

Mass evacuations from Syria's war-ravaged cities 'desperate measures in desperate times,' says senior UN adviser

In Syria, the mass evacuation of civilians is threatening to leave aid workers "overrun" and "acutely underfunded," as details emerge of the unparalleled destruction in urban areas like the former ISIL-held city of Raqqa, UN senior adviser Jan Egeland said on Wednesday.

"This is the very [wrong time to turn our back on civilians](#)," he told journalists in Geneva, highlighting that aid projects in Syria are now less than eight per cent funded.

Mr. Egeland, who had earlier attended a scheduled meeting of the UN-supported humanitarian task force on Syria, said that more than half a million men, women and children had been displaced in the last three months in and around Idlib, from Eastern Ghouta, and from the district of Afrin in northern Aleppo.

He described mass evacuations of civilians as "desperate measures in desperate times" adding that they had played their part in ending battles in urban areas in Syria.

But they have also contributed to a desperate humanitarian situation.

In Idlib Province alone, some 1.5 million people were now displaced in various locations, making it "the biggest refugee camp on earth in many ways," said Mr. Egeland, who is the Senior Advisor to UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura.

Mr. Egeland also provided details about the destruction of Raqqa city, once the stronghold of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) extremists, saying that it was even worse than in Aleppo and Homs, two other once-vibrant Syrian cities that have seen massive destruction over the course of the seven-year conflict.

On the final push for Eastern Ghouta, just outside the Syrian capital, Mr. Egeland said that there had been "no recent reports of fighting and air raids" and "hopefully the battle is over now in the heavily populated areas."

Until recently more than 400,000 people had been besieged for years in parts of Eastern Ghouta.

The area has been subject to a Government-backed offensive launched in mid-February and now only 130,000 people still live there, Mr. Egeland said.

Of that number, around 80,000 have gone to shelters in Government-held areas of Rural Damascus and one-third have left voluntarily – an important indicator of freedom of movement, the humanitarian official added.

Referring to “ongoing negotiations” between the Syrian government and armed groups over the evacuation of those left in opposition-held locations of Eastern Ghouta, Mr Egeland said he hoped that people would be allowed to stay if they wished.

He also called for an amnesty “for those who put away arms”.

In Raqqa city in northern Syria, Mr. Egeland said that 100,000 people had returned there to live, and the same number were outside the city hoping to return home.

What awaits them is almost total devastation, he added, citing a new report compiled by 25 UN experts used to working in conflict situations but who were nonetheless shocked by the destruction they encountered.

Homes were “still full of bombs” and children were “still being maimed and killed,” according to Mr. Egeland, who also highlighted that there is only one hospital in Raqqa and almost no public services.