

High-Level Segment on Solidarity and Burden-Sharing with Countries Hosting Syrian Refugees

**Opening remarks by António Guterres,
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

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Madam Chairperson,
Honorable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Syria has been burning for far too long. Its people scattered in fear across the region, its cities in rubble, its schools and hospitals destroyed, its industry looted, its food stocks depleted. An unbearable present and a broken future.

Syrians have been leaving their country by the thousands every single day. Many of them flee with nothing at all. They only carry their scars and the torturous memories of everything and everyone they lost.

It is a miracle that refugees have been spared a second humanitarian catastrophe after escaping the one inside Syria. There is only one reason for this – the generosity of the neighbouring countries. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq have been sheltering an unrelenting flood of Syrian refugees, saving lives and providing protection. They have been generous hosts to their neighbours, but all of them are stretched to their limits.

These four countries, together with Egypt, today host more than 2.1 million registered Syrian refugees. This does not include the hundreds of thousands who did not come forward for registration, or Syrians living in these countries as economic migrants.

In the exercise of my mandate as UN High Commissioner for Refugees, it is my duty to ask the governments of these states, like all others, to open their borders and continue to provide protection to all Syrians in need. But it is also my duty to ask the international community to realize that this burden is far too heavy to be borne by only the neighbouring countries, and to put in place more – and more robust – measures of sharing this burden.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For a tiny country like Lebanon, the presence of 760,000 refugees is equivalent to over 11 million in the United Kingdom, 15 million in Germany, or 58 million in the United States. I visited a village where 3,000 Lebanese were sheltering 5,000 Syrian refugees. Between 20 and 25 per cent of people living in Lebanon today are in fact Syrians.

The impact of the refugee influx on the societies, economies and communities of the host countries is immense. It further compounds the already dire economic consequences created by the conflict, through the loss of foreign investment, trade and tourism revenues – not to mention the security risk of a war across the border.

The pressure is felt heavily in all areas of everyday life. Across the region, budget deficits are increasing, growth suffers, and jobs, salaries and price levels are being affected, leaving many local families and refugees struggling to make ends meet.

In Lebanon, the recent Economic and Social Impact Assessment led by the World Bank, with the UN system, has shown the devastating consequences of the crisis for the country's economy, with a yearly loss of 2.9% in GDP growth. By the end of 2014, unemployment may double and 170,000 additional Lebanese could be pushed into poverty. Already today, local centres catering to the poor struggle with an increase of 40 per cent in demand for health and social services because of the Syrian refugees.

Jordan faces a parallel situation. The government estimates that by the end of 2013, the cost of hosting Syrian refugees will reach US\$1.7 billion. Hundreds of millions of dollars have already been paid in additional subsidies on water, bread, gas and electricity. The surge in demand for health care has led to a shortage of medicines, and especially in the northern governorates there is less drinking water available for Jordanians and refugees.

Turkey has spent US\$2 billion on assisting the refugees, mostly from its own budget. In Kilis, near the Syrian border, hospitals designed for a population of 89,000 now serve nearly double that number with the arrival of 75,000 Syrian refugees.

Kurdistan is also feeling the pressure. Authorities estimate that the population of Dohuk Governorate has increased by 10 per cent since the beginning of the refugee influx.

Excellencies,

This conflict has to stop. As a citizen of the world, I have been enormously frustrated to see all appeals for a political solution seemingly fall on deaf ears, and the various parties unable to come together and put an end to the suffering of Syrians and the gradual destabilization of neighbouring countries. But I want to interpret last week's agreement as a glimmer of hope to pave the way for something broader.

There are other fora to discuss the political and security dimensions of the conflict. But as the fighting still drags on, today's meeting on solidarity and burden-sharing with host countries becomes even more important. To make it successful, we must focus on the humanitarian, strictly non-political dimension. My appeal to all delegations is therefore this: Let us not deviate. Let us not jeopardize the objective of this meeting. Our efforts must centre on mobilizing solidarity with Syria's neighbours.

This crisis has gone far beyond requiring only humanitarian assistance to displaced people. The Syria conflict is not just a threat to global peace and security, but it results in fundamental, structural problems for the countries of the region. They are going through huge demographic changes following the refugee influx, unsettling their social and economic fabric.

Many donors have provided strong support to humanitarian programmes, but the needs surpass available resources. More international solidarity with host countries and communities is now a must. This does not only mean assistance through humanitarian organizations. It must also mean emergency development support – structural assistance – to neighboring states, most importantly in health, education, housing, water and energy supply.

Some of the countries affected may require direct budget support. Many hosting communities need massive longer-term development investment, as the challenges they are now facing are only likely to grow. Bilateral development programmes and international financial institutions should consider making these countries priority partners at the present moment.

International solidarity must also include burden-sharing in receiving refugees. Syrians struggle to find protection in many locations further afield. But there are positive examples, like Sweden, where Syrian refugees were recently granted permanent residence.

I call on all countries, particularly in Europe and the extended Middle East, to allow Syrians to access asylum and enjoy quality protection.

Burden-sharing also includes resettlement and other ways of protecting Syrians in third countries. Germany has set an important example with humanitarian admission for 5,000 refugees. I hope other countries will come forward with similar offers, and especially include the possibility of family reunification.

Should the situation in Syria deteriorate drastically, the international community may also have to consider the humanitarian emergency evacuation of Syrian refugees to locations outside the region to help ease the pressure on neighbouring countries.

Excellencies,

Let me conclude my remarks with a broader reflection. Today's international refugee protection scheme is marked by a growing imbalance between rich and poor states when it comes to carrying the burden of refugee movements. Developing countries provide the protection space for four out of five refugees worldwide.

Syria is a case in point for this imbalance. It is also a test for the broader international system. Can we mobilize massive international support to those who are taking in millions of refugees at great domestic suffering? Is the world able – and willing – to do what is necessary to uphold international refugee protection and regional stability? Are the mechanisms we have for international burden-sharing up to the task?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for joining this important gathering. We have a lot of work ahead of us.