16 MARCH 2024, CAIRO, EGYPT – Thirteen years of conflict have left 16.7 million people requiring humanitarian aid and 15 million people - 65% of the population – in need of health assistance in Syria. This is the largest number of people in need of humanitarian aid since the conflict began in 2011.

“There are currently more Syrians in need of aid than any other time since the war began,” said Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. “An entire generation has been born into war, knowing nothing but insecurity and deprivation, and facing shock after repeated shock. We need to exert all efforts to protect and strengthen Syria’s health system so that all people across the country have access to affordable and accessible health care services.”

The earthquake that affected Türkiye and Syria in February 2023 added another layer of suffering to people ravaged by years of war. Since the escalation of hostilities in the occupied Palestinian territory in October 2023, the security situation in Syria has become increasingly unstable, particularly in the northeast and northwest regions.

“I have been displaced four times,” said Muna Ahmad, originally from Hama in west-central

Syria. “I just want this war to end and go back home.”

Today, only 65% of hospitals and 62% of primary healthcare centres across Syria are fully operational. The toll on mental health is huge, with levels of depression and stress-related disorders increasing by an estimated 200% and 600% respectively. A worsening economic crisis, compounded by sanctions, have left nearly 90% of the population living in poverty with limited capacity to afford basic services, including health care services.

“I am 52 years old, but I look much older. I guess 13 years of suffering is reflected on my face,” said a nurse at a primary health care centre in northwest Syria, whose husband was killed in the conflict in 2012.

Throughout 2023, WHO delivered ambulances, hospital beds, medicines and medical equipment, such as ventilators and haemodialysis machines, across Syria. WHO also provided mental health support to almost 700 000 people and referred more than 3300 people to reproductive and child health services. WHO support last year also extended to the treatment of over 2000 complicated cases of severe acute malnutrition in 23 stabilization centres across the country.

But while WHO persists in its mission to reduce health inequities and build a healthier and more resilient Syria, funding cuts pose grave concerns for the provision of essential health services, including maternal and child health care, emergency care, control of infectious diseases, mental health services, and the management of non-communicable diseases, including cancer treatment.

Funding for humanitarian health activities declined by over 27% from 2022 to 2023 and are expected to further reduce by at least 30% in 2024. In northwest Syria alone, 15 hospitals suspended operations in 2023 due to funding shortages and more hospitals are at risk of closure. With the northwest entirely dependent on donor funding, an estimated two million people may lose access to lifesaving and emergency healthcare if funds do not become available.

“While there are many other crises across the globe that require the generosity and solidarity of the international community, we cannot forget the people of Syria,” stressed Dr Balkhy.

WHO is committed to playing its vital role and has consistently demonstrated good health outcomes when given the resources. In 2024, WHO needs nearly $80 million in funding for the country to support the continuity, quality and accessibility of health services and health infrastructure, and prevent a calamitous situation from worsening.

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