

18 August, 2014, Erbil - Humanitarian health services in Iraq have received a much-needed boost through a \$US 50 million grant provided by Saudi Arabia to WHO for its response to the health crisis facing millions of people affected by the ongoing conflict in Iraq.

The recent upsurge in violence, massive population movement, and presence of over 250 000 Syrian refugees in northern Iraq is straining an already beleaguered health system. The donation from Saudi Arabia, the largest ever humanitarian contribution to WHO for a specific crisis, enables the Organization to scale up its response to disease outbreaks, malnutrition, medicine shortages and overburdened hospitals and clinics.

Humanitarian health care providers will tackle medical complications resulting from malnutrition by providing targeted support to 350 000 people, including children under the age of five, pregnant and lactating women and patients suffering from severe malnutrition," says Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain, WHO's Representative to Iraq.

The health projects will be implemented in all areas hosting displaced people, plus conflict-affected governorates (Anbar, Ninewah, Salah El-Din, Diyala, Kirkuk and the Kurdistan Region). Low immunization coverage, and compromised access to quality health care are among the main health concerns. Ongoing insecurity compounds the crisis.

The threat of infectious disease outbreaks, like cholera, diarrhoeal diseases, measles and hepatitis E, has increased due to population displacement and the strain on the health system. The disease control programme aims to halve the number of acute watery diarrhoea cases, and increase childhood immunization coverage, particularly in Anbar, where the polio vaccination coverage rate will rise from 48% to over 94%.

Access to health services in conflict-affected areas has been greatly compromised. Most hospitals and clinics can no longer cope with the influx of displaced people seeking health care. In Anbar, only 40 of the 153 public health centres are functional, with the main Fallujah and Ramadi hospitals operating at limited capacity. In Mosul, the number of functioning public health centres has been decreasing daily since early June 2014. The capacity of health facilities in Sinjar, Tel Afar, Tikrit and Hamdiniyah has been greatly affected, with Tel Afar hospital reportedly damaged by explosions, although still partly functional.

“Even before the current crisis, Iraq’s health system and the health of its people were facing major challenges,” says Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain. “This has only been exacerbated by the new waves of insecurity in many parts of the country.”

WHO support aims to expand access to health services, including emergency obstetric care for expectant mothers, noncommunicable disease care and psychosocial support, to a wider catchment area of people.

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