

As many as 330,000 displaced by heavy fighting in south-west Syria – UN agency

Intense air and ground-based strikes at multiple locations in Syria's south-western Dara'a governorate has resulted in the "largest displacement" in the area since the conflict began more than seven years ago, the United Nations refugee agency has reported.

A number of civilians are also reported to have been killed in the hostilities and many more injured, said Andrej Mahecic on Tuesday, a spokesperson for the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR).

He said the agency was "[deeply concerned by the escalation of fighting](#)" and called on those involved "to take all necessary measures to safeguard civilian lives, protect civilian infrastructure and allow freedom of movement as required under international humanitarian and human rights laws."

Among those displaced by the fighting – estimated to number between 270,000 to 330,000 – are some 60,000 at the Nasib/Jaber border crossing, between Syria and Jordan, forced to live with sweltering heat, pounded by dusty desert winds.

According to reports, at least twelve children, two women, and one elderly man, have died in the past few days close to the Jordanian border due to scorpion bites, dehydration and disease.

Elizabeth Throssell, a spokesperson for the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), appealed for the safety of those trapped at the border.

We call on the international community, in particular countries of the region with the financial ability to host refugees, to take in fleeing civilians from Syria – *OHCHR spokesperson*

["We call on the international community](#), in particular countries of the region with the financial ability to host large numbers of refugees, to take in fleeing civilians from Syria ... We call on the Jordanian Government to keep its border open and for other countries in the region to step up and receive the fleeing civilians."

She also called on all parties involved in the conflict to "ensure safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to those in need, in line with their obligations under international law.

UN agencies on the ground are preparing to scale up their response,

prioritizing life-saving assistance and protection services for those with emergency needs.

The [World Food Programme](#) (WFP), the organization's emergency food and nutrition relief agency, has [delivered enough food for around 200,000](#) people and stands ready to deliver more as soon as security improves and conditions allow.

However, violence has also displaced hundreds of staff of WFP-partner organizations, "leaving few people on the ground to manage aid distribution and limiting possibilities to intervene," said Bettina Luescher, a spokesperson for the UN agency. She added that "other distribution solutions" were currently being examined.

[Egypt urged to free prominent couple jailed arbitrarily since last June: UN rights office](#)

The UN human rights office is urging Egypt to free a prominent married couple that has been arbitrarily detained for more than a year.

Ola Al-Qaradawi and her husband Hosam Khalaf, both in their 50s, were arrested at their vacation home in Alexandria on 30 June 2017, allegedly for their affiliation with the banned Muslim Brotherhood organization and for terrorist activities.

We call on Egypt to release all those arbitrarily detained in the country unconditionally – *Liz Throssell (OHCHR)*

Ms. Al-Qaradawi is the daughter of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a leading Islamic scholar and member of the outlawed group, who lives in exile in Qatar.

She has been held in solitary confinement "in one of the worst prisons in Egypt", the UN human rights office said on Tuesday. Her husband is being held in similar conditions in a different prison, according to media reports.

Ms. Al-Qaradawi has been denied visits from her family and lawyers, and recently began a hunger strike in protest.

"We understand that Ola Al-Qaradawi's health is frail and deteriorating and urge the authorities to ensure that her right to health and to physical and psychological integrity is respected," Liz Throssell, spokesperson for the UN human rights office, told journalists in Geneva.

“We call on Egypt to release all those arbitrarily detained in the country unconditionally.”

In June, a UN-mandated body issued a [decision](#) determining that Ms. Al-Qaradawi and her husband had been arbitrarily arrested, and called for their immediate release.

The [Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) also determined that repeated renewals of 45-day detention orders against them resulted in ongoing violations of their rights to fair trial and due process.

Furthermore, Ms. Al-Qaradawi’s prolonged solitary confinement could also amount to torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

The decision stated that “The Working Group cannot but conclude that Ms. al-Qaradawi and Mr. Khalaf have been arrested and detained for their family ties with Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. This is the only plausible explanation for the subversion of the equal protection of the law they experienced”.

[Palestinian Bedouin community faces demolition after Israeli court ruling, warns UN rights office](#)

A Palestinian Bedouin community is under threat from a demolition order within days, to make way for Israeli settlement expansion, the UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), warned on Tuesday.

Spokesperson Liz Throssell said that the imminent destruction of buildings used by Khan al Ahmar al Helu residents comes after the Israeli High Court ruled against any further delay.

“The community is home to 181 people – more than half of them children,” Ms Throssell told journalists in Geneva, noting that it is “at high risk of forcible transfer” owing to Israeli practices and policies “that coerce people and communities to move”.

The Khan al Ahmar al Helu community has spent the last decade opposing the move in a part of the central West Bank called Area C.

In total, around 7,000 people from 46 Bedouin communities live there “and we are concerned about all of them”, the OHCHR spokesperson said, noting that the community is located near existing “large Israeli settlements”.

Describing Israel’s planning policy as “discriminatory” and incompatible with international law, Ms Throssell explained that “most properties are

considered illegal” because planning permits are not granted to Palestinians in the area.

In an appeal to the Israeli authorities, the OHCHR spokesperson said that if the demolitions went ahead, “people would lose their homes, children would lose their schools” and residents “would lose their community”.

Such a development would “likely amount to forced evictions” and violate the community’s right to housing, Ms Throssell said.

She added that once demolitions take place, the community is expected to be encouraged to move about 10 kilometres away to a suburban area on the outskirts of East Jerusalem.

Such a move is “not really appropriate for a community that has animals and needs grazing”, Ms Throssell said, adding that this had happened before, affecting 150 Bedouin Palestine refugee families between 1997 and 2007.

“The demolition itself may not amount necessarily to forced eviction – the people may try to stay in the area,” she said. “But as you can imagine, it really increases the risk of forced transfer, so our main call to the Israelis, is not to proceed with the demolition of this community.”

Ms Throssell added that international humanitarian law prohibits the forced transfer of the population of an occupied territory, regardless of the motive.

[Yemen: ‘No justification for this carnage,’ says UNICEF chief, as children in need now outnumber population of Switzerland](#)

The relentless conflict in Yemen has pushed a nation already on the brink “deep into the abyss,” said the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) chief on Tuesday, after returning from a four-day visit to the war-torn country.

“Social services are barely functional. The economy is in [ruins](#). Prices have soared. Hospitals have been damaged. Schools have turned into shelters or have been taken over by armed groups,” UNICEF Executive Director Henriette Fore told journalists in Geneva on Tuesday, describing her trip to the key cities of Aden and Sana’a.

Having witnessed first-hand the effects of three years of intense war, after

decades of underdevelopment and chronic global indifference can do to children, Ms. Fore spelled out some of what children there are going through.

She said that they were routinely “taken out of school, forced to fight, married off, hungry, dying from preventable diseases,” she began, adding that “today, 11 million children in Yemen – more than the entire population of Switzerland – need help getting food, treatment, education, water and sanitation.”

Since 2015, health facilities have been cut by more than half; 1,500 schools have been damaged by airstrikes and shelling; and at least 2,200 children have been killed with around 3,400 injured, according to the UNICEF chief.

“These are only numbers we have been able to verify. The actual figures could be even higher,” she said. “There is no justification for this carnage.”

The protection of children...should remain paramount at all times –
Henriette Fore, UNICEF Executive Director

Ms. Fore described some of the individual children she met, such as a young girl receiving psychological support after fleeing violence in the port city of Hodeida – which is living under the threat of a major offensive – who presented her with a drawing of the world she wished to live in.

“It was the opposite of the world surrounding her, one of displacement, destruction and fear,” Ms. Fore said.

She described visiting health facilities, and a ward for malnourished children where an eight-month old child weighed that of a newborn. In a neonatal intensive care unit, she heard how a pair of conjoined twins simply could not get the surgery they needed to survive. She said she had met committed, overstretched health staff who had not been paid in two years: “And yet the conflict goes on,” said the UNICEF chief.

She explained that around 5,000 families had fled Hodeida over the past two weeks, where basic commodities including flour and cooking gas were dwindling, electricity was unavailable in most of the city and damage to the water supply had caused severe shortages

The Executive Director called it “critical” that families be allowed to voluntarily leave and that infrastructure be kept safe. “The protection of children – from landmines, recruitment, exploitation and attack – should remain paramount at all times,” Ms. Fore added

Since January, more than 250 UNICEF staff have remained in Aden, Sanaa, Idlib, Hodeida and Saada – serving children while dealing with life in a war zone.

“We are committed to doing all we can to help the children and young people of Yemen but there should be a political solution to the conflict,” she

stressed. “We all need to give peace a chance. It is the only way forward,” concluded the UNICEF chief.

Food safety critical to development and ending poverty: FAO deputy chief

Ensuring that people everywhere can trust the safety and quality of the food they eat is the focus of a UN meeting taking place this week in Rome.

The international food standards body known as the Codex Alimentarius Commission ([CAC](#)) is expected to adopt a text on the maximum level of mercury in fish, among other matters, during its annual session, which opened on Monday.

“One of the greatest challenges the world faces is how to ensure that a growing global population has enough safe food,” Maria Helena Semedo, Deputy Director-General of the UN [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#), told the gathering.

“Food safety is a critical enabler for market access, which promotes economic development and alleviates poverty.”

The Codex Alimentarius Commission was established more than 50 years ago by FAO and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#).

It coordinates input from nearly 190 countries and the European Union, and addresses themes such as contaminants, pesticides, health claims and nutrition labelling.

The Commission meets every year for one week to adopt the standards, guidelines, codes of practice and other recommendations that make up the Codex Alimentarius—Latin for “food code”—aimed at protecting consumer health and ensuring fair practices in the food trade.

Tom Heilandt, CAC secretary, told UN News that mercury in fish and other seafood can be harmful or even deadly to people of all ages.

“We are particularly concerned about the contamination of fish because of contamination of the seas with this heavy metal. It is partially because of natural contamination, meaning that the mercury was in the environment already and then dissolved in the oceans, and partly also because of emissions from industry,” he explained.

“It can also enter into the body, even through the hair, and it is also possible to enter the foetus in a pregnant woman. And that can be really bad for the baby.”

Representatives from nearly 120 countries and 70 organizations are attending this year's CAC meeting, which concludes on Friday.

Guilherme da Costa, the chairperson, called on delegates to build consensus in setting standards.

"It is essential we do our best to further develop and disseminate Codex standards in order to ensure food safety and quality for everyone everywhere," he said.