

Crisis in Syria: the U.S. Response

Testimony of Anne C. Richard
Assistant Secretary of State
Department of State
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration

Before the
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

March 20, 2013

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of this committee. Thank you for hosting this hearing today on the humanitarian crisis inside Syria. I am pleased to be able to appear before the Committee with my colleague, Ambassador Robert S. Ford and USAID Assistant Administrator Nancy Lindborg. Our offices work closely together to provide critical humanitarian aid to those affected by the violence in Syria.

The two year anniversary of the Syria uprising coincides with another dark milestone: over one million refugees have now fled across Syria's borders into neighboring countries. More troubling news is that half of that number arrived in the last two months. The United Nations (UN) estimates that over 2.5 million people are displaced inside Syria and many more have been affected by the upheaval and fighting.

I would like to share with you the approach my bureau in the State Department is taking to address the crisis and how our efforts and USAID's work are complementary and mutually reinforcing... I shall first briefly comment on how the refugee crisis is affecting the neighboring countries, discuss the challenges we face in delivering humanitarian assistance to those in need throughout the region, and provide some specifics on the priorities of the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and our diplomatic outreach to other countries.

Refugees in Neighboring Countries

Countries bordering Syria are approaching a dangerous saturation point with refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in January of this year, 2,000 people fled Syria every day. In February, the number climbed to 5,000 a day; and in March, we've seen 8,000 people a day crossing from Syria into Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. In addition to serving as evidence that life inside Syria has become extremely dangerous for many, the number and the rate are overwhelming the capacity of humanitarian aid organizations to meet the needs of these victims and are sorely testing the limits of host countries' abilities to provide safe shelter. If international borders are closed to Syrians seeking refuge, the awful tally of human destruction will only increase.

Jordan: There are approximately 350,000 refugees in Jordan according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Approximately 70 percent of refugees in Jordan live outside of the refugee camps in cities and towns. Many have been taken in or helped by relatives, friends or even strangers. Only 30 percent live in the Za'atri refugee camp in northern Jordan. The Government of Jordan set up Za'atri in response to the large numbers of refugees crossing the border, and it has moved to set up another camp, as yet uninhabited, and initiated plans for another. Za'atri camp has been plagued by security problems and we have been in active conversations with the UNHCR and the Government of Jordan to improve the safety of refugees there as well as humanitarian workers.

Jordan is allowing refugees to cross its borders but is finding that its resources are stretched to help massive flows of refugees while providing services to its own citizens at the same time. We should note that we are concerned by reports that some Palestinian and Iraqi refugees have been turned around at the border and we have asked the Government of Jordan to let them cross. We've thanked the Government of Jordan for its ongoing assistance to the refugee population, and asked them to keep their borders open to all refugees. Knowing the significant economic cost associated with hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees, the U.S. government is providing Jordan with budget support.

Lebanon: Lebanon is hosting over 354,000 Syrian refugees. Lebanon has also taken in 32,000 Palestinian refugees who have fled the violence in Syria. Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in host communities and are not in camps, which allows for greater freedom of movement, greater possibilities for self-sufficiency and a semblance of a normal life. At the same time, the presence of so many refugees in a country of 4 million people taxes Lebanon's infrastructure and resources and has increased tensions within the refugee-hosting communities. Hizballah's presence in southern Lebanon creates a challenge for UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGO) in providing aid, while its involvement in the Government of Lebanon complicates U.S. efforts to provide help during this crisis. Despite these strains, the Government of Lebanon continues to keep its borders open, though its leaders have warned that Lebanon has reached its saturation point and requires significant international assistance in order to support the refugees.

Iraq: Over 110,000 Syrian refugees have fled to Iraq, and most are now in Kurdistan. Domiz camp in Kurdistan accommodates approximately 54,000 persons, and two camps in Anbar province at Al-Qaim accommodate over 7,500 persons. In addition to those living in camps, there are many who live in villages and communities. In Kurdistan, Syrians are permitted to live and work in the community once they have registered.

Since October 21, 2012, the Government of Iraq has kept the Al-Qaim border crossing with Syria closed, except for medical emergencies and some family reunification cases. Local authorities and the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement state that the border is closed for security reasons. Syrian refugees in Anbar prior to the closure of the border are restricted to the camps, although some have family members nearby. The main reasons for return to Syria continue to be lack of freedom of movement out of the camp and lack of a way to earn a living.

UNHCR continues to provide support to those expressing interest in returning to Syria but is not encouraging repatriation because conditions are not conducive to a safe return.

Turkey: Since the beginning of the crisis, the Government of Turkey has supported most of the humanitarian needs of the refugees from Syria who have crossed its border. In addition to 186,200 refugees registered in 17 camps set up by the government and 71,000 registered (or soon to be registered) outside of camps, the Government of Turkey estimates that an additional 100,000 unregistered refugees live in urban areas. While the government has previously focused its support for Syrian refugees on the camp-based populations, it is now beginning to address the needs of the out-of-camp Syrians by setting up centers where urban refugees can register for IDs and free health services. Turkey has a strong economy but is experiencing a decline in its once vibrant cross-border trade with Syria.

Challenges in Crisis Response

The challenges before us are many. USAID Nancy Lindborg's testimony discusses access, security and funding issues. Therefore, I will focus on: (1) the need to work with host governments to ensure that they keep their borders open to refugees and have what they need to help the refugees; (2) specific contributions made by the PRM bureau; and (3) ensuring that other countries are contributing to humanitarian aspects of the crisis so that the UN and other humanitarian agencies have more of the support they need to respond.

Working with Host Governments

We recognize the huge strain that the influx of refugees is currently placing on countries that neighbor Syria. In both Jordan and Lebanon, government leaders are concerned about their capacity to absorb so many refugees. Iraq has expressed concerns that al-Qaeda and its Syria affiliate, al-Nusra Front, are sending fighters and weapons across the border. Turkey, for the most part, has maintained an open border policy for all refugees, although each day it limits the number of refugees allowed to cross at border crossings with high traffic. It is essential that neighboring countries continue to keep their borders open for those refugees fleeing violence in Syria. In every meeting with officials from these countries, we thank them for allowing refugees to cross and discuss ways to help them uphold humanitarian principles while safeguarding their own security so that they are protected from a spillover of violence.

It is important that short-term relief programs link to longer-term development aid as part of overall U.S. government aid to the region. This is particularly the case in Jordan and Lebanon. We must leverage other aid and investments and incorporate refugees into the fabric of these countries, in order to minimize the costs that hosting refugees places on communities. This is an important area in which the State Department and USAID are working together.

Department of State Response

The Department and USAID lead the U.S. government's humanitarian response and we work closely together in response to the crisis. Nancy Lindborg and I have traveled together to

the region twice and were also recently joined by Ambassador Ford in Turkey, prior to our participation at the Kuwait Donors Conference in January. Our communications teams are taking advantage of maximizing every opportunity to get the message out to domestic and international audiences about the dimensions of the crisis and to highlight our government's leadership role in responding.

That said, allow me to outline the role the State Department has in helping to get as much humanitarian aid into Syria as possible through partners. Over several decades, PRM has developed a privileged relationship with the humanitarian agencies of the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and non-governmental organizations. These agencies are a key part of the international humanitarian system that is governed by humanitarian principles. They bring technical expertise and operational capacity to respond to this large-scale crisis. Of the nearly \$385 million in humanitarian assistance that USAID and the State Department are providing in response to the Syria crisis, the State Department's contributions total nearly \$185 million. Our contributions provide life-saving emergency assistance to meet basic humanitarian needs, such as shelter, water, sanitation, and health both inside Syria and in host countries.

The delivery of assistance is often undertaken at great personal risk to those distributing the aid. For example, in the past couple of months, two UNHCR convoys and one UN interagency convoy have delivered aid into north-west Syria, where thousands of internally displaced people are in acute need of humanitarian help. The operations were carried out in collaboration with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the local community. Once the convoys moved across battle-lines into areas controlled by the opposition, the missions were facilitated by the Syrian Opposition Coalition. Such operations are dangerous and difficult, which underscores the need for unhindered and safe access for those providing humanitarian assistance inside Syria. We will continue to encourage the UN to do more such cross-line assistance deliveries, counting on the Syrian Opposition Coalition to help coordinate and negotiate safe access. While these convoys are good, much more is needed to ensure supplies consistently and safely reach people in need.

Of course, people in need are not concentrated in one area and instead can be found on both sides of shifting battle-lines. Humanitarian organizations provide aid in a neutral and impartial manner. The United Nations is seeking to get access to all communities in need on a regular basis. It is unacceptable and a violation of humanitarian principles for the Syrian regime to deny this access.

I should also mention the plight of the 525,000 Palestinian refugees who were living in Syria prior to the start of the conflict. They, too, have been caught up in the violence in Syria. Fighting has engulfed many Palestinian refugee camps and neighborhoods, including in Yarmouk, causing over half of Syria's Palestinian population to be displaced. For the most part, the Palestinian population has kept away from taking sides in the conflict. Those refugees who remain in camps are the poorest and most vulnerable. Some Palestinians have fled Syria, but most remain inside the country, having heard that they will be turned away at the borders with neighboring countries. The U.S. is the largest bilateral donor to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the UN agency responsible for

assisting Palestinian refugees. There are also approximately 63,000 Iraqi refugees inside Syria. In recent months, many other Iraqis who were living as refugees in Syria have chosen to return to Iraq or flee for a second time to other countries.

Contributions of Other Countries

With no end in sight, we are facing a resource crisis. The UN's Regional Response Plan to assist up to 1.1 million Syrian refugees in the region has thus far received only 21 percent of the funds it needs to operate for the first half of 2013 and, as of mid-March, refugee arrivals have already nearly reached June 2013 planning figures. Despite our own budget constraints, the United States continues to make every effort to continue to provide funding to meet the increasing needs. However, it is vital that other donors quickly honor the pledges they have made and provide the cash that agencies need to keep life-saving operations going.

Even if the Asad regime falls soon, displacement and the need for humanitarian aid will continue. This is because of the widespread destruction of Syria's infrastructure and predicted flows of refugees that would continue to cross borders – likely in both directions. If refugees are not able to return for years, host countries will need to continue to help host Syrian children in schools, and help families with medical facilities, and provide other public services.

Using diplomatic channels, we are using every opportunity to ask other donors to follow through on the pledges they made at the Kuwait Donors Conference in January in order to raise the promised \$1.5 billion. The Secretary and other Department principals have reached out to other governments to ask them to do more for the Syrian people, including Syrian refugees. Funding is urgently needed if UN agencies and others are able to continue to operate.

Coordination of the international humanitarian response is complex and must occur on multiple levels. The United States participates in meetings in Geneva of the Syria Humanitarian Forum that bring together senior officials from key donor governments, countries affected by the crisis and UN leaders to discuss the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, and to coordinate our collective response. We also actively participate in UN coordination meetings in the field. In addition, we are deepening our coordination with the Syrian Opposition Coalition's Assistance Coordination Unit. We have also encouraged UN agencies and other partners to do the same, and are pleased with the initial results.

In conclusion Mr. Chairman, I would like to say that my bureau's primary concerns are providing protection to and aiding those who have fled the violence. The State Department's overall goal, of course, is a return of peace and stability to Syria and to one day see the refugees return home.

I am grateful for the generosity of Congress and the American people who make our assistance possible, and for the excellent collaboration with the State Department's Near East and European bureaus, and USAID colleagues. Thank you once again for the opportunity to highlight PRM's role and some of our concerns regarding the Syrian humanitarian crisis. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.