

1 November 2018 – Fifty-five year old Um Mohammad from Ar-Raqqa governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic was diagnosed with breast cancer 2 years ago. There are no public hospitals in the governorate that can provide the treatment she needs, so she has to travel every 2 weeks to a national hospital in the neighbouring governorate of Hama for chemotherapy. The journey takes 8 hours each way.

A tearful Um Mohammad said that the constant travel, on top of her illness, has left her exhausted. “I have been travelling to Hama for almost 2 years now; I am on the verge of physical and financial collapse.” Each trip costs Um Mohammad 20 000 Syrian pounds (the equivalent of US\$ 43); a small fortune considering that two thirds of the population is living on less than US\$2 a day. “I am trying to get by and borrowing money from friends and neighbours, but they are all suffering too and have no money to spare.”

Um Muhammad is one of hundreds of thousands of patients who have been badly affected by the conflict. “Syria’s disrupted health system has led to a public health catastrophe. Over half of the country’s hospitals are closed, and those that remain open are working under severe pressure,” said Ms Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria. “Syrians, especially those in rural and conflict-affected areas, are obliged to travel long distances to obtain health care. Many of them simply cannot afford to make the journey. In the absence of health care services, chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension – health conditions that would be treatable in normal times – have become deadly.”

Hama National Hospital is one of many hospitals supported by WHO through staff trainings and delivering medicines, supplies and equipment to maintain essential services. However, it is operating under severe and increasing pressure. It is the only public health care facility providing specialized health care in Hama governorate. Two other public hospitals in the governorate have been destroyed and forced to close, and the 5 other remaining hospitals provide only limited services. The destruction of health care facilities in neighbouring governorates has exacerbated the situation. The hospital regularly admits patients from Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh governorates. Its emergency department alone receives 800 patients each day.

Ms Hoff said that WHO would continue to support the hospital as much as possible. “The work it does is so important”, she said. “Rehabilitating the badly damaged National Hospitals in Ar-Raqqa will be costly and time-consuming. In the meantime, Hama National Hospital provides the only hope for so many people.”

Um Mohammad expressed her deep gratitude to the doctors and nurses at the hospital. “They have been amazing”, she said. “They’ve supported me and taken care of me. When I needed to talk, they listened. I will never forget what they have done for me.”

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