

## **Aid groups fear for civilians in Idlib as ceasefire deal deadline looms**

*Berlin/Beirut, October 12* – Four international aid agencies working in Syria’s north-west region of Idlib have warned of dire consequences for millions of civilians if the Russia-Turkey deal, due to be implemented by October 15, doesn’t result in a sustained reduction of violence in this overcrowded province.

Local organizations that partner with CARE International, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Mercy Corps and Save the Children, as well as civilians receiving aid have expressed fears that violence could spiral out of control in the next few days if either the deal collapses or fighting escalates in areas not covered by it. Almost 3 million people live in Idlib, and it is estimated that even a limited military offensive would displace hundreds of thousands of people.

“Idlib residents, and aid workers hold their breath as the deadline for a political deal looms. While the terms of the agreement are known, we don’t know what the plan is if parties on the ground fail to implement it. Will it be all out war? Over and over again, similar deals have simply ended in a bloodbath. Civilians caught in this stand-off must be spared at all costs,” said Wouter Schaap, Syria country director for CARE International.

“The people of Idlib need a deal that offers long-term protection to civilians and allows aid to reach all those in need. Aid efforts are already stretched to the maximum in Idlib, where the population has doubled in recent years as people relocated there from areas retaken by the government of Syria. Aid organizations are at full capacity responding to the current needs of both displaced people and local communities. Though we are prepared to respond to any emergency, if this deal falls short and military operations start, many hundreds of thousands will struggle to get the help they will so badly need,” said Lorraine Bramwell, IRC Syria Country Director.

In September, Russia and Turkey agreed to create a demilitarized area in Idlib, which armed groups must leave by a provisional deadline of October 15. Provided it is implemented in line with International Humanitarian Law and does not result in an increase in violence in areas outside the demilitarized zone, the agreement could offer a potential lifeline to the people of Idlib. Civilians have already lived through years of war, during which many families have been forced to flee their homes multiple times.

Now, reports that different parties to the conflict are refusing to engage with the terms of the deal and commit to it long-term threaten to undermine the hope of a reduction in violence in Idlib.

“We already see the impact of this nerve-wracking situation on children, who tell us they are terrified at the prospect of more violence. The school year has barely started, but the facilities we support are making contingency plans to suspend classes and training young children on how to evacuate in the event of an attack. Many children in Idlib have been forced to flee their homes up to a dozen times, forcing them to miss years of school and causing stress and upset. Renewed conflict would compound the suffering of more than a million children in Idlib,” said Sonia Khush, Syria Response Director at Save the Children.

“Some people we help have stocked up on food, expecting to be stuck at home for days on end if fighting resumes. Others have packed their bags and are ready to move at the first airstrike. In both cases, our aid workers might not be able to reach those people if the security situation doesn’t allow them to move. And everyone fears losing their life if bombs start raining from the sky. What we need is a deal that not only holds but is also extended to other parts of Idlib and guarantees full humanitarian access to people in need,” said Arnaud Quemin, Syria Country Director for Mercy Corps.

Notes to editors:

- Since the start of the year, CARE and its partners have reached more than 300,000 people in Idlib, distributing food and non-food items, clean water, clothes, blankets, cash, rehabilitating collective shelters, and extending psycho-social support. We also work with people to restore livelihoods, particularly agriculturally based ones, protect maternal health, and repair small infrastructure.
- The IRC and its partners reach 80,000 patients each month through ten static health facilities and two mobile health teams. In coming months, the IRC will distribute thousands of educational and fun-packed backpacks for children in Idlib to help them better cope with their situation. IRC also provide specialist care to vulnerable women and girls as well as helping thousands of Syrians gain an income through emergency cash distributions, business grants and training.

- Mercy Corps supports more than 68,000 people with clean water, shelter and other household items and child-friendly spaces for children in northwest Syria. Mercy Corps has been working in Syria since 2008. In 2017, we delivered food assistance to around 500,000 people, distributed more than 240,000 emergency kits, and provided safe spaces and psychosocial support to more than 11,000 young people throughout Syria.
- Save the Children and its partners reached more than 42,318 people in North-West Syria last month. Since the start of the response in Idlib, the agency has reached 1.9 million people, including 1.3 million children. Save the Children supports health clinics, a maternity hospital, nutrition centers and more than 40 education facilities. It also works to provide specialized child protection services and mental health and psychosocial support, as well as help for livelihoods and rapid emergency response to new displacement.

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