

Syria: UN aid convoy returns to eastern Ghouta

The United Nations and partners on Friday reached the Syrian city of Douma in Eastern Ghouta to complete the distribution of food aid after intense shelling cut short deliveries to the war-torn enclave earlier this week.

“The United Nations and our partners were able to go back into Douma today to deliver the remaining food assistance,” said Marwa Awad, Communications Officer of the World Food Programme (WFP), from the conflict-ravaged country’s capital, Damascus.

The assistance consisted of food baskets and wheat flour bags prepared by the WFP and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The WFP and its partners, namely ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, “look forward to our ability to enter again in the future to continue delivering the much-needed humanitarian and food assistance to the people inside Eastern Ghouta,” she added, calling on all parties to the conflict to grant humanitarians safe access to deliver the much-needed food and other assistance.

Meanwhile at UN Headquarters in New York, Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric told reporters that while the convoy was underway, shelling occurred in the proximity of operations, despite prior assurances of safety from all parties.

Despite such risks, today’s delivery completed the planned food relief for 27,500 people, along with health and nutrition items. The UN is waiting for access authorization to cover all 70,000 people in Douma that was initially approved by the Syrian authorities.

In Geneva, the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) warned that there has been a marked increase in violent attacks on health care in Syria.

“Every attack on health represents a loss that shatters families and communities and ripples through health systems. Health workers and health facilities are not a target. It has to stop,” Christian Lindmeier, WHO communication officer, told reporters.

According to a monthly report from the health cluster based in Gaziantep, Turkey, 43 incidents of violence against health care facilities, services and workers were reported in February, of which 39 were verified by external monitors and four are still being verified.

That compares to 31 incidents last month, of which 28 were verified.

In all, the 67 verified attacks on health facilities and workers in the first two months of this year amount to more than 50 per cent of verified attacks in all of 2017, which totaled 112.

Of February's verified incidents, 28 were in eastern Ghouta, 10 in Idleb and one in Homs. The attacks targeted 20 hospitals, 16 health facilities, two ambulance stations and one medical supplies warehouse.

These unacceptable attacks resulted in the deaths of 19 people, among them four health workers. The attacks also left 28 people injured, seven of them medical staff, he said.

[UN rights chief denounces 'unacceptable' charges of terrorism by Philippine's Duterte against UN expert](#)

Flinging terrorism charges at a United Nations human rights expert is just one act in a litany of profane and inflammatory comments made by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte against the rapporteur, prompting the UN rights chief to question the leader's mental stability.

"He needs to submit himself to some sort of psychiatric examination," Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussen, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told reporters on Friday during a press conference in Geneva, which covered a range of other issues, including the situations in Venezuela and Myanmar.

Mr. Zeid said the Philippine Government had added UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz's name to the "alleged membership of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army," which has been designated a terrorist organization.

According to Mr. Zeid, Ms. Corpuz believes that she has been targeted because of her comments on the attacks and killings of indigenous people in Mindanao.

"This is of course unacceptable for a special rapporteur acting on behalf of the international community whose expertise is sought by the Human Rights Council to be treated in this way," the High Commissioner said.

"And I hope and expect the Human Rights Council to respond accordingly," he added.

Turning to the "outrageous attacks" made by Mr. Duterte against Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial summary or arbitrary Executions, Mr. Zeid stressed: "These attacks cannot go unanswered."

Mr. Zeid called it "absolutely disgraceful that the president of a country could speak in this way, using the foulest of language against a rapporteur that is highly respected."

Since 1 July 2016, the year Mr. Duterte took office, thousands of people in the Philippines have reportedly been killed for their alleged involvement in illegal drug use or trafficking. While some killings have reportedly occurred in the context of clashes between or within gangs, it is suspected that many incidents involved extra-judicial killings in the course of police anti-drug operations, according to the Court.

In February, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)) announced that she would open preliminary examinations into the Government of the Philippine's "war on drugs."

[Over 4,700 UN agency trained veterinarians new vanguard against deadly disease outbreaks](#)

More than 4,700 veterinary health professionals who have just completed a United Nations training to tackle disease outbreaks are the new front line of defence protecting farm animals against deadly illnesses in 25 countries across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

In addition to keeping fowl, cattle, pigs and other animals safe, the freshly trained veterinarians will also help keep at bay diseases that are deadly to humans.

"Some 75 per cent of new infectious diseases that have emerged in recent decades originated in animals before jumping to us Homo sapiens, a terrestrial mammal," says Juan Lubroth, the Chief Veterinary Officer at the UN [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO), which has been organizing the trainings over the past year.

"This is why adequately discovering and tackling animal disease threats at-source represents a strategic high-ground in pre-empting future pandemics."

According to the UN food security agency, beyond the risks posed to human health, animal diseases can cost billions of dollars and hamstringing economic growth.

For instance, outbreaks of high impact disease in recent decades all had an animal source, including H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza, H1N1 pandemic influenza, Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

The H5N1 outbreak of the mid-2000s alone caused an estimated \$30 billion in economic losses, globally. A few years later, H1N1 racked up as much as \$55

billion in damages.

As with any disaster, the worst affected are often the poorest and most vulnerable.

“Animals are their primary capital assets – ‘equity on four legs’. Losing them can push these families out of self-reliance and into destitution,” states FAO.

Backed by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) support, the FAO trainings covered critical areas related to animal health, including disease surveillance and forecasting, laboratory operations, biosafety and biosecurity, prevention and control methods and outbreak response strategies.

A proactive approach to animal health and disease is critical, highlights Mr. Lubroth.

“For that [approach], the world needs well-trained, up-to-speed professionals – biologists, ecologists, microbiologists, modellers, physicians and veterinarians which is why the United States’ consistent support for building up that kind of capacity has been invaluable,” he stressed.

[Encouraged by proposed DPRK-US talks, Guterres reiterates support for peaceful denuclearization of Korean Peninsula](#)

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Friday said he is “encouraged” by the announcement of an agreement between the United States and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to hold a summit meeting by May.

“[Mr. Guterres] commends the leadership and vision of all concerned and reiterates his support for all efforts towards peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions,” said UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric in a [statement](#).

The statement follows yesterday’s reported proposal by the DPRK to hold talks with the US and its southern neighbour, the Republic of Korea, and to put its weapons and missile testing programmes on hold while the discussions are being held.

Seven years of war in Syria has left 'colossal human tragedy' in its wake – UN refugee chief

After seven years of brutal conflict in Syria, there are no clear winners, “but the losers are plain to see,” the United Nations refugee agency chief said Friday, describing the “colossal human tragedy” that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives, driven 6.1 million people from their homes and forced 5.6 million others to seek safety in neighbouring countries.

“This [seven-year war](#) has left a colossal human tragedy in its wake. For the sake of the living, it is high [time to end this devastating conflict](#),” the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi underscored.

The conflict – which broke in the wake of massive anti- and pro-Government street protests across the country in 2011 – reaches “a depressing anniversary” this month.

The High Commissioner painted a grim picture of the relentless suffering of Syrian civilians and denounced the ongoing brutality as a shameful failure of political will and a new low in Syria’s long-running conflict.

“There are no clear winners in this senseless pursuit of a military solution. But the losers are plain to see – they are the people of Syria,” he added.

With 69 per cent of civilians inside the country languishing in extreme poverty, conditions are worse than ever. Ninety per cent of families now spend more than half their annual income on food as prices are, on average, eight times higher than pre-crisis levels.

Moreover, some 5.6 million people lack security or basic rights and require humanitarian assistance.

While UNHCR and other humanitarian actors are making every effort to bring relief to hundreds of thousands of people in dire need inside Eastern Ghouta and other besieged parts of the country, access to these populations remains woefully inadequate.

On 5 March, a humanitarian convoy delivering aid to besieged Eastern Ghouta was cut short amidst ongoing shelling and subsequent attempts have been thwarted.

“Humanitarian access to those in need must be guaranteed. People must be allowed to leave to seek refuge and civilians and civilian infrastructure including hospitals and schools must be protected at all costs,” Mr. Grandi

maintained.

Meanwhile, the hopes of millions of Syrian refugees living in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq who dream of returning home when conditions are safe are being dashed.

“With fighting in parts of Syria as fierce as at any point during the conflict, refugees are understandably still too frightened to return,” Mr. Grandi continued, noting that UNHCR is preparing to assist in returns for when the security situation improves.

As conditions for millions of Syrians in exile grow more desperate, the vast majority live below the poverty line and more than three-quarters sheltering in Jordan and Lebanon are unable to meet their basic food, shelter, health or education needs.

Although host countries lay on second shifts to accommodate the refugees, 43 per cent of 1.7 million school-aged Syrian are out of school.

“While the focus is on the devastation inside Syria, we should not forget the impact on the host communities in the neighbouring countries and the effect that so many years of exile has had on refugees,” Mr. Grandi reminded.

Turning to an upcoming international conference in Brussels on supporting the future of Syria and the region, he asserted that it must result in a boost of financial and development assistance.

“As long as there is no political solution to the conflict, the international community must step up its investment in the host countries,” the High Commissioner concluded.