



Worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria

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The plight of civilians in Syria may be about to get a lot worse, as drought ravages the region, ISIS takes over much of the River Euphrates and government services threaten to collapse.



Photo: AFP/BBC

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1 Introduction

After more than three years of fighting, combatants on both sides are increasingly resorting to tactics which harm civilians. There are increasing reports of the Syrian government using barrel bombs – often oil drums packed with huge amounts of explosives – dropped on urban areas, causing enormous damage and civilian casualties. Meanwhile, rebel groups use car bombs and place bombs in tunnels under buildings.

But it is possible that much more widespread suffering is on the way as food, water, sanitation and health systems approach comprehensive collapse. This may displace far more people than has been the case so far. While it is already hard to imagine how countries such as Lebanon are coping with refugee populations that already probably amount to more than a quarter of their normal population, it looks as if they will have to manage far more within the next few months.

2 Water

Both sides in the conflict have been accused of using water as a weapon in the conflict. The government has often been accused of cutting off water while laying siege to such towns as Homs. Rebel groups, probably to a lesser extent,¹ have also used water supplies to try to weaken the government's grip on towns.

In May, after reports that rebel groups had cut the water supply to part of Aleppo, the United Nations warned that such tactics are a 'clear breach' of international law:

The Secretary-General notes that preventing people's access to safe water is a denial of a fundamental human right. Deliberate targeting of civilians and depriving them of essential supplies is a clear breach of international humanitarian and human rights law.²

The progressive destruction of sewage treatment facilities is a particular concern. Conflict damage, added to the decreasing capacity of normal government services and the absence

¹ Amnesty International, *Updated briefing on sieges across Syria*, 12 June 2014

² 'Syria: Ban warns against targeting civilians after armed groups cut water supplies in Aleppo', UN press release,

of skilled personnel mean that treatment facilities are being rapidly degraded and water supplies are becoming contaminated. This means that waterborne diseases are on the increase, threatening Syria and neighbouring countries with epidemics, as the World Health Organisation has warned:

All the risk factors that enhance the transmission of communicable diseases in emergencies are present in the current crisis in Syria and its neighbouring countries. We are anticipating a number of public health risks from water-borne diseases, specifically hepatitis, typhoid, cholera and dysentery. Given the scale of population movement both inside Syria and across borders, together with deteriorating environmental health conditions, outbreaks are inevitable.³

Rainfall over the last few months has been about 50% of the usual in some areas. The conquest by the extremist group ISIS of much of the River Euphrates and low rainfall for several years threaten to take the disaster to a whole new level.

The Euphrates is the source of some 65% of Syria's water supplies. Lake Assad on the Euphrates above al-Raqqah has fallen by 6 metres from its level when ISIS took over the al-Raqqah dam in January. The dam at al-Tabqah supplies 19% of Syrian electricity needs. If the water in it falls another metre, the system will fail and four million people in Aleppo will be deprived of water as well as 1,300 km² of agricultural land losing its irrigation.⁴

3 Food

Both Syria and Iraq are threatened by sharply increased food shortages. The drought, combined with damage to and neglect of water systems, has resulted in severe reductions in wheat and barley production. Syria's strategic reserve of wheat has now been used up and the harvest is likely to be about one fifth of its normal level this year.⁵ Food prices climbed by 108% in the year to November 2013.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation has launched an appeal for \$43 million to help Syrians continue producing food.⁶ The World Food Programme too has drawn attention to the \$40 million per week that it needs to keep up the work that it is doing to feed the most needy in Syria.⁷ The WFP has also pointed out that the destruction of irrigation infrastructure will take years to reverse, meaning that even if the conflict were to end now, food production would still decline, and take years to recover.⁸

4 Health services

The Syrian health service has been devastated by the conflict. The degradation of health services is having catastrophic effects on the health of Syrians. Vaccination programmes have been affected and this has led to an outbreak of polio, which could spread to neighbouring countries with refugees.⁹ Iraq has conducted a relatively effective immunisation

³ ['WHO warns of increased risk of disease epidemics in Syria and in neighbouring countries as summer approaches'](#), Reliefweb press release, 4 June 2014

⁴ Nour Shamout, ['Syria Faces an Imminent Food and Water Crisis'](#), Chatham House, 24 June 2014

⁵ ['Syria: Poor crop prospects reflect the impact of continued conflict and drought conditions'](#), Food and Agriculture Organisation press release, 15 May 2014

⁶ ['Syria: Poor crop prospects reflect the impact of continued conflict and drought conditions'](#), Food and Agriculture Organisation press release, 15 May 2014

⁷ ['Syria: Looming Drought Threatens To Worsen Food Crisis'](#), WFP press release, 14 April 2014

⁸ World Food Programme, [Special Focus Syria](#), March 2014

⁹ ['Polio outbreak in the Middle East – update'](#), World Health Organisation news release, 21 March 2014

campaign but that country is increasingly at risk as conflict spreads. Samples have also detected the polio virus in Israel and the Occupied Territories, Egypt and Lebanon.

Other transmissible diseases such as cutaneous leishmaniasis, a disease that causes ulcers, scarring and disability is on the rise. It is particularly susceptible to being spread by movements of people and animals.

In a report in March 2014, the charity Save the Children reported that 60% of Syrian hospitals were damaged or destroyed, nearly half of the country's doctors had fled the country, 93% of Syrian ambulances had been damaged, stolen or destroyed and more people were probably dying from preventable diseases through lack of medication or medical attention than from violence.¹⁰ Save the Children estimated that 80,000 children are likely to be affected by the most aggressive form of polio, unknowingly spreading the disease. The report drew attention to some of the most distressing results of the crisis in health services:

- Children having limbs amputated because clinics don't have necessary equipment for appropriate treatment
- Newborn babies dying in their incubators during power cuts
- Patients being knocked out with metal bars owing to a lack of anaesthesia
- Patients undergoing potentially deadly person-to-person blood transfusions.¹¹

5 Refugees

Refugees continue to flood out of Syria. 10.8 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance: 6.5 million of those are internally displaced and 2.9 million have fled to neighbouring countries.

The UK has opted to dedicate most resources to helping refugees in the region, but a programme to transport a limited number of refugees to the UK was initiated in January 2014. Several thousand Syrians who had managed to make their own way to the UK have been granted political asylum.¹²

6 Humanitarian access

International agencies gaining access to people in need continues to be a big problem. Valerie Amos, Emergency Relief Coordinator for the United Nations, reported in June that, of the 240,000 people living in siege conditions in Syria, only 2,467 had been reached by food assistance. Amos said that deliberately obstructing humanitarian access and depriving civilians of essential services is unlawful in international law.¹³

In spite of a unanimous United Nations Security Council resolution passed in February demanding that all parties, and particularly the Syrian authorities should allow safe access to humanitarian agencies, access continues to be hindered. Lynn Featherstone, minister at the

¹⁰ ['Millions of Children's Lives at Risk in Collapse of Syrian Health System'](#), Save the Children press release, 9 March 2014

¹¹ ['Millions of Children's Lives at Risk in Collapse of Syrian Health System'](#), Save the Children press release, 9 March 2014

¹² See the Library Standard Note *In Brief: Syrian refugees and the UK*, June 2014

¹³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Statement to the Security Council on Syria](#), 26 June 2014

Department for International Development, said that the UK government intends to take further steps to see that the resolution is respected:

We need to maintain pressure on the regime and its allies. We need to maintain our dialogue with neighbouring countries, regional partners and the opposition. As the resolution makes clear, we fully intend to take further steps if the demands it sets out are ignored; I accept that they are being ignored. We will return to the UN Security Council to consider further measures. It is vital to the credibility of the Security Council that it acts when its will is so clearly undermined.¹⁴

7 UK response

The UK government has committed £600 million to help Syrian civilians, of which £249 million has been allocated to partners within Syria and 292 million has been earmarked for Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt to help with looking after refugees there. The allocations of £59 million are being finalised.¹⁵

¹⁴ [HC Deb 29 April 2014, c244WH](#)

¹⁵ Department for International Development, [Syria: UK aid response](#), 24 June 2014