

The Syrian refugee crisis: A sword of Damocles over the region

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On World Refugee Day, returning from an investigation mission in Jordan, FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights) and AWO (Arab Women's Organisation), call on the international community to provide urgent support to Syrian refugees and their host countries and communities, or risk instability spreading across the region.

The influx of refugees into neighboring countries has increased massively in recent months and shows no signs of abating. As a direct consequence of the bloody conflict in Syria, the UNHCR estimates that over 1.6 million Syrian refugees have sought refuge in neighboring countries – mainly in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt - and a further 4.5 million have been internally displaced. At this pace, the United Nations expects the number of Syrian refugees to double by the end of 2013, to 3.5 million.

"The current crisis threatens the entire region, with dramatic implications for regional security and socio-economic developments. A coordinated international response to the Syrian refugee crisis is crucial and urgent. The international community has a duty to act and to share the burden with neighboring countries," said Karim Lahidji, FIDH President.

In December 2012 and May 2013, FIDH and AWO conducted investigations in Jordan, interviewing refugees and service providers in the Za'atari refugee camp and urban communities. Jordan hosts over 480,000 refugees, representing almost a third of the Syrian refugee population in the region. 78% of those registered with the UNHCR are women, children and elderly persons and one in every 5 refugee households is female-headed.

The population of the Za'atari refugee camp has more than tripled over the last six months. Today the population is over 100,000, vastly exceeding the camp's 65,000 person capacity. Moreover, abuse of the "bailout system", which allows refugees to leave the camp if they can provide a Jordanian sponsor, has resulted in increased vulnerability and exploitation of refugees, particularly women and girls. FIDH and AWO are deeply concerned about reports of forced marriage and trafficking, including into prostitution.

FIDH and AWO spoke to the Director of Refugees at the Ministry of Interior, Saleh Kilani, who expressed concern that the bailout system has turned into a business. The Jordanian government has imposed limits on the system, reserving it for "humanitarian cases", based on family reunion criteria or medical needs. Yet, while the numbers in Za'atari continue to increase and conditions deteriorate, it remains the only official means to leave the camp. FIDH and AWO welcome the UNHCR's efforts to increase supervision of the bailout system but underline that this will not be enough to prevent abuse. A full revision of the system is required.

Up to 80% of refugees live outside camps, in urban communities. The response of the Jordanian population was initially very welcoming, but with the massive increase in numbers over recent months and the resulting pressure on housing, education, health, access to goods and security, FIDH and AWO have observed growing resentment towards the Syrian community. Many refugees in urban areas have not yet registered with the UNHCR, increasing their vulnerability and making access to health services, food and education all the more difficult. There have also been reports of discrimination in aid distribution by community-based service providers. A monitoring mechanism is needed to supervise provision of aid and address allegations of abuse.

“The refugee situation is a sword of Damocles hanging over the host countries and the host communities, which lack the capacity to absorb increases of up to 10% of their local populations. Urgent support is needed to meet humanitarian needs and to prevent unrest spreading,” said Layla Naffa Hamarneh, Director of AWO.

The latest Regional Response Plan launched earlier this month calls for a total of 2.9 billion USD to enable states and humanitarian organisations to support Syrian refugees.

FIDH and AWO issue an urgent call to the international community to ensure that host countries receive adequate support to provide all necessary assistance to refugees and to cope with the impact on host communities. Donors should ensure that pledges are fulfilled without delay and additional funds are provided to meet short-term and longer-term needs.

States, including EU Member States, should also take concrete steps to facilitate access for Syrian refugees to their territories, including by simplifying visa procedures and providing humanitarian visas.