



Global Protection Cluster  
Child Protection

# URGENT! Child Protection in Syria

## Current Situation and Priorities

The conflict in Syria has resulted in the deaths of up to 60,000 men, women and children; and caused the displacement of millions.<sup>1</sup> Children inside Syria are living in harrowing and unsafe conditions. Boys and girls of all ages who have survived so far face high risks of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.

Children, above all, pay the price for the ongoing conflict. Just under half of those in Syria affected by the emergency are children, as are 52% of the 600,000 who have fled the country.<sup>2</sup>

### Limited access to children and information on child protection needs

Restricted humanitarian access inside Syria means that the international humanitarian response is not able to reach all girls and boys with urgent protection needs. It also means that data on child protection needs and existing child protection structures and capacities is limited and information is difficult to verify. More evidence is required in order to assess the exact scale and scope of child protection issues and the appropriate modalities for the response in this context. Currently, child protection assessments amongst the refugee population, eyewitness accounts, media reports and information issued by the UN, NGOs and others indicate the following child protection issues which are of serious concern.

### Violence against children inside Syria

**Boys and girls have been killed and injured in the conflict, and remain at risk of death and injury including permanent disability.** Children are particularly at risk during attacks, characterised by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and the destruction of civilian buildings such as hospitals and schools.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing threat of violence is impeding some children's access to education and to urgent medical services.

**There are credible reports of the use of indiscriminate weapons such as landmines, cluster munitions and incendiary bombs** within Syria.<sup>4</sup> These and other explosive remnants of war put children at very high risk. Damascus hospital reports that it is receiving an average of 70-100 people per day as result of burns, gunshot wounds and injuries from explosions, with an increasing number of women and children among them.<sup>5</sup>

**Boys and girls are suffering from psychosocial distress** while their caregivers face difficulty providing them with much needed support due to their own high levels of distress. Traditional community support mechanisms are also failing due to displacement and prevailing distrust.

<sup>1</sup> National Public Radio; "2 Million Displaced Syrians Are Living 'Rough'"; 04/01/2013

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR; 16/01/2013

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; "UN Special Representative Zerrougui engages parties in the Syrian conflict to better protect children"; 18/12/2012

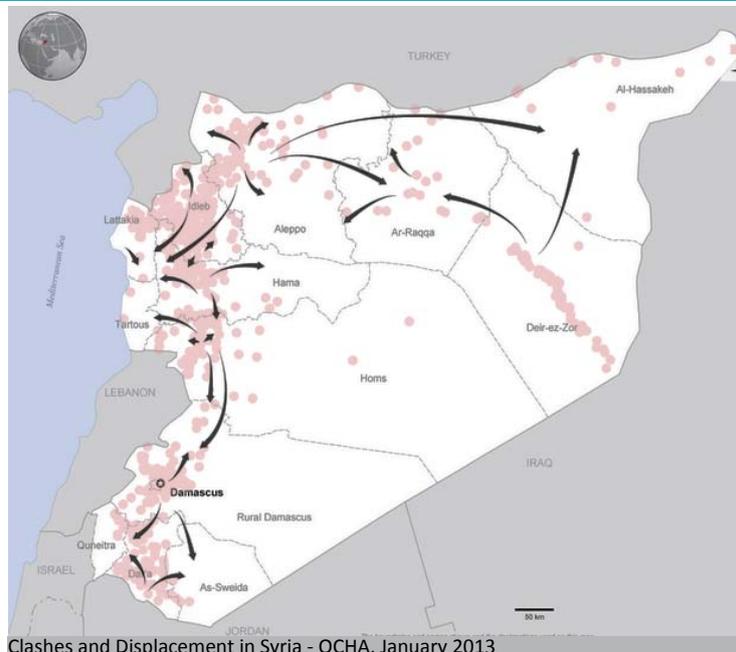
<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch; "Syria: Evidence Shows Cluster Bombs Killed Children"; 27/11/2012

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organisation; *Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq Situation Report, Issue 8; 2/1/2013*

**Children are being detained and tortured.**<sup>6</sup> Some adults who have been detained reported that children were also present in detention cells. Detained children have given accounts of torture and witnessing the death of other children whilst in detention.

**There are reports of children being used by armed groups** as soldiers, porters and to help with frontline medical duties.<sup>7</sup> Children are also reportedly being used as human shields to facilitate military activities.<sup>8</sup>

**Girls and boys are at risk of sexual violence.**<sup>9</sup> Collective shelters and insecure living conditions limit privacy and are known to increase the risk of sexual violence. There are reports that girls as young as 12, and also boys have been sexually abused and that sexual abuse is taking place in detention areas.



## Reduced capacity to protect children in families and communities

Along with infrastructure such as clinics and community centres, it has been reported that 2,400 schools have been destroyed since the beginning of the conflict. In some areas, schools are used as military bases and seen as military targets. Children and their families have severely reduced access to basic services. At the same time, the capacities of families and communities to protect their children are reduced. As a result of the breakdown of pre-existing protection structures and protective environments, boys and girls are exposed to an elevated risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

Whilst the majority of the displaced inside Syria are hosted by the community, many are staying in schools and public buildings, which often have limited heating and sanitation facilities. Local communities' capacity to support the displaced has diminished considerably. Parents are also under intensive ongoing stress caused by months of fear, uncertainty and helplessness. Many families have lost their livelihood, prices are rising, and humanitarian responses hampered by insecurity.

In humanitarian situations, lack of access to basic goods and services is often linked to a heightened threat of sexual exploitation and abuse. Families' reduced capacity to care for their children can also generate negative coping mechanisms such as voluntary separation of children from their parents (sending children into institutional care or to live in places perceived to be safer) and child marriage – both of which have been reported in this emergency. These survival strategies can significantly increase the child's vulnerability to violence, exploitation and abuse.

## Priorities for protecting children affected by the Syria crisis

### All parties to the conflict must:

- Commit to **upholding the legal protections for children** outlined in national and international law, and take immediate measures to fulfill these commitments. In particular all parties must take immediate measures to safeguard **civilians from direct attack and the indirect effects of military action**, and ensure that **no one under the age of 18 is involved**, in any manner, in direct hostilities.
- Ensure that children and other civilians are able to **physically move away from combat areas**; and commit publicly to provide **warnings** and to ensure the **safe passage of children** and other civilians out of the theatre of military operations.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International; *Annual Report 2012 – the state of the world's human rights – Syria*; 2010

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch; "Syria: Opposition Using Children in Conflict"; 29/11/2012 and Warchild; *Syria: A War on Childhood*; July 2012

<sup>8</sup> Save the Children; *Untold Atrocities: The Story of Syria's Children*; October 2012

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch; "Syria: Sexual Assault in Detention – Security Forces Also Attacked Women and Girls in Raids on Homes" 15/06/2012; and International Rescue Committee; *Syria: A Regional Crisis*; January 2013

- Take immediate measures to **protect schools, medical facilities** and other essential civilian infrastructure from direct attacks or from the indirect effects of attacks need to be taken by concerned parties. All children must have safe, unimpeded access to education. All children in need of medical care should have **access to adequate care** without fear of reprisal including when injured as part of the on-going conflict.
- **Immediately secure humanitarian access** in order to allow for provision of essential services to children and their families.

**Donors and other members of the humanitarian community should:**

- **Systematically include child protection in humanitarian assessments**, including in neighbouring countries to which Syrian children have fled, and paying due attention to current and potential capacities as well as needs.
- **Make full use of the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action** in order to plan, monitor, and review the suite of responses required to improve protection for boys and girls. This is the globally agreed standard for the sector, to which humanitarians have committed to being accountable.
- **Ensure adequate funding for Child Protection as an essential, life-saving component of the response.** As a guide child protection funding rates should not fall below the overall rate of funding for the response. Appropriate support must be ensured for the whole affected region over a prolonged period of time, given the extensive geographical impact of the conflict inside Syria, and the likely duration of the effects on children and their families.
- **Systematically mainstream protection of children in their responses.** In all aspects of programming, particular attention must be given to children who have been separated from their parents or normal caregivers, child survivors of sexual and other types of violence; and to those in particularly vulnerable situations such as children in detention, associated with armed groups, or those facing other immediate dangers including risks of landmines and explosive remnants of war.
- **Ensure that wherever possible child protection responses should build on and strengthen local capacities.** There are reports of local initiatives and community support networks being established inside Syria, and these should be supported in their efforts to protect children. School teachers and other community-level workers, as well as caregivers, should be empowered to effectively address the high level of distress children are facing, whilst dealing with their own.
- **Ensure that any post-conflict planning includes a well-coordinated and well-funded suite of efforts to strengthen protection for all children**, building on existing capacities in families and communities, and extending to local and national institutions such as the social workforce and the provision for child protection in the national budget.

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