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U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

Hearing on:
The Humanitarian Crisis in Syria: Views from the Ground
May 21, 2014

Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the Sub-Committee today about the growing humanitarian crisis in Syria and for the close attention you have paid to this complex and protracted crisis, which has now entered its 4th year. I am here today in my capacity as Vice President of Global Engagement and Policy with Mercy Corps, a global humanitarian and development non-governmental organization (NGO) that responds to disasters and supports community led development in more than forty countries around the world. Mercy Corps has been working in the Middle East and North Africa for over three decades; and we currently run and manage programs in nine countries in the region, inside Syria as well as in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

According to the United Nations (UN), 9.3 million people are in need of assistance inside Syria, including 6.5 million internally displaced. Over half are children. Moreover, 242,000 people are estimated to be living in besieged areas where they are completely cut off from assistance or receive only limited aid. And there is no end in sight to the growing humanitarian need.

Mercy Corps is assisting the best we can in these extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and remarkably through our local partnerships we are doing so on a large scale. For nearly two years, Mercy Corps has been delivering humanitarian aid to civilians in Syria through the most direct routes, reaching more than 1.7 million civilians who are suffering.

We are among the largest providers of food and baking flour. We are leading these programs with the generous support of donors, including the important contributions of the United States Agency for International Development's Emergency Food Security Program, funded through the International Disaster Assistance (IDA) account which is administered by Food for Peace.

Every day hundreds of my colleagues risk their lives delivering flour to Syrian bakeries to ensure that hundreds of thousands of civilians will have bread to eat. In addition, we are also delivering a monthly supply of food staples: rice, bulgur wheat, pasta, lentils, canned tuna fish and other items -- enough to provide a family of seven with half their daily caloric requirements. And it's worth noting that by purchasing this food in the region, we are able to give American taxpayers

more impact for their money ensuring supplies are delivered quickly and at a lower cost while also stimulating local markets.

We're also running a pilot program to buy food and non-food items inside Syria. This initiative is currently a comparatively small element of our overall procurement but is laying the groundwork for future operations. And with funding from USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), we are also providing civilians with essential items such as blankets, clothing, winter survival kits, hygiene items, emergency water and sanitation. Recently, we've also begun to pilot a new voucher program with pre-cleared vendors; this should give people living in areas that are frequently inaccessible due to fighting the ability to purchase what they need in their own neighborhoods.

I had the opportunity to visit Syria last year, and met with some of the families who are benefitting from this assistance. These are families who had lost everything – their homes, jobs, and belongings, but more importantly, they have also lost loved ones, friends and neighbors.

As we drove across the countryside, in what used to be the bread basket of Syria, I could not help but notice rows of tree stumps lining fields where there used to be lush olive groves. Olive groves are not only an important source of income for Syrians. They are a symbol of identity and home: an olive grove is cared for by generation after generation. These trees are, for many, a source of proud family history, a link from grandparents to grandchildren. And yet during my visit, I could see Syrians chopping down these trees. Without fuel for heat, they were burning their trees to stay warm. Or they sold the wood for cash. It was a short-term solution to a long-term crisis; a painful, and very personal accommodation to a harsh reality.

During my visit I met with a mother of four. She had fled Aleppo city along with her husband and children. This was their third temporary home. When we met, they were camping out in a tiny cinderblock garage. We sat together on the cold concrete floor where she apologized for not serving me tea. She explained they were just barely getting by. Two years into the war, they had already exhausted their life savings. The monthly food basket they received to supplement their diet -- thanks to the Food for Peace program -- was greatly appreciated, but it was not enough. They were always hungry. And so each day, this mother would send her children to go scavenging for food. Wild grasses and plants were usually the only edible things they could find. They also made small beaded decorations for shoes to sell in the market.

Despite their bleak circumstances, she said, they were among the best off in this community. She pointed toward the local school down the road, where dozens of less fortunate families, many with sick children, had crammed into abandoned classrooms. They all shared a single communal bathroom, burning wood from the desks to keep warm.

It has been over 444 days since I made that trip to Syria. And the situation has only gotten worse. Much worse.

Humanitarian aid is limited, but Mercy Corps, working with our local partners, continues to deliver vital assistance despite the dangers and challenges. There are many stories of heroism. To ensure the delivery of lifesaving assistance to desperate families caught in the siege, average Syrians – who were until just two or three years ago: economics professors, journalists, teachers, and merchants – now risk their lives every day. Delivering food in the midst of a war is

incredibly dangerous work. It requires men and women who can move back and forth across the front lines, through areas of extreme violence. Mercy Corps is extremely proud to partner with many of these people. They inspire us. And they thank us. The Syrian people, they say, greatly appreciate the assistance of the United States and other donors, and yet they say much more needs to be done.

For Mercy Corps and other dedicated aid agencies, Syria poses one of the most hostile, complex and difficult response environments in which we have ever worked.

Regional Humanitarian Context

But of course these humanitarian challenges are not confined to Syria. Massive refugee flows into neighboring countries have turned a civil conflict into a regional crisis.

Now as we enter into the fourth year of the crisis, the social, political and economic landscape of Syria's neighbors is being dramatically altered by the continued influx of refugees. Currently, there are 2.8 million registered refugees. But the number is rapidly expanding and doesn't include hundreds of thousands of unregistered men, women and children. By the end of the year, the UN estimates that the total number of registered refugees will reach four million.

The pressure on host countries is immense. Those struggling the most are Lebanon and Jordan. One in four people living in Lebanon today is Syrian. In Jordan, it is one in ten. Scarce natural and financial resources are being stretched thin. Competition for jobs, rising food and rent prices and overcrowded schools and hospitals are stoking tensions between host communities and refugees. But it's also put host governments and their citizens at loggerheads. Our recent research on water scarcity in Jordan found that the huge influx of refugees into the Kingdom of Jordan is draining natural resources and is undercutting the long-term sustainability of Jordan's water supply networks.¹

Caught in the middle in all the affected countries are the children – host and refugee alike.

With our partners - UNICEF, Save the Children and World Vision - we are working to elevate the needs of children, helping them work through stress and trauma to find meaningful outlets for their skills and energy. We are working to prevent what may become a “lost generation.”

Mercy Corps is particularly seeking strategies to ensure that adolescents - boys and girls emerging from childhood and on the threshold of adulthood – are not falling between the cracks. In all of our programming, we aim to build the capacity of local communities to address emerging needs, alleviate the impact of the crisis on natural and social resources like education and water, and defuse tensions between refugees and host communities and these communities and their national governments.

For example, our recent research on adolescents finds many are losing hope as a result of being out of school for years and unable to work legally.² They risk isolation from their families and

¹ “Tapped Out: Water Scarcity and Refugee Pressures in Jordan,” online at: <http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/tapped-out-water-scarcity-and-refugee-pressures-jordan>.

² This report is online at: <http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/advancing-adolescence>

host communities and lack tools to deal with conflict constructively. And this is not only impacting refugees, but it's also affecting Lebanese and Jordanian youth.

For Syrian adolescents, we found a sense of humiliation was pervasive and often involved physical violence. Flashpoints for this violence revolved around disputes over wages, verbal assaults while they are playing in the neighborhood or while walking to school.

One boy told us that he would like to move to a country where humans are valued. "If I cannot go there," he said, "I want to leave this world."

Another boy said, "It would be better to return to Syria to fight and die with dignity than live with humiliation."

For adolescent girls, most especially Syrian girls, tremendous physical and social isolation is most common. One Syrian girl described her collective shelter as a "prison" where she lives under the "stifling control" of her parents, who understandably only wanted to keep her safe at home.

To help these adolescents as well as meet other long-term needs, it is imperative that the donor community shift gears and develop an integrated strategy that moves beyond the basic provision of humanitarian assistance.

Recommendations for Congress

While the situation is bleak, there are a number of concrete steps that Congress can take now to help the people of Syria, and to reduce the stress, rising tensions and destabilizing effects the crisis is putting on Syria's neighbors. I would like to leave the Sub-Committee with the following four key recommendations:

First, there is a desperate need for funding humanitarian assistance that also supports longer term needs. The vast requirements inside Syria, in addition to unexpected global challenges in countries ranging from the Central African Republic to South Sudan, have resulted in unprecedented global needs. Humanitarian funding is an important cornerstone of the US government's efforts to support stability and provide lifesaving assistance around the world and is considered, by many, to be a moral imperative. Drawing on these principles, I urge Congress to fully fund the response efforts. As of this month, the joint UN and NGO funding appeals - the Regional Response Plan (RRP) and the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) - are only 25 percent funded. While the US continues to lead the international community, with \$1.7 billion donated to the Syria response since the start of the conflict, I was extremely disappointed and surprised to see that the Administration's FY15 budget request cut humanitarian assistance accounts by 25 percent. Congress can ensure humanitarian needs are met by restoring funding to at least \$2.1 billion for International Disaster Assistance (IDA), \$3.1 billion for Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) and \$1.866 billion for Food for Peace (FFP), to address the growing needs in and around Syria. Of particular importance is the Emergency Food Security Program (EFSP), a subset of the IDA account, which has served as a stopgap against hunger for 680,000 people in Syria. Moreover, as you consider funding levels, I

urge you to work with the Administration to recalibrate the response strategy to fund and integrate relief and development programming. Specifically, Congress can:

- **Encourage investments in longer-term programs – particularly for humanitarian accounts like MRA and IDA – that integrate relief and development aims.** Short-term programs alone cannot adequately address the needs of the Syrian crisis. And yet, relief programs that last only 3 to 12 months have made up the majority of the response. This is not an efficient use of funding. Short-term programs do not allow for comprehensive responses to complex needs. Lurching from one short-term plan to the next significantly undermines efficiency. It also complicates the hiring of qualified staff who are understandably reluctant to sign contracts for 3-6 month periods. In addition, it makes it difficult to establish credibility with local officials who are hesitant to build humanitarian assistance goals into their long-term planning processes when a long-term partnership is not guaranteed.
- **Shift to more integrated approach away from a “siloed” funding response – in which short-term humanitarian responses and three- to five-year development programs are kept separate.** Instead, we must implement a holistic strategy that: bridges relief and development needs; works to deliver best “value for money” outcomes; shores up the ability of front-line communities to withstand and respond to the challenges of a protracted crisis; and enables donors and implementers like Mercy Corps to efficiently marshal limited resources in response to growing, long-term needs, particularly in refugee hosting countries. This holistic strategy should also be closely aligned with national plans put forward by refugee hosting countries – including Jordan’s National Resilience Plan, and Lebanon’s Stabilization and Recovery Program.
- **Enhance humanitarian efforts by supporting funding for adaptable accounts, such as the Complex Crisis Fund (CCF) and the Economic Support Fund (ESF), that are nimble enough to respond to emerging issues.** Additionally, I want to call on Congress to support the Economic Support Fund (ESF) at a level of \$5.1 billion and the Complex Crisis fund at a level of no less than \$40 million globally. These accounts provide essential longer-term development funding to countries including Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq and protect fragile development gains previously made in these countries. While the ESF funding request for Jordan was static from FY14 to FY15, Lebanon, a country that is teetering on the brink, saw a dramatic 18 percent decrease in the President’s FY15 request. Another concerning trend in US assistance is the move away from supporting Iraq. Recent events and the influx of refugees into the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) administered areas of Iraq, layered on top of internal violence, threaten to plunge that country into a new civil war. And yet, Iraq was among the biggest losers in the FY14 budget allocation in which it’s expected to receive only \$23 million in US development aid—a 69 percent reduction from FY13. By FY15, the USAID Mission in Iraq plans to end all programs in the country.

Second, Congress must urge the Administration to elevate the need for the full implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 2139. Adopted unanimously in February 2014, it demands safe and unhindered humanitarian access, across conflict lines and across borders, to people in need throughout Syria. The resolution represented an important step

toward getting aid to millions of Syrians. However, it will only be meaningful if it results in real, substantial changes in Syria and if implementation is based on the practicalities and diversities of access challenges on the ground. This week we mark 90 days since 2139 was adopted and, unfortunately, we are still not seeing any tangible progress. Congress should call on Secretary of State John Kerry to fully engage with the UN to sort through legal hurdles. In addition, Congress should specifically:

- **Elevate the importance of access with the international community not only to deliver aid, but also to assess needs and monitor delivery even in conflict-affected environments.** The ability of humanitarian agencies to assess and monitor is a critical component of aid delivery and central to a ‘do no harm’ approach. To support this, the international community must press to allow access not only for delivery of aid, but also to assess needs and monitor impact. Moreover, we must elevate access as a tool to understanding the full breadth of needs and the impact of aid in all areas of Syria, including those that are under opposition control. While some progress has been made in the past 30 days – in that we have recently secured access to do assessments for 25 percent of the country – there are still many areas where we simply do not know the extent of the needs.
- **Encourage the Obama Administration to work with the United Nations to maximize coordination.** As the UN looks to determine its role with regards to cross border operations under the auspices of 2139’s mandate, the focus of such work should be on complementing, not duplicating, the already significant efforts of NGOs working in non-Government controlled territory. Efficient delivery mechanisms and practices have been developed over the past two years – that could serve as a basis for expansion and close coordination.
- **Call for greater involvement of civil society actors in decision-making processes.** The Obama Administration must push the United Nations to include international and national non-governmental organizations in decision-making processes related to the planning of aid convoys, discussions on aid delivery mechanisms, and in the formal monitoring structures of 2139. Non-governmental actors lead a large portion of aid delivery inside Syria and have considerable expertise on the nuances of operating in the region. Discussions around 2139 – including through the High Relief Committee - risk sidelining a critical component of the aid response without the involvement of non-governmental actors.
- **Urge the Administration to ensure a quick replacement for the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, who resigned this month.** This position is essential to restarting political track negotiations.

Third, humanitarian aid must not be used as a proxy for the lack of a political solution. I want to urge Congress to avoid blurring this line by using humanitarian assistance as a tool to build the legitimacy of political actors to the crisis. While it is imperative to elevate and prioritize realistic political tracks aimed at ending the conflict and moving toward a political transition, humanitarian assistance cannot play this role. For it to remain impartial and

independent, humanitarian aid must remain separate from politically oriented funding. This is not just a matter of principle, but it's also a matter of security and practicality. For international NGOs like Mercy Corps, and our peers, maintaining humanitarian impartiality is central to our community-based acceptance security model. If we were to appear to take sides, our credibility, our ability to reach the people in greatest need, as well as the safety of our staff would all be at risk. Please help protect our status as humanitarian actors.

Finally, Congress should call on the Obama Administration to prioritize programs that build the resilience of refugees and host communities, with special focus on adolescents and conflict mitigation. More than 1.5 million adolescents have been affected by the conflict: boys and girls on the cusp of adulthood who are facing uncertain futures because of the shocks and stresses of war, educational disadvantages, exposure to violence, and discrimination. I want to urge Congress to increase funding for programs targeting adolescent refugees and their peers in host communities --through accounts such as MRA, IDA, ESF and CCF -- to meet their unique psychosocial and developmental needs, through programs that promote tolerance and build life skills. Through quick-impact community projects, these programs also expand economic opportunity, improve conflict management, and strengthen young people's civic engagement. Specifically, we ask Congress to call for programs that:

- **Empower local actors in fragile and transitional environments to use conflict mitigation programming to address and snuff out flash points as soon as they arise.** If addressed appropriately, crises can also foster opportunities to transform attitudes. In Mafraq, Jordan for example, during a water shortage, violence broke out between Jordanians and Syrian refugees. However, community leaders -- who were trained in conflict mitigation as part of a community infrastructure program -- negotiated with the frustrated parties, and urged the communities to remain calm until they could find a solution. After several meetings the community leaders agreed to: form a community advisory group on water; identify strategies to better maintain existing infrastructure; and coordinate their efforts with those of INGOs, local community-based organizations, and wealthy citizens to provide water tankers to the village. As a result, a downward spiral of violence was avoided and the community leaders demonstrated their ability to independently discuss and develop strategies to address contentious issues. With the protracted nature of this crisis, and the rising pressure placed on host communities, these kinds of approaches are invaluable.
- **Encourage programs funded through ESF and CCF that invest in local actors who can manage, design and implement programs that work in tandem with national response plans.** This will ensure that US interventions are not just reactive, but have a sustainable impact in the region. It will also help support our key regional allies to maintain stability and mitigate the potential for spillover of violence. This requires programs that do more than dig another well or build a new school. Programs must support existing local institutions and integrate cross-community partnerships. They should also focus on supporting the local economy and create jobs.
- **Move beyond big turn-key infrastructure projects alone and prioritize resilience oriented programming to address the roots causes of reoccurring issues that spark**

conflict. In Jordan, for example, which is a resource scarce environment, this can mean a focus on programs that help communities better deliver services like water. It also means working with the Jordanian government to streamline their own procurement procedures to cut bureaucratic tape and establish equitable investments that expand essential services – like water – to communities most in need. It also means working closely with local communities to ensure that limited water resources are conserved, and that conflicts over shortages are defused. A big part of a resilience approach must include building the capacity of local government actors and encouraging proactive consultations between the central government and those on the front lines, among them municipal governments, local committees, community-based organizations and tribal leaders.

In conclusion, I would like to say that through our work and partnerships in the region, we have been humbled and touched by the grace and dignity of Syrians as well as by the generosity of their regional hosts, despite the many profound challenges they face. We are also heartened by the unwavering faith of Syrians everywhere that there will be a peaceful resolution. It is with that goal in mind that we continue our work in the hope that soon this dreadful crisis will be over.

I wish to sincerely thank the Sub-Committee for its focus on this tremendously important issue, and for extending me the privilege of testifying today.