

31 January 2019, Damascus, Syria – The World Health Organization is extremely concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Al-Hol camp in Al-Hasakeh governorate, and calls on all parties to the conflict to provide unhindered humanitarian access to people in need of life-saving aid.

Over the last 2 months, approximately 23 000 people, mainly women and children fleeing hostilities in rural areas of neighbouring Deir-ez-Zor, have arrived in the camp. Many of them have walked or travelled in open trucks for several days and nights in the bitterly cold winter weather. Their journeys have been delayed en route by lengthy security screening procedures in an exposed field, and their ordeal has not ended on arrival to the camp. Thousands of new arrivals have been forced to spend several nights in the camp's open-air reception and screening areas, without tents, blankets or heating. At least 29 children and newborns are reported to have died over the past 8 weeks, mainly from hypothermia, while travelling to the camp or shortly after arrival.

The situation in the camp is now critical. Its population has tripled in size (from 10 000 to almost 33 000 people) in less than 2 months. The authorities are overwhelmed and struggling to cope with the sheer numbers of people. Many new arrivals are malnourished and exhausted following years of deprivation living under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The camp is unheated and there are shortages of health care services, tents, latrines and sanitation facilities. Humanitarian access to the camp and surrounding roads is hampered by bureaucratic obstacles and security constraints.

Since the beginning of January, WHO has delivered over 35 000 treatment courses to support the work of 2 mobile clinics donated by WHO, as well as 4 mobile health teams currently operating in the camp. WHO-supported teams are working round the clock to screen new arrivals and refer them to hospitals when required. Severely malnourished children are being referred to a WHO-supported hospital in Al-Hasakeh.

WHO is also supporting the deployment of additional vaccination teams, setting up disease surveillance, and training camp volunteers on psychological first aid and basic counselling. Follow-up care is being arranged for all infants and health care workers are being trained on neonatal resuscitation and newborn care at home. The health sector has urged that ambulances and medical staff be placed on standby along the route to the camp and that buses be deployed to transport families, especially those with very young children.

"The situation in Al-Hol camp is heartbreaking. Children are dying from hypothermia as their families flee to safety. We are scaling up our efforts in Al Hol, but we need faster approvals to allow us deliver supplies, and we need guaranteed access to both the camp and the roads leading to it. We call on all parties to give us unhindered access so that we can reach these people and give them the help they desperately need," said Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria.

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