

Syria displacement crisis worsens as protracted humanitarian emergency looms International Rescue Committee

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IRC report calls aid levels for Syria crisis insufficient and spotlights forsaken urban refugees and ongoing sexual violence as issues that need urgent attention

Nearly two years into Syria's civil war, the region faces a staggering humanitarian disaster, requiring the international community to urgently scale up planning and funding for what is certain to be a long-term regional crisis, says the International Rescue Committee's Commission on Syrian Refugees.(...) The report also details horrific levels of sexual violence, describing "rape as a significant and disturbing feature of the Syrian civil war." In the course of three IRC assessments in Lebanon and Jordan, Syrians identified rape as a primary reason their families fled the country. "Many women and girls relayed accounts of being attacked in public or in their homes, primarily by armed men. These rapes, sometimes by multiple perpetrators, often occur in front of family members," the report states. The IRC was also told of attacks in which women and girls were kidnapped, raped, tortured and killed.

Because of the stigma and social norms around the "dishonor" that rape brings to women and girls and their families, Syrian survivors rarely report rape. Many interviewed by the IRC also said survivors fear retribution by their assailants, being killed by "shamed" family members, or in the case of girls, being married off at an early age "to safeguard their honor." For survivors who manage to flee, there is a shortage of medical and counseling services to help them recover in the communities where they have settled and even there, challenges continue. Many women and girls face unsafe conditions in refugee camps as well as elevated levels of domestic violence.(...)

The vast majority of Syrians who have fled (100 percent in Lebanon and about 80 percent in Jordan, 50 percent in Iraq and 30 percent in Turkey) are now "urban refugees". "Even though 70 percent of Syria's refugees live outside of camps in urban and rural areas, there is a dearth of funding for programs to assist them," says George Rupp, the IRC's president, who led the commission visit to the region in November. "As a result, Syrian refugees not living in camps are grossly underserved and growing increasingly destitute and desperate."(...)

Syrian children and youth have been gravely impacted by the violence and upheaval of their families. Nearly every child will speak about witnessing family members attacked or killed and many children have been caught in the crossfire or targeted with violence. Many Syrian children have already missed up to two years of their education because of the unrest. And schooling for thousands of refugee children remains interrupted because classes in host communities are full and unable to absorb more refugee students. For those fortunate enough to attend school, most teachers are ill-equipped to assist such traumatized children and specialized services are

largely unavailable.

A Protracted Humanitarian Emergency

The IRC report asserts that the Syria crisis will be a protracted humanitarian emergency: “An end to the civil war will not necessarily end sectarian violence; indeed the violence could well increase. Recovery, reconciliation and political transition will be fraught with challenges and could take years. Every country in the region is unsettled by the prospect of hostilities spilling over their borders. They fear continuing refugee influxes could create internal instability or exacerbate simmering or historical tensions. Even if the conflict comes to a swift end, Syria will emerge in ruins—its social and civic fabric in shreds, its economic foundation and infrastructure devastated and its population scattered throughout the region—potentially unable for months if not years to return to shattered communities.”(...)

The IRC’s Commission on Syrian refugees makes the following recommendations:

Increase humanitarian aid

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Donor governments must urgently meet the UN funding appeal for \$1.5 billion to aid uprooted Syrians and significantly ramp up bilateral assistance to countries absorbing refugees to help offset the strain on their infrastructure and mitigate growing tension.

Maintain open borders: Host countries must keep their borders open to endangered Syrian civilians and continue offering them safe haven. “Buffer zones,” which have a poor record of effectiveness, are difficult to protect and create a false sense of security for civilians living in them, should be discouraged.

Expand international assistance inside Syria

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The international community must expand partnerships with Syrian organizations that provide lifesaving assistance throughout Syria. Channeling aid to such groups is essential now and must be maintained in a post-conflict phase. (...)

Prepare for a protracted humanitarian emergency: The international community must put financial diplomatic and logistical plans in place for a regional humanitarian crisis that could last years, given the scale of displacement and destruction and the risk of regional instability and increased sectarian violence. Preparations must be made for a mass exodus of refugees, should there be a sudden escalation of the crisis. UNHCR and donors should also discuss

resettlement options for extremely vulnerable refugees.

Scale up programs for “urban refugees”:

While camp-based Syrian refugees require improved and ongoing support, it is vital that international donors vastly increase resources for programs that aid refugees living outside camps and bolster the infrastructure of over-extended host communities. (...)

Address violence against Syrian women and girls: Funding must be increased for programs that prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, inside and outside of camps. This includes clinical care and emotional support for survivors, improving safety in camps, minimizing survival sex, forced marriage, and domestic violence and providing economic aid so that women do not revert to exploitative jobs.

Invest in children’s safety and healing:

Programs must focus on identifying and providing tailored support for harmed or at risk children, including psychosocial support, aid for separated children and prevention of abuse, child labor and recruitment into armed groups.(...)

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