

Syrian civil war creates worsening humanitarian crisis

Oliver Campbell
15 February 2013

Statistics released by the UN and various aid agencies have highlighted the devastating social impact of the two-year Syrian civil war, fuelled by the intervention of the US and its allies. An estimated four million people, or 20 percent of the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance, and more than two million people are internally displaced, amid fears that both numbers will rise sharply as the conflict continues.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) last week revealed that 5,000 Syrians were fleeing the country every day, the highest number since the war began. Almost 800,000 Syrians have now left the country, or registered as refugees.

UNHCR spokesman Adrian Edwards told the media: “This is a full-on crisis. There was a huge increase in January alone—we’re talking about a 25 percent increase in registered refugee numbers over a single month.” More than 260,000 Syrian refugees are living in Lebanon, over 242,000 in Jordan, around 177,000 in Turkey, and almost 85,000 in Iraq.

A Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) report on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, released last week, found that many did not have access to free health care and adequate shelter. In wintry conditions, more than half of those surveyed were housed in inadequate shelters such as unfinished buildings and old schools that “provided paltry protection against the elements.” Roughly a quarter had received no assistance.

The war, which has led to almost 70,000 deaths according to UN estimates, has devastated the medical system inside Syria. According to the World Health Organisation, 55 percent of Syria’s public hospitals have been damaged during the civil war, with over a third effectively closed. Two-thirds of ambulances have been damaged. Hospitals that remain open face chronic shortages of medical supplies.

In an interview last week, MSF co-ordinator in northern Syria, Katrin Kisswani, said: “The healthcare system in Syria has essentially collapsed. We had a cancer patient who was supposed to be receiving chemotherapy. He came to us in a terminal stage and all we could offer was pain relief ... Pregnant women basically have nowhere to go and are forced to give birth at home if they’re lucky enough to find a midwife or a traditional birth attendant.”

Last week, UNICEF warned that children were at heightened risk of water-borne diseases because of the damage done to water and sanitation systems in two years of war. Its survey of areas affected by conflict found that water supplies were one third of the pre-war figure—down from 75 litres a day to just 25 litres. Many people were forced to buy water, often of poor quality and at high prices, from mobile tankers. The lack of clean water has led to a surge of cases of Hepatitis A.

There have also been outbreaks of leishmaniasis, particularly around the major city of Aleppo. Leishmaniasis is a parasitic disease, borne by sand flies, that results in skin ulcers resembling leprosy. The World Health Organisation said the disease was caused by poor waste management and lack of hygiene.

The UN World Food Program announced on February 5 that it had increased its aid, and aimed to reach 2.5 million people a month inside Syria. The agency said its aid workers “take advantage of brief lulls in fighting to send food to trapped civilians. Some areas, however, like the old city in Homs and some parts of North Aleppo close to the Turkish border, remain unreachable due to heavy fighting and road insecurity.” It warned that children were increasingly at risk of potentially deadly malnutrition.

Two years of civil war have paralysed the country’s economic life. The country’s gross domestic product

has fallen by 20 to 30 percent since the conflict began. Unemployment stands at 37 percent, with fears that it will rise to 50 percent this year.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, Syria's wheat and barley output was below 2 million tonnes in 2012, half the level of previous years. Large areas of the country face bread shortages, leading to major queues outside bakeries.

The humanitarian crisis in Syria is an indictment of the United States, Britain and the other major powers that have deliberately stoked the sectarian civil war, and given support to a rag-tag opposition, dominated by reactionary Islamist tendencies, in a bid to oust the Assad regime and install a pliant puppet government. The US and its allies cynically exploit the social disaster they have helped create, in order to intensify the push to remove Assad.

The rising exodus of refugees from Syria coincides with an escalation of fighting. Fighting has been fiercest in Aleppo province, with opposition forces besieging a number of government military bases. Opposition groups claimed to have seized control of Syria's largest dam, located in Raqa province on Monday, a military air base in Al-Jarra in Aleppo province on Tuesday, and the bulk of base 80, another military base, also in Aleppo province, on Wednesday. Heavy fighting has also taken place at two military airports in Aleppo province. Clashes have been reported on the outskirts of Damascus.

The fighting has taken a heavy toll, with 145 people, including 66 civilians, reportedly killed across the country on Wednesday. In the city of Aleppo, Syria's most populous, and formerly the country's commercial hub, there have been reports of electricity outages, and a lack of water supplies most of this week.

Anti-government forces appear to be concentrating the bulk of their resources on seizing control of military infrastructure and bases, as opposed to the country's urban centres. There have also been a series of suicide bombings and terrorist attacks, likely carried out by Islamist militias such as Al Nusra. On February 6, 54 people were killed, including 11 women, by a bus bombing outside a defence factory in the village of al-Buraq, near the government-controlled city of Hama in central Syria. The dead were mostly civilians employed by the Syrian Ministry of Defence.

On the same day, two car bombs were detonated in

the government-controlled city of Palmyra, also in central Syria. One of the blasts killed 19 government security officers at the local branch of the country's military intelligence organisation, and injured a number of others. The other bomb, which also targeted a security office, injured 8 civilians. According to the government-controlled press, another car bombing in Arnous Square in central Damascus injured two people.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact