

March 30, 2020

Dr. Ahmed Al-Mandhari
WHO Regional Director
World Health Organization Regional Office
for the Eastern Mediterranean
P.O. Box 7608, Nasr City
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Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge
WHO Regional Director
WHO Regional Office for Europe
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Dear Dr. Al-Mandhari and Dr. Kluge:

We, the 39 undersigned directors of humanitarian organizations, write to you today to urge the World Health Organization Regional Offices to increase their support for Syrian humanitarian NGOs, the Early Warning Alert and Response Network (EWARN), and Syrian health workers in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the vulnerable northeast and northwest Syria.

After nearly nine years of conflict in Syria, 12 million people are in dire need of health assistance, including 2.8 million people in northwest Syria¹ and 1.8 million in northeast Syria². These civilians are some of the most vulnerable in all of Syria as reported by the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019³; most of the population are children under 5 years old, elderly above the age of 65, and people living with disabilities, who have been displaced multiple times in the past two years alone and are living in camps and overburdened areas. These numbers are staggering in comparison to any country in the world.

Furthermore, the healthcare system in Syria has been severely weakened to an unprecedented level driven by access constraints, insufficient human resources, and systematic attacks on healthcare that have rendered many health facilities unfunctional. For example, according to the 2019 fourth quarter report of Health Resources Availability Monitoring System, in northwest Syria alone there are only 1,937 hospital beds with a gap of 52% from the minimum number of beds that should be available for normal workload, let alone for response to a global pandemic. In another example of the hurdles that are affecting the health care system in Syria: in northeast Syria, and as per UNICEF Syria, access constraints have led to interruption of water provision in al-Hasakah city, Tal Tamer

¹ Health Cluster – Turkey Hub. Health Cluster Bulletin, January 2020. Retrieved March 22, 2020 from: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/turkey_health_cluster_bulletin_jan_2020_d.pdf

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2019 Mid-Year Periodic Monitoring Report (PMR) data. Retrieved March 22, 2020 from: https://hno-syria.org/data/downloads/pmr_data_2019.xlsx

³ Whole of Syria – Strategic Steering Group (SSG). Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 (Syrian Arab Republic). Retrieved March 22, 2020 from: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2019_syr_hno_full_1.pdf

and the al-Hol and Areesha camps, hindering the COVID-19 response plan for 460,000 people in those areas⁴.

The weakness of the healthcare system extends to government-controlled areas. We are gravely concerned about the transparency of the Government of Syria in sharing updates about the number of COVID-19 cases and response modalities, which could have horrific repercussions on the civilian population. We are especially disturbed by the incapability of the Government of Syria to do a rigorous pandemic response given our previous experience with the government's handling of the polio outbreak in 2013-2014 that was detected by the EWARN based in Gaziantep, Turkey, and later only contained by the coordinated effort of UNICEF, WHO, and Syrian NGOs⁵.

Today, we again worry about the health of the Syrian people as COVID-19 spreads geographically at full speed. The detection of only one case of COVID-19 in Syria until now is a clear indication of the weakness of the healthcare system and its lack of detection capacity, and/or the government's lack of transparency in refusing to report the actual number of cases which suggests much higher numbers according to several reports. The primary line of defense assisting vulnerable populations in Syria are the Syrian health workers that have been sacrificing day and night to ensure that proper health care is provided to Syrian civilians. These heroes comprise the backbone of the Syrian NGOs who partner with the WHO and other international organizations to implement surveillance activities and provide health services in one of the worst man-made disasters to date.

While we commend the strong partnership between the WHO and Syrian NGOs over the past nine years, and applaud the recent steps that have been taken in preparedness and response to the pandemic northwest and northeast Syria, we ask the WHO, as the leader of the COVID-19 response, to boost the support for EWARN and Syrian NGOs in terms of funding, technical support, purchase and distribution of COVID-19 detection kits, provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and ventilators for remaining hospitals, establishment of appropriate quarantine centers, and public messaging at this critical time.

Kind regards,

The Undersigned (*listed in alphabetical order*)

Abdulaziz Ramadan, CEO, DOZ International

Aref Razouk M.D., CEO, SHAFAK Organization

Baraa Alsmoudi, Executive Director, Ihsan Relief and Development

Bassam Alahmad, Executive Director, Syrians for Truth and Justice – STJ

Chamsy Sarkis, President, ASML/Syria

⁴ UNICEF Syria. Statement from Fran Equiza, UNICEF Representative in Syria. Retrieved March 23, 2020 from: <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/interruption-key-water-station-northeast-syria-puts-460000-people-risk-coronavirus>

⁵ Annie Sparrow. Syria's Polio Epidemic: The Suppressed Truth, The New York Review of Books, February 20, 2014. Retrieved March 23, 2020 from: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/02/20/syrias-polio-epidemic-suppressed-truth/>

Fadi Al-Dairi, Regional Director, Hand in Hand for Aid and Development

Farhad Ahma, Executive Director, PÊL- Civil Waves

Feras Fares, Regional Programs Director, SEMA

Ghassan Hitto, CEO, Syrian Forum

Ghiath Alddin Zeen, CEO, Ghiras Al Nahda

Hamdi Qenawi, Country Director, Syria Relief

Hassan Abd Alrahman, Président de l'Association, Association ALWANE

Hisham Dirani, CEO, Binaa for Development

Iman Zaza, CEO, Rahma Worldwide

Jomana Qaddour, Co-Founder, Syria Relief and Development

Juma Al-Musa, Coordinator, Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA)

Kutaiba Sayed Issa, GM, Violet Organization

Maher AlAref, Senior Program Manager, Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM)

Mahmoud Shehadi, CEO, Orange Organization

Majed Youseef Dawi, CEO, Analysis and Strategic Study Organization (ASO)

Moawia Harsouni M.D., The Chairman Director, AlAmeen for Humanitarian Support

Mohamed Walid Tamer M.D., President, North Free Doctors' Syndicate

Mohamed Zahid Almasri M.D., Director of International Coordination, Physicians across continents PAC

Mohamed Yaser Tabbara Esq., Chairman, American Relief Coalition for Syria

Mohammed Al Ahmad, Livelihoods Officer, Hevy for relief and development

Mohannad Othman, Executive Director, Al Sham Humanitarian Foundation

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Mufaddal Hamadeh, M.D., President, Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)
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Rahaf Salama, Board Member, Orschina e.V.

Riyad Al Najem, CEO, Hurras Network

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Yaser Alshhada, CEO, SKT Organization

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Zaid AlKintar, General Secretary, CODSSY