



Testimony on “The Humanitarian Crisis in Syria: Views from the Ground”  
for the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

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Bernice G Romero, Senior Director, Public Policy and Advocacy, Humanitarian Response

I want to thank Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Member Deutch for organizing today’s hearing on the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

Three years of conflict in Syria have taken a devastating toll on Syria’s children. The scale, brutality and duration of the conflict have created levels of need almost impossible to imagine. 4.3 million children in Syria are in desperate need of assistance and more than 10,000 young lives have been lost. The plight of these children may be the most serious humanitarian crisis of our generation with consequences for many generations to come.

Save the Children has worked in the Middle East for decades to advance our mission as a nonprofit, child-focused agency working to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives. Today we are working with communities, host governments and UN agencies to ensure that all vulnerable groups affected by the Syrian conflict get the assistance and protection they need. To date, we have provided lifesaving assistance such as shelter, food and protection to over 1.6 million people in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Syria –nearly 1.2 million of whom are children.

My recommendations to Congress and the Administration draw upon Save the Children’s experience working to address the needs of children and families affected by the Syrian crisis. Today I will focus on four issues. First, I will discuss the value of investing in education to ensure that refugee children have access to safe learning environments and gain the knowledge and skills necessary for Syria’s future. I will examine several barriers to education that refugee children are facing, particularly in Lebanon. Second, I will discuss the importance of supporting child protection activities to help refugee children cope with trauma they have experienced as a result of the crisis. I will focus particularly on the child protection concern of child labor in Jordan. Third, I will discuss the importance of robustly funding humanitarian accounts to ensure that lifesaving assistance is available for families and children affected by the crisis. Finally, I will discuss steps Congress can take to improve humanitarian access to ensure that lifesaving aid can reach children and families living in besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

Ultimately, ending the conflict in Syria is the only way to end the suffering of Syria’s children. Until a political solution is found, however, we can take steps to build a better future for Syria’s children. Save the Children, together with UNICEF, UNCHR, World Vision, Mercy Corps, CARE and other partners have launched the “No Lost Generation” campaign to help address the enormous needs of children in the region. With this campaign, we are calling on the international community to provide \$1 billion to

help rescue a generation of Syrian children from lives of despair and broken futures. We seek to accelerate donor and public support for programs that help Syrian children gain access to quality education, protect them from violence and abuse, and provide counseling and psychological support. Without more investment in education and child protection, we risk losing an entire generation – the very people who will eventually be called on to help Syria rebuild and recover.

## **Education**

Funding for education programming for children is critical. Education is a key stabilizing force in the lives of children affected by conflict. It can give children hope, provide physical and psychosocial protection, and send children the message that the world has not given up on their future. Despite these important benefits, many children are not in school and face huge barriers to continuing their education. Consider the following:

- Three million children have now dropped out of school in Syria
- One in five schools has been damaged or destroyed
- 22% of teaching staff and 18% of school counselors have left the country
- 68% of refugee children are not in school – in Lebanon this is as high as 80%

We know from our work in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt that countries across the region face many of the same educational policy problems, challenges, and gaps. Schools are overcrowded and Syrian children are being turned away. Many are dropping out because they do not understand the lessons or the language in which they are being taught. Others have fallen far behind and there are few opportunities for them to catch up or alternative ways for them to learn. Most don't know if their learning will be recognized later by school systems or employers. A large number have to abandon education and go to work in order to support their families.

Educational challenges are especially acute in Lebanon. Lebanon has received a staggering number of refugees—somewhere between 1 and 1.5 million or roughly a quarter to one third of its population. This is placing a huge amount of pressure on a country that is already struggling with political instability. Lebanon now has the highest concentration in the world of refugees as a percentage of population, with about one Syrian for every three Lebanese. In order to provide an adequate education for Syrian refugee children, Lebanon would have to more than double its education infrastructure and school capacity.

Less than 20% of Syrian children are currently enrolled in full time formal education in Lebanon's public school system. For many of the reasons outlined above—including language challenges, economic need, and sometimes bullying by other students—drop-out rates are extremely high among those few enrolled in full time formal education, reaching up to 40%. Children out of school are often being sent out to work in fields for as little as two dollars a day. Others, as young as three years old, can be seen begging on the streets of towns and cities. Skills-training is also limited, leaving disenfranchised youth with unstructured days, few employment opportunities, and little hope for their future. For the countless thousands of youth who have lost friends and family to Syria's brutal war and who find themselves without opportunity, radicalization, criminalization and militarization may seem to be some of the few options available.

The international community must do much more to provide the government of Lebanon with the necessary support to ensure that refugee children can access education. This includes providing support for community based education efforts where INGOs and UN agencies can work together to provide high quality, formal education to Syrian children in non-formal surroundings and supporting the government of Lebanon in the rehabilitation and extension of existing school facilities and the training of teachers. At present the Lebanese government is also providing a “second shift” system which allows Syrian students to attend school and avail of a truncated curriculum for around three hours a day when the normal public school day ends. This should be complemented by community based efforts. Using existing structures or setting up easy to assemble structures where required, teachers can be trained, accredited and deployed; the Lebanese curriculum can be adapted; and accreditation can be provided to students, enabling them to progress to higher level education and training. This approach is one that can be deployed speedily and reach large numbers of children.

We need to start having some hard conversations on how we are going to tackle some of the big, persistent problems that are stopping Syrian children from learning and developing not just in Lebanon but throughout the region. The window to take effective action is closing fast. Most Syrian refugee children have lost up to three years of school already and a clear plan is needed to ensure yet another year is not lost so that Syrian children can develop to their full potential. Syria’s future depends on it. A comprehensive, long-term plan on how to prioritize, protect and enable refugee education in the countries surrounding Syria needs to be developed by key stakeholders, including national governments, so that education can be delivered in a comprehensive, efficient and coordinated way. The international community needs to fund it and help national governments shoulder the burden. To this end, we urge the US to work with other donors to:

- Support programs throughout the region that provide Syrian refugee children with access to education, whether at school or through learning programs. Only one third of refugee children currently have such access;
- Support host country efforts to expand educational infrastructure to accommodate refugee children including hiring more teachers and providing materials and resources for additional teaching shifts
- Invest in programming that helps both refugee and local children from the host country to learn together
- Support vocational training programs and non-formal learning centers

### **Child Protection**

Funding for child protection programming is critical because the crisis has put already vulnerable children at risk of harm. Every day in Syria’s brutal war, children are being killed or injured. They are also witnessing and experiencing atrocities that no one—much less a child—should ever see. The resulting trauma is profound. Consider the following:

- Three out of four children have now lost a loved one to the conflict and the atrocities they have witnessed have left them with deep emotional scars;
- Early marriage is now affecting one in five girls; this time last year it was affecting one in eight girls;
- Sexual abuse and domestic violence is increasingly being reported;

- Children are at risk of recruitment by armed groups, both as fighters or as support to military groups as runners, cooks and cleaners;
- About 8,000 children across the region are estimated to have been separated from their families and are living unaccompanied;
- UNICEF estimates one in ten children across the region is now engaged in some form of child labor. A recent Save the Children assessment in one governorate puts this number as high as 91% in some border towns.

While child labor is an issue of concern across the region, Save the Children’s research shows this may be much higher in Jordan. Children are working in the worst forms of labor, often in industries that are hazardous for their health and wellbeing. 80% of girls working in Jordan are in domestic labor or agriculture—industries known for high levels of sexual exploitation. While child labor in Jordan has been shown to affect boys more than girls, Save the Children assessments highlight a particular category of girls in exploitative work, which is not normally considered child labor—“homebound girls”. These are girls who have been withdrawn from school, confined to the family home and engaged in household chores on a full time basis.

The main reason children are working is to support their families. There is a substantial risk that, without alternatives, child labor will increase for both poorer Jordanian and Syrian children. For Jordanian children, the refugee crisis has put pressure on resources for the poorest families in Jordan, particularly in the northern border area, which is one of the most impoverished regions in the country.

Currently, Syrians cannot officially work in Jordan, and a number of studies show a direct link between the lack of livelihood opportunities and the high levels of child labor—namely it’s easier for a child to find work than it is for adults to find work and the ramifications of a child being caught working illegally are less severe. In a recent UN survey, 30% of respondents reported having at least one family member find paid employment during the past month in Jordan. As a result, Syrian refugees rely heavily on child labor to supplement family income. Almost 15% of all households surveyed cited child labor as their primary source of income.<sup>1</sup> Of the households that reported paid labor in the past month 47% reported that some or all of this income was from children.

The government of Jordan has been generous in its reception of Syrian refugees. According to UNHCR, the total number of registered Syrian refugees in Jordan is 591,922, with over half of these arriving in 2013. The government of Jordan estimates there are now over 600,000 Syrians in the country, of which over half are children. The scale of the problem necessitates US and other governments’ support to ensure:

- Policy reforms that protect children in informal labor and look at what job training and opportunities can be provided where refugees can contribute to economic growth and development
- Strengthened educational services and policies to keep children safe in school
- Programs to promote livelihoods and provide financial support through programs like cash-for-work

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women Report, *“Gender-based violence and child protection among Syrian refugees in Jordan, with a focus on early marriage”*, p20

Children inside Syria face additional protection challenges to do with the direct violence they are witnessing and experiencing. The US and other governments should use diplomatic influence to ensure that all parties to the conflict:

- Agree not to target or allow military use of schools or health facilities. Since the conflict started, nearly 1 in 5 schools inside Syria have been damaged, destroyed, used by the military, or turned into shelters. Putting schools out of use in this way not only makes schools unusable or unsafe, but also can make children fearful of going back to school when the conflict ends. Health facilities have also been targeted, putting children at risk.
- Agree not to use explosive weapons in populated areas. To date, the primary cause of death of children in the Syrian conflict has been explosive weapons, killing over 70% of children whose cause of death was recorded. We must put a stop to the killing and maiming of children. All parties to conflict should refrain from the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas to ensure that civilians – in particular children – are protected against death, injury and psychological harm.

### **Humanitarian Funding**

As difficult as daily life is for millions in the region, the situation is not hopeless, and international assistance is making a difference. In December, the UN launched an unprecedented appeal for \$6.5 billion in 2014 to assist the millions of people affected by Syria's conflict—the largest humanitarian appeal ever. Many donor governments, including the United States, have been generous in providing financial support to help Syrian refugees. However, more funding is required to meet the mounting needs as the crisis continues into its fourth year.

Despite the great humanitarian need, President Obama's proposed FY2015 budget slashed overall humanitarian assistance by 25% below the funding level Congress provided for humanitarian accounts in the FY2014 omnibus spending bill passed in January. Specific cuts proposed by the Administration include:

- 33% cut to the Migration and Refugee account that supports refugee response
- 28% cut to the International Disaster Assistance account that supports internally displaced people
- 4.5% cut to the Food for Peace program, which feeds tens of millions of people around the world. This cut represents reducing food assistance to more than 1.5 million people.

Cutting the humanitarian accounts by 25% means that funding the Syrian response would have to be done at the expense of reducing assistance for life-threatening crises elsewhere, such as in the Central African Republic and South Sudan. As such, Save the Children is urging Congress to:

- Protect foreign assistance humanitarian accounts against the severe cuts proposed by the Administration in the budget to ensure that significant gains made in the FY14 appropriations bill are not lost.
- Use its influence to urge the Administration to pay special attention to host communities to help them deal with the refugee influx and its resulting strain on community resources. Across the region, almost 80% of Syria's refugees do not live in camps, but instead live with family or friends or in informal settlements. Supporting host

communities is an important step to ensure that countries have the support they need to keep their borders open.

- Encourage the Administration to create a long-term strategy that integrates humanitarian response and development funding streams. Save the Children has advocated for the Administration to consider using resources from development accounts to fund programs that benefit communities that host refugees. We are also encouraging U.S. government agencies to do joint planning to ensure that humanitarian and development funding streams are used effectively to address the Syrian crisis.

### **Humanitarian Access**

In addition to robust funding of the humanitarian response, humanitarian agencies need improved access to people living in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Full humanitarian access would ensure medical care for injured children, food for starving families, clean water, shelter and some hope for the future.

On February 22, 2014, the UN Security Council unanimously passed UN Security Council Resolution 2139 to allow unfettered humanitarian access to all parts of Syria. The passage of this resolution was a political breakthrough that included strong stipulations demanding both cross-line and cross-border access. This resolution also demanded an end to sieges across the country, an end to the indiscriminate use of weapons in populated areas, and the demilitarization of medical facilities, schools and other civilian facilities.

However, nearly three months after the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution, only a trickle of the aid desperately needed inside besieged and hard-to-reach areas is making it through. Around 3.5 million people are now estimated to be in need of assistance in such areas – an increase of one million since the beginning of this year.

Every day that goes by without the resolution fully implemented is another fatal day for more Syrian children and their families. Therefore, Congress should use its influence to send a clear message about the importance of humanitarian access. To this end, Save the Children suggests that Congress do the following:

- Use diplomatic pressure with governments that have influence over parties to the conflict to push for full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2139.
- Encourage UN agencies to increase funding for humanitarian NGOs providing assistance through cross-border channels. To this end, Congress should 1) urge the UN to immediately use pooled funding mechanisms such as the Emergency Relief Fund (ERF) to fund cross-border work carried out by humanitarian NGOs and 2) direct the Administration to provide resources through pooled funding mechanisms like the ERF for cross-border response.
- Encourage UN agencies to increase coordination and communication between Syria-based and cross border humanitarian providers. In order to ensure that aid coverage is effective and not duplicated or diverted, UN agencies should work in partnership with NGOs to develop communication lines between Damascus-based agencies and those providing assistance from neighboring countries.

- Advocate with neighboring government authorities to agree on a humanitarian fast track that can streamline and speed up the delivery of humanitarian aid, open additional border crossings, and diminish other administrative hurdles for INGOs delivering aid across borders.
- Request that the UN Secretary General include additional criteria in his monthly reports in order to collect information about the challenges NGOs face in cross-border operations.
- Encourage increased UN monitoring of access with information provided on when and where requests are being made and when these are accepted or denied.

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We thank the subcommittee for its leadership in addressing the needs of those affected by the Syrian crisis. We sincerely appreciate your attention to these important issues, and look to both the Administration and Congress to marshal the necessary support, including in upcoming appropriations legislation, to reduce the suffering and improve the outlook for the children and families of Syria. This is not only the right approach required by the scale of human suffering and America's long standing tradition of helping those in need, but also the smart approach for advancing U.S. interests in the region.