

## UN aid workers urge safe passage for civilians fleeing northern Iraq ahead of battle

22 August 2017 – Warning of harassment, revenge attacks and abuse of civilians displaced from the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar, United Nations refugee and migration agencies today called for people trying to flee the city ahead of military operations to have safe passage.

“We fear that Iraqi civilians are likely to be held as human shields again and that attempts to flee could result in executions/shootings,” Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told journalists in Geneva about the ongoing operations to retake the city.

He also noted reports of people being denied access to safety and stopped along the way.

“We call on all parties to the conflict to allow civilians to leave the conflict area and to access to safety,” Mr. Mahecic said.

Thousands of civilians are believed to be in Tal Afar, which has been without aid since the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh) terrorist group took control of the surrounding communities in 2014.

Since April this year, more than 30,000 people fled Tal Afar district, many living in camps sheltering other displaced families mainly from Mosul, some 65 kilometres south-west.

Conditions in the district are believed to be “very difficult,” Mr. Mahecic said, noting a lack of food, water and electricity.

“People are said to have been surviving on unclean water and bread for the past three to four months,” he told journalists.

Those who fled have often had to walk in temperatures up to 50 degrees Celsius for up to 20 hours at a time, amid shooting, and often leaving behind children, elderly and disabled who are too vulnerable for the trip.

“Many talk of seeing dead bodies along the way, and there are reports that some were killed by extremist groups. Others appear to have died due to dehydration or illnesses,” said Mr. Mahecic.

In the past four days, some 1,500 people arrived at nearby emergency sites [managed](#) by the UN International Migration Agency (IOM)

In conjunction with partners, IOM and UNHCR have been treating arrivals with food and water, transporting them to hospitals, if needed, and helping them settle in camps.

IOM is preparing additional aid for hundreds more arrivals expected in the coming days.