

Millions at risk if Syria's war moves to last redoubt of Idlib, warns senior aid official

Aid access to embattled Syrians may soon improve following recent military gains by the Government, but the war "cannot be allowed to go to Idlib", the head of the UN's Humanitarian Task Force said on Thursday.

Speaking in Geneva, [Jan Egeland](#) confirmed that fighting in the south-west had largely ended and that Syria's last remaining sieges – in the Shia towns of Foah and Kefraya – have also been lifted.

The potentially positive development means that there should be "no need to negotiate" with the Government of Syria for aid convoy access, the UN Special Adviser said.

Progress should also be quicker because the lorries will no longer have to cross active front lines, he explained.

"Hopefully, we are seeing the beginning of the end to the big war," he said, adding that "there are signs" the UN and humanitarian partners would finally get access to civilians that they have been trying to reach "for a very long time, and that some of the cruel practices of the war are coming to an end".

However, the "tremendous worry" is that the conflict will move to Idlib province and other non-government-controlled areas in Syria's north-west, Egeland cautioned.

"This area is screaming for diplomatic solutions," he said. "It is yearning for the best diplomats, the best military negotiators to sit down between each other and come to agreements, knowing that there wouldn't be another Idlib to be evacuated to."

Idlib and other areas, including Afrin and Azaz, are home to some 4 million people, including 3 million women and children, according to Egeland, who is also Special Adviser to the UN Special Envoy for Syria.

Around 1.4 million of that number have fled from previous conflict hotspots including Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta and the south-west governorates of Dera'a, Sweida and Quneitra.

This area is screaming for diplomatic solutions – UN Special Adviser Jan Egeland

"A small minority" of those in Idlib "would be seen as terrorists", Egeland added, but this was "no excuse for sending the war" to women and children.

Insisting that “this is no tsunami” but rather a “man-made crisis from A to Z”, Egeland appealed to the international community to support the “humanitarian lifeline” which helps some 2 million people every month.

“That lifeline has to be expanded because there will be new people in need,” he said. “There is some fighting happening continuously and finally there has to be protection of civilians, including hospitals and others.”

In a bid to prevent further bloodshed after more than seven years of conflict that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and forced millions to flee, Egeland said that he hoped that countries with influence on the belligerents will be encouraged to reach a political settlement that would spare Idlib.

He singled out the Russian Federation, Turkey and Iran as having “big influence” in Idlib, as well as Western countries and those Gulf countries who also wield influence with armed opposition groups.

“We will push [them] ...to say: learn from Eastern Ghouta, learn from Aleppo, learn from Ar-Raqqa,” Egeland said. “There must be talks, there must be agreements, this war must end not in a bloodbath, but by agreements.”