

Worst 'humanitarian tragedy' of the century looms in Idlib, UN aid agencies warn

A full-scale military offensive on Syria's Idlib risks creating the worst humanitarian tragedy of the 21st century, UN aid agencies have said, amid concerns that a severe funding shortfall threatens the "most vulnerable" victims of the conflict.

"We as humanitarian advocates must raise our voice," said Jens Laerke from the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#). "We are saying that this has the potential to be the worst crisis – humanitarian crisis – in the 21st century, because that is frankly what it looks like, if it goes ahead with a full-scale military operation."

Since 4 September, an uptick in violence has killed scores of civilians and displaced more than 30,000 people, Mr Laerke said.

Reading a statement from [Panos Moumtzis](#), Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, the OCHA spokesperson noted that aerial and ground-based bombardment had struck northern rural Hama governorate and southern rural Idlib, and had been accompanied by an increase in retaliatory rocket and mortar attacks.

The resulting impact on civilians has been "dramatic", Mr. Laerke said, his concerns echoing those of UN Emergency Relief Coordinator [Mark Lowcock](#), who a day earlier had issued a warning about a military escalation in Idlib, after a recent meeting with Syria government officials in the country's capital.

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Panos Moumtzis, OCHA, Syria

"As the Emergency Relief Coordinator mentioned, he was recently in Damascus", noted Mr. Laerke, adding that the Syrian Government had indicated it would pursue a military solution "which is very, very scary from a humanitarian perspective."

"They have this capacity to kill and destroy," Mr Laerke said. "We have seen it in use before, and we strongly advise that it does not happen in this enclosed area, where the population has, I think, almost doubled by the influx of evacuees and IDPs from other parts of the country."

In the space of less than a week, four hospitals have been hit in southern Idlib and neighbouring Hama governorate.

This is contrary to international humanitarian law, the OCHA spokesperson

said, adding that one of the hospitals was also in a protected “deconfliction zone”, whose coordinates had been given to the warring parties to spare it from attack.

“Our fear as humanitarians is that the worst may be ahead of us,” the statement from Panos Moutzis read. “The safety and protection of some 2.9 million civilians residing in Idlib and surrounding areas is at risk.”

As UN agencies and their partners prepare to help those fleeing a full-scale military attack, UN Refugee Agency, [UNHCR](#), warned that \$270 million is urgently needed to help Syria’s most vulnerable people inside and outside the war-torn country.

Of more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, 2.6 million are children.

UNHCR’s total funding needs for the Syria crisis amount to nearly \$2 billion. So far, only 31 per cent of this has been provided.