17 January 2019, Damascus, Syria – The World Health Organization expresses severe concern about the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Rukban settlement close to the border with Jordan, and calls for immediate access to the settlement to assess the health situation, provide essential medicines and medical supplies, and support the medical evacuation of critically ill patients.

Approximately 40 000 people, mostly women and children, remain stranded in the settlement and are unable to leave, and harsh winter conditions have reportedly led to several deaths. Health care facilities are barely functioning and have very few staff or medical supplies. There are no generators or fuel to provide even minimum warmth to alleviate the bitterly cold weather.

Winter diseases associated with overcrowding and indoor air pollution include acute respiratory infections, to which young children are particularly vulnerable. Other diseases include influenza, measles, tuberculosis and chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma. Limited water and sanitation facilities are likely to lead to increasing rates of skin diseases such as lice and scabies.

"The people trapped in Rukban are living in deplorable conditions, exposed to harsh winter weather that shows no sign of abating," said Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria. "It is imperative that we are able to reach them as soon as possible with heath assistance, so that no more lives are lost unnecessarily."

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