

NGOs warn: Reduced humanitarian access impedes response to rising cases of COVID-19 and the harsh effects of winter in Northern Syria amid shortages of humanitarian aid. UN Security Council must assure continued cross-border access.

Sub-zero temperatures, floods and soaring food prices – combined with rising cases of COVID-19 and ongoing aid shortages – have rapidly increased the needs across northern Syria at a time when humanitarian access to the area has been severely constrained, NGOs warned today - six months after the UN Security Council voted to further limit access points for humanitarian aid to the country.

Women, men and children are suffering from lack of access to aid, including food, water and medical supplies including oxygen, and funding is falling short of meeting the basic needs of millions of Syrians across the country.

[With only 9 hospitals operationalized for COVID-19, 212 ICU beds and 162 ventilators in North West Syria](#) for a population of four million, the overwhelmed health sector is unable to cope with the rise in cases, leading families to desperate measures to survive.

Mahmoud, 48, a father of two, who went to the length of buying his own ventilator, died in Idlib this month in a hospital's corridor, waiting for oxygen. With an alarming [28 percent](#) of people testing positive for COVID-19 in North West Syria's internal displacement settlements as of December 2020, Mahmoud's fate could represent the devastating reality for thousands.

Joint-NGO Statement:

“Six months ago, just as the first case of COVID was confirmed in North West Syria and despite warnings of persistently high levels of need, the UN Security Council voted to close a critical crossing point for humanitarian aid between Turkey and Syria, jeopardizing access to life saving aid for hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

“The now-closed Bab al-Salam crossing had facilitated desperately needed humanitarian assistance including food, shelter and medical supplies such as vaccines and PPE for hundreds of thousands of displaced people in North West Syria, the majority of whom are women and children.

“COVID-19 cases in the North West Syria now stand at [20,717](#) after the number of cases reportedly quadrupled between November and December. In the North East COVID-19 cases have also reached [highs of 8,227 as of January 12th](#). These numbers are thought to be a vast underestimate due to extremely limited case detection and testing capacity across the country, particularly in the North East.

“With a healthcare infrastructure decimated by 10 years of conflict, the pandemic is threatening to turn an already dire humanitarian situation into a catastrophe, as families in Northern Syria face stark choices to survive. Many cannot afford to feed their families, let alone buy a mask to protect themselves and others. Lack of oxygen and insufficient access to adequate water and sanitation are just some of the desperate circumstances that health workers have had to contend with while trying to save the lives of people suffering from COVID-19 over recent months.

“Just one channel now remains through which the UN is able to deliver life-saving supplies including those needed to address the life-threatening effects of COVID-19 and winter to populations in the North West, at a time when more and more families are being forced to make unacceptable tradeoffs to survive.

“Aid going through this last remaining crossing, Bab al-Hawa, has never been more important but is under immense pressure. Violence and insecurity have previously forced the crossing to close, and ongoing conflict risks delaying the delivery of aid to vulnerable populations. There are fears adverse weather conditions or insecurity may at any time cut off the only remaining road to reach hundreds of thousands of displaced people previously supported through the now-closed Bab al-Salam crossing.

“Over the last week, sub-zero temperatures, heavy rain and wind has forced more than 20,000 displaced people to abandon their homes and shelters after heavy flooding and has led to the death of at least one child. For thousands of families, it will take a very long time to recover from this storm.

“In six months’ time, the UN Security Council will vote again to decide whether to allow UN-led assistance to continue to flow to millions of Syrians living in the North West of the country. Any move to further restrict access will have dire consequences for the millions whose lives depend on humanitarian aid.

“States must learn lessons from the Security Council’s decision 12 months ago to remove the only UN crossing to the North East, home to the densely populated Al Hol camp and hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians. This decision has contributed to gaps in provision of aid, funding and access to supplies to populations in the North

East, including basic medicines and COVID-19 testing kits. The situation is only set to worsen as latest projections show that between 40% and 50% of the population of North East Syria are likely to have been infected with COVID-19 by the end of May 2021.ⁱ

“UN cross-border humanitarian access to North West Syria must be assured now and in the future and the Security Council must urgently address ongoing access challenges across the country. It is critical for continuing to deliver the most basic forms of life-saving aid to those who need it most. The loss of access would contribute to a rapid increase in hunger, an out-of-control COVID-19 crisis, and unnecessary suffering and death. 10 years into this conflict, we cannot turn our backs on the Syrian people, and risk the lives of millions.”

Signed by,

Save the Children

International Rescue Committee

CARE

Norwegian Refugee Council

World Vision

Oxfam

Humanity & Inclusion

Islamic Relief USA

Mercy Corps

Christian Aid

Hand in Hand for Aid and Development (HIHFAD)

MedGlobal

Syrian American Medical Society

Syria Relief & Development (SRD)

Social Development International (SDI).

Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA)

GOAL USA Fund

Life for Relief and Development

Embrace Relief Foundation

Mercy-USA for Aid and Development

NuDay

Global Communities and PCI

¹ Data modelled by the [COVID-19 International Modelling Consortium](#) (CoMo Consortium) - 13th December 2020