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HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite the decrease in hostilities in northwest Syria due to the 6 March ceasefire, humanitarian needs for nearly 4 million people remain severe. Humanitarian assistance is at its highest levels since the establishment of the cross-border resolution.
- Millions of people are at high risk of COVID-19. A preparedness/response plan identifies a need of $30 million to address needs.
- Testing for COVID-19 in northwest Syria has begun, with no confirmed cases.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

After nine years of crisis, the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria remains dire, with nearly 1 million people displaced since 1 December 2019 due to the escalation of violence. The additional preparedness and response required for COVID-19 along with the existing needs of IDPs and the host community makes these times some of the most challenging since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. After the ceasefire between Turkey and Russia in relation to the Idlib area came into effect on 6 March, hostilities decreased significantly in the northwest, while needs on the ground have not. A total of 4 million people live across the region comprising the Idlib area and northern Aleppo governorate - approximately 940,000 people have been displaced since 1 December. Reportedly, tens of thousands of the civilians who were displaced since 1 December 2019 have returned to their places of origin, including to the towns and villages located north of the M4 border.
highway. Atareb, Ariha, Ehsem and Bennsh reportedly have the highest number of returnees, with smaller numbers returning to locations such as Mhambal and Maaret Tamsrin.

Humanitarian assistance continues to be needed at high levels, even though the ceasefire has reduced new displacement and the COVID-19 pandemic complicates the provision of aid. In March, a total of 1,486 trucks transported UN humanitarian assistance into northwest Syria via the Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salam border crossings, providing vital humanitarian assistance to some 4.4 million people – 559 more trucks than in February and the most in a month since the start of the cross-border operation in 2014. NGO assistance, which usually exceeds UN assistance, continued at high levels as well. Despite these efforts, the gap remains large. Priority needs still include protection, shelter, water, sanitation, food and nutrition, along with education. Securing land for people to shelter on remains a challenge. Significant funding has been received for pipelines of key supplies such as tents, NFIs, hygiene kits, and dignity kits, while gaps remain on the ground as programs continue to be implemented.

A revised COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (PRP) by the Health Cluster was released on 31 March, requiring an estimated USD $30 million, covering an initial response phase of 3 to 6 months. The document outlines a local plan of action for northwest Syria to rapidly scale up the prevention, early detection, and rapid response to COVID-19. A laboratory in Idlib started testing for COVID-19 on 24 March, with plans to potentially activate two more laboratories. WHO has already procured 5,000 swabs, 50 PCR kits and 50 extraction kits for testing a total of 5,000 COVID-19 samples. As of 2 April, there were no confirmed COVID-19 cases in northwest Syria, with the 23 samples from potential COVID-19 cases testing negative or pending results. Three hospitals with intensive care units in Idlib, Salqin and Daret Azza are being modified and re-established as COVID-19 isolation case management centres, with a total capacity of 210 beds. Two additional potential hospitals in Azaz and Jarablus districts have also been identified by Turkish and local authorities. Cobanbey Hospital located in Ar Rae has been identified as a reference hospital for COVID-19 cases, with five hospitals in northern Aleppo Governorate serving as first examination and diagnosis referral centres.

As a part of infection prevention and control (IPC) measures in health care settings, there are plans to increase the number of handwashing points as well as water trucking quantities from 25 liters to 30-35 liters per person per day to allow for extra handwashing. The SNFI cluster is planning to provide tents for 190 health facilities. As of 31 March, 29 health partners have been trained on IPC, including 519 health facility managers and senior health professionals. The supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and IPC material has been impacted due to market shortages and restrictions on exports. WHO has now purchased the supplies and they will be shipped to northwest Syria. The already prepositioned 1,300 PPE sets in hospitals and 800 PPE sets in warehouses in the northwest Syria will be distributed to health facilities.

Humanitarian partners in northwest Syria are also putting into place countermeasures against the virus in their normal work. These response measures are focused on prevention and preparedness, to ensure the continuation of existing plans and activities while scaling up actions to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19. Activities include increasing the supply of water and soap for all communities and the creation and distribution of information, education and communication (IEC) materials. An inter-cluster document is being compiled to identify non-health impacts, inter-cluster considerations and mitigation practices. While the situation is evolving, broad trends across sectors thus far include increasing shifts towards conducting activities via virtual modalities, favouring door-to-door distributions in place of group distributions, reducing frequency of activities, and incorporating increased hygiene and sanitisation practices. Further considerations that will be outlined in the document include mitigation measures for greater reliance on IT infrastructure and services, access of the affected population to devices and internet connections able to sustain bandwidth-intensive online activities, additional costs of individualised distribution, and the potential impact of further restrictions at the border crossings between Turkey and northwest Syria. The Bab Al Hawa and Bab Al Salam border crossings remain open for humanitarian and commercial shipments, albeit with occasional delays, but have been closed to individual movements other than emergency medical cases. The same regulations have been put in place at crossings between the Idlib area and northern Aleppo. Engagement with the relevant authorities continues to ensure humanitarian work can continue. Local authorities in northwest Syria have taken many preventive measures regarding COVID-19, such as prohibiting congregations of people, halting market activities, suspending schools, and so on. Across northwest Syria, more than 100 local measures have been announced.
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