

Luxembourg Meeting - April 21, 2013 Meeting Note

On April 21, 2013, the International Peace Institute, together with the governments of Luxembourg and the United Arab Emirates, hosted a meeting at *Senningen*, Luxembourg, on the humanitarian crisis and mounting refugee problem emanating from the crisis in Syria, and the political implications for the region.

The meeting served as a follow-up to a retreat for neighboring countries and regional and international stakeholders, co-chaired by the governments of Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and IPI, sponsored by the government of Canada, with the support of Switzerland, and held at the Greentree Estate in New York on February 24-26, 2013.

Syria: Discussion of the evolving situation on the ground

The complexity and duration of the crisis is among the largest ever seen, and have surpassed all expert projections. Last December the international humanitarian community projected that by June 2013 the number of refugees would grow to 1.1 million and of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to 2 million. The projections proved too conservative, with over 1.3 million refugees and 4.5 million IDPs already in April, and an estimated 8,000 leaving the country daily.

The crisis in Syria has led to a public health disaster, with basic services (i.e. sanitation, water, vaccination, etc.) no longer being provided, and a deliberate targeting of medical facilities, supplies and staff. Current estimates suggest that over 80 percent of public hospitals in Syria have been damaged and 30 percent are no longer operating. Before the crisis began there were 5,000 doctors in Aleppo; today there are only 36 left.

Children are particularly affected, no longer being able to access schools and health facilities. A large number of children will also require psychological assistance to deal with the trauma of the ongoing crisis – which will affect them for years to come.

Humanitarian organizations highlighted the importance of having people working on the ground, but the risks associated with it as well, with about 30 humanitarian workers having lost their lives already. The Syrian government recently increased the number of humanitarian organizations allowed to work inside Syria, often together with the Syrian Red Crescent, but there are only two cross-border operations. International organizations highlighted the fact that the biggest humanitarian operation is done by the Syrian themselves, who host IDPs in their houses. It is also notable that before the crisis Syria was already hosting the third highest number of refugees in the world, behind Pakistan and Iran. Of the 500,000 Palestinians refugees in Syria, 10 percent already fled to Lebanon and another 40 percent are displaced within Syria. Palestinian refugee camps are now empty and only one third of UNRWA schools are still operating.

Access and mobility within Syria is increasingly challenging, and some areas have been inaccessible for the last 6-8 months. In the week immediately preceding the meeting in Luxembourg, the Syrian government had announced that every truck seeking to deliver aid or medicine in Syria would now need a permit signed by two ministers to pass government checkpoints, which effectively stopped operations. Travelling from Damascus to Aleppo requires passing through an estimated 50 roadblocks, which means that, practically speaking, many NGOs and UN agencies in Syria have now ceased all operations.

Neighboring countries are greatly affected – particularly Jordan and Lebanon, which face the pressure of the influx of refugees. In Jordan, the Zaatari refugee camp is already the fourth largest city in the country and has seen a surge in violence lately. In Lebanon, while the government has opted not to set up camps, Syrian refugees already represent about 10 percent of the overall population, causing tensions in the labor and commercial markets and negatively impacting services and security in the country, including of humanitarian workers (UN agencies may need to relocate their workers from Lebanon to neighboring countries due to security concerns). In addition, approximately 350,000 migrant workers are crossing the border from Syria to Lebanon. This year, unlike in the past, many are bringing their families with them, who are not classified as refugees. Closing borders with Syria would greatly aggravate the conditions of IDPs within Syria.

What needs to be done

Participants welcomed the informal meeting as an effort to bring together the humanitarian community and politics, and insisted on the importance of the international community being specific on the objectives and speaking with a strong unified voice. Humanitarian organizations noted that the Syrian government and opposition have behaved differently when international pressure was exerted on them in a unified manner. Suggestions were put forth to prepare a UN Security Council Resolution calling on all parties to respect humanitarian access and international humanitarian law (IHL). Such a resolution—which must be directed at all parties, not just the regime—would show a strengthened and united international community at a time when some actors still question whether humanitarian action is used as a cover for military operation. Any potential resolution or action taken would therefore need to ensure that this is not the perception.

Some participants suggested that – short of the above resolution – a follow on UN Security Council statement could be issued calling for the respect of IHL with a particular emphasis on allowing medical relief.

While neighboring countries - particularly Jordan and Lebanon - are going above and beyond their capacity to help, their social services are overwhelmed and they will necessarily require greater multilateral and bilateral support to be able to cope with the influx of refugees. Such support should include humanitarian relief but also assistance with security. This is all the more important as the

international community will support these countries in keeping their borders open, in order to prevent an even greater humanitarian catastrophe inside Syria.

An **expert-level working group meeting**, looking at how best to support neighboring countries and how to prevent spillover from Syria, should be convened.

Due to the scale of destruction, reconstruction in Syria will take many years (and refugees and IDPs will therefore not be able to return for some time). The international community should therefore start preparing for “day-after scenarios” and devise a strategic plan for the region, taking into consideration the magnitude of the post-war reconstruction. This must look beyond the destruction of local infrastructure to include the societal destruction – within families, communities and between religious groups etc. Proposals for post-war reconstruction could also include the possibility of establishing a UN peacekeeping force in the country, to help prevent risk of descent into civil war.

The UN agencies insisted on the importance for donors to follow-through on their pledges, particularly as needs exceed what had initially been forecasted. Member states should apply international and bilateral pressure on those nations who have not yet fulfilled their pledges of assistance, and encourage them to “give to the right people” operating on the ground. Current funding is only at about 40 percent of what is needed, and UN humanitarian organizations will come up with a new appeal next month based on revised 6-month projection, which could be in the order of 10 million refugees and IDPs combined.

Additional ideas

Concerns were raised over the radicalization of the conflict and participants welcomed suggestions on how the opposition coalition could be strengthened in non-military ways, and made more inclusive of women, minorities, and civil society.

Additionally, some participants regretted that arms were flowing into Syria with little-to-no oversight, which fuelled the conflict. These flows also contributed to radical jihadists playing a greater role in the opposition.

Several participants raised concerns about the number of foreign fighters present in Syria. Suggestions were put forward to establish a mechanism to track and discuss the issue beyond traditional bilateral ways. This should also include research on potential consequences in the home countries, once foreign fighters return – what they bring back when they return to their home countries (i.e. radical ideas).