens Laerke from the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#). "We are saying that this has the potential to be the worst crisis – humanitarian crisis – in the 21st century, because that is frankly what it looks like, if it goes ahead with a full-scale military operation."

Since 4 September, an uptick in violence has killed scores of civilians and displaced more than 30,000 people, Mr Laerke said.

Reading a statement from [Panos Moumtzis](#), Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, the OCHA spokesperson noted that aerial and ground-based bombardment had struck northern rural Hama governorate and southern rural Idlib, and had been accompanied by an increase in retaliatory rocket and mortar attacks.

The resulting impact on civilians has been "dramatic", Mr. Laerke said, his concerns echoing those of UN Emergency Relief Coordinator [Mark Lowcock](#), who a day earlier had issued a warning about a military escalation in Idlib, after a recent meeting with Syria government officials in the country's capital.

Our fear as humanitarians is that the worst may be ahead of us –
Panos Moumtzis, OCHA, Syria

"As the Emergency Relief Coordinator mentioned, he was recently in Damascus", noted Mr. Laerke, adding that the Syrian Government had indicated it would pursue a military solution "which is very, very scary from a humanitarian perspective."

"They have this capacity to kill and destroy," Mr Laerke said. "We have seen it in use before, and we strongly advise that it does not happen in this enclosed area, where the population has, I think, almost doubled by the influx of evacuees and IDPs from other parts of the country."

In the space of less than a week, four hospitals have been hit in southern Idlib and neighbouring Hama governorate.

This is contrary to international humanitarian law, the OCHA spokesperson

said, adding that one of the hospitals was also in a protected “deconfliction zone”, whose coordinates had been given to the warring parties to spare it from attack.

“Our fear as humanitarians is that the worst may be ahead of us,” the statement from Panos Moutzis read. “The safety and protection of some 2.9 million civilians residing in Idlib and surrounding areas is at risk.”

As UN agencies and their partners prepare to help those fleeing a full-scale military attack, UN Refugee Agency, [UNHCR](#), warned that \$270 million is urgently needed to help Syria’s most vulnerable people inside and outside the war-torn country.

Of more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, 2.6 million are children.

UNHCR’s total funding needs for the Syria crisis amount to nearly \$2 billion. So far, only 31 per cent of this has been provided.

[Afghanistan: UN condemns latest school bombings as ‘repulsive acts of terrorism’](#)

Amidst mounting concern over what appears to be a pattern of attacks targeting civilians and schools, a series of bombs on Tuesday morning in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province left more than 21 dead and some 60 others injured, drawing condemnation from the United Nations Assistance Mission in the country ([UNAMA](#)).

Within a 15-minute period on Tuesday morning, at least three schools were targeted in Nangarhar’s capital, Jalalabad.

As children recently returned to school after their summer vacation, two girls’ high schools were targeted. While first responders and families rushed to the scene, a second improvised explosive device (IED) was detonated, killing a 12-year-old boy and injuring several other children, and men. Meanwhile, explosive experts located and diffused an IED placed by terrorists next to a third school.

“Our deepest sympathy is with the victims, families and the Afghan people,” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA.

“The bombings of schools and the killing of children are among the most

[egregious](#) and repulsive acts of terrorism which violate international humanitarian law,” Mr. Yamamoto underscored.

The blast came less than a week after a [suicide attack](#) killed more than 20 people in the Afghan capital of Kabul.

Most of Tuesday’s civilian casualties occurred in the Mohmandara district of Nangarhar when a suicide attacker detonated explosives among a crowd demonstrating against a local Afghan police commander. At least 20 died at the scene, and more than 60 were injured.

Jalalabad and other parts of Nangarhar have recently witnessed multiple deliberate attacks against civilians. Since June, Nangarhar schools have been pointedly targeted in retaliation for operations by Government and allied forces in the area.

“I feel profound indignation at this latest wave of attacks deliberately targeting civilians,” asserted the Special Representative. “The planners must face justice.”

UNAMA reminded all warring parties to uphold their obligations to protect civilians and called upon them to comply with international humanitarian law and immediately cease targeting civilians, including schools.

[Hungarian government ‘fuels discrimination against migrants’, say UN human rights experts](#)

New laws in Hungary, and Government attacks on civil society in the country, fuel “hostility, xenophobia, and discrimination against migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and all those trying to provide them support”, say a team of independent [human rights experts](#) mandated by the [UN Human Rights Council](#).

The experts expressed concern in a statement released on Tuesday, following the adoption of legislation which the Hungarian Government has named the “Stop Soros” law, imposing further restrictions on the right to seek asylum, and making it practically impossible for asylum seekers to submit asylum claims and regularise their migratory status.

The Government’s name for the law is a reference to Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros, whose Open Society Foundations (OSF) are committed to “build vibrant and tolerant societies whose governments are accountable and open to the participation of all people”, according to the OSF Website.

OSF has reportedly moved its Budapest branch to the German capital, Berlin, writing in a May statement that it was leaving Hungary because of the “increasingly repressive political and legal environment.”

Under the measures, individuals or organisations can also be sent to prison for “supporting and facilitating illegal immigration.”

Additional laws levy a special 25 per cent tax on NGOs who engage in “immigration activities”, restrict assembly, and impose restrictions on the work of civil society.

The experts noted that the Government is encouraging regular and widespread threats to human rights defenders in Hungary, saying: “Since the last general election, the Government has engaged in smear campaigns against civil society, particularly in connection to migration issues, discrediting and intimidating dissenting voices, notably through its own agencies and through the public media.”

These attacks, combined with the current legislation, they continued, run counter to Hungary’s obligations under international human rights law and represent a serious breach by Hungary of the obligations and values that found the European Union, of which it is a member.

“We call on the European institutions to continue addressing the deteriorating human rights situation in Hungary and keep on taking decisions reflecting the core values of the European Union: democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights.”

A number of international and inter-governmental institutions have condemned the legislation, including the [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), the [UN Human Rights Committee](#), the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Commission.

The European Parliament is reportedly discussing whether to launch disciplinary proceedings against Hungary, due to its policies on issues such as migration.

‘More support’ vital to put Afghanistan back on a ‘positive trajectory’ – top UN officials

After four decades of conflict and insecurity, and with elections to be held in the coming months against a backdrop of growing humanitarian need, Afghanistan needs more support than ever to tackle its challenges, [said](#) the United Nations humanitarian and refugee chiefs on Monday after a joint two-

day visit in the country.

The United Nations humanitarian affairs chief, [Mark Lowcock](#), and the [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#), [Filippo Grandi](#), were speaking to the press in Geneva, ahead of a major international conference on Afghanistan due to be held in November.

“The world needs to pay a bit more attention again to Afghanistan to help them through this challenging period,” said Mark Lowcock, “it’s possible that a year from now they could be back on a positive trajectory if they get the right engagement and help”.

Afghan refugees, who have made the difficult decision to voluntarily return home to Afghanistan, some after decades living in Pakistan, here pictured at UNHCR’s voluntary repatriation centre in Peshawar, which provides administration and services to help them go home. UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), nearly 4.2 million people in Afghanistan are in acute need of humanitarian assistance, including 1.9 million internally displaced by conflict, and more than 60,000 refugees who have returned home and need help to restart their lives.

In addition, the UN Refugee Agency ([UNHCR](#)) [highlights](#) that, outside the country, 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees are hosted by Pakistan and Iran, along with an even larger number of undocumented Afghans.

Ongoing insecurity, including terrorist attacks and growing criminality, was cited by Mr. Grandi as “having a very negative impact,” as it “continues to produce internal displacement” and “has caused a sharp decline in the number of people going back to Afghanistan.” The head of UNHCR explained that the number heading home around the same time last year reached 40,000 to 50,000; whereas this year it’s fallen to around 12,000.

To make things worse, the country is facing a [massive drought](#) that is affecting 70 per cent of its territory, and putting 1.3 million women, children and men at risk.

As the country is gearing up for parliamentary and presidential elections in the coming months, Mr. Lowcock commended the “good efforts” made by the Afghan Government to address issues preventing returns and reintegration such as a lack of available land. He also applauded bilateral agreements with other countries hosting Afghan refugees, such as Pakistan and Iran. He added however that the problem remains finding ways to translate “those laws and policies into practice” so they can “have a real impact on people”.

The two UN officials called on the world to support Afghanistan in its path to peace, political stability and economic recovery and stressed that international backing of the Government’s policies and strategies is required for their effective implementation.

On 27 and 28 November, an [international conference](#) co-hosted by the United Nations and the Afghan Government, will be held in Geneva to discuss the way forward, described by Mr. Lowcock as “an important opportunity to reaffirm international commitments to peace, stability, development and progress in Afghanistan”.

Pervasive corruption costs \$2.6 trillion; disproportionately affects ‘poor and vulnerable’ says UN chief

“Numbers show the [startling scope](#) of the challenge,” the UN chief said on Monday, citing World Economic Forum estimates that corruption costs at least \$2.6 trillion – or five per cent of global gross domestic product.

And according to the World Bank, businesses and individuals pay more than \$1 trillion in bribes each year.

Mr. Guterres elaborated saying that corruption:

- Robs schools, hospitals and others of vitally needed funds.
- Rots institutions, as officials enrich themselves or ignore criminality.
- Deprives people of their rights and drives away foreign investment and despoils the environment.
- Breeds disillusion with government and governance – often at the root of political dysfunction and social disunity.
- Can be a trigger for conflict.
- And, drives and thrives on the breakdown of political and social institutions.

“The poor and vulnerable suffer disproportionately,” he stressed. “And impunity compounds the problem.”



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

The UN chief linked corruption to many forms of instability and violence, such as the illicit trafficking of weapons, drugs and people and noted that connections between corruption, terrorism and violent extremism have been repeatedly recognized by the Security Council and General Assembly.

“Large-scale corruption surveys conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)) found that bribery of public officials was particularly high in areas affected by conflict,” he continued, adding that in times of conflict, corruption can be especially devastating as it can affect basic needs and exacerbate hunger and poverty.

“It is especially important to build up the capacity of national anti-corruption commissions and prosecutorial efforts,” he told the Council, encouraging governments to ensure independent judiciaries, media freedom and whistleblower protections.

He suggested that the international community work effectively against money laundering, tax evasion and the illicit financial flows “that have deprived countries of much-needed resources,” and that feed further corruption.

Mr. Guterres reiterated some of the ways the Organization can support Member States, “from sharing good practices to supporting efforts to strengthen national anti-corruption institutions.”

Mr. Guterres recognized that people globally continue to express outrage over their corrupt leaders, noting how deeply corruption is embedded in societies, saying “They are rightly calling for political establishments to operate with transparency and accountability – or make way for those who will.”

"I call on leaders everywhere to listen, to nurture a culture of integrity and to empower citizens to do their part at the grass roots," he said.

Stop mass atrocities by curbing war profiteers

Also taking the floor was John Prendergast, Co-founder, with George Clooney, of "The Sentry," a team of policy analysts, regional experts, and financial forensic investigators who follow the flow of corrupt cash, and its close links with African warlords who perpetrate atrocities.

With a focus on the continent, Mr. Prendergast highlighted the major role of corruption in fueling and extending conflict, explaining that war has been good business for many.

Citing deadly African conflicts, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic, he spoke of the extraordinary opportunities exploited by profiteers when "there is a visible nexus between grand corruption and mass atrocities."

"Until the Security Council and other interested parties with potential influence can create leverage" to change the dynamics of financing conflict, from pillaging resources, looting and stealing state assets, he assured the Council that "the bottom line is that war will remain more beneficial than peace for those at the centre of conflict and corruption."