

The humanitarian crisis in Syria poses a threat to world peace

Political objectives are getting in the way of helping the millions of people caught up in the Syrian conflict, but the imperative to act is clear

By Valerie Amos, under-secretary general and emergency relief coordinator, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Signed in June 1945, the United Nations Charter stated that the purposes of the UN were to “achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all”.

Further to this, as the UN secretary general’s January 2009 report on *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect* noted: “Weaknesses of capacity and the paucity of will, including in many capitals that speak in favour of advancing goals relating to the responsibility to protect, feed off each other in a particularly vicious cycle of hesitation and finger-pointing in the face of unfolding atrocities. Most visibly and tragically, the international community’s failure to stem the mass violence and displacements in Darfur, as well as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, has undermined public confidence in the United Nations and our collective espousal of the principles relating to the responsibility to protect. I am firmly convinced that we can and will do better in the future.”

The founding values of the United Nations set the framework for the way the organisation works. These values, spelt out in the Charter, clearly call for the international community to act when states do not protect their citizens from war crimes and violations of humanitarian and human rights law. In Syria, these values are being eroded every day as the parties to the conflict violate international humanitarian and human rights law.

The conflict in Syria is the greatest humanitarian crisis facing the world today, posing a threat to peace and security in

neighbouring countries, the broader region and the world. The influx of three million refugees into bordering countries, including over a million who have arrived in Lebanon alone, is putting a huge strain on the communities hosting the refugees and on the economic and social infrastructure of host countries. Fragile relationships between different communities are being tested every day, leading to anti-refugee rhetoric in some countries. Repeated calls for the refugee burden from Syria to be shared more equitably by the international community continue to go largely unheeded.

The conflict continues to do significant damage to the people and the social fabric

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of Syria. The economy has imploded, with the currency having lost two-thirds of its value. Unemployment levels now stand at nearly 50 per cent; essential infrastructure, including the electricity and water supply systems, have been damaged or destroyed; schools have closed and the health sector has been severely affected, with half of Syria’s doctors having left the country.

The UN estimates that more than nine million people need aid and protection inside Syria; some 6.5 million people have been forced from their homes, of whom half are children, and many of them have fled the conflict more than once. Well in excess of 130,000 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands injured. In blatant disregard for the norms of international humanitarian law, an estimated 3.5 million

people are living in areas that are hard to reach with humanitarian aid, and an estimated 241,000 are under siege: 196,000 people in areas besieged by government forces and 45,000 in areas besieged by opposition groups. They are not allowed to leave and humanitarian workers cannot enter. Those who have managed to leave these besieged areas are thin and malnourished.

Hundreds of thousands of lives at stake

Many people are dying because they cannot get the medicines they need. A generation of children has been brutalised and traumatised; everyone has now seen heart-rending pictures of families cowering in ruined buildings and babies being pulled from the rubble. Every day that the world allows international humanitarian law to be ignored and flouted, the tenets of international justice and accountability are undermined and the achievements of 150 years of humanitarian action are eroded, with profound repercussions for the future.

The UN Security Council came together in February 2014 to pass Resolution 2139 on the provision of humanitarian aid in Syria. This was seen as a sign that, with hundreds of thousands of lives at stake and nearly three years into the conflict, Security Council members could agree, despite their political differences, on the importance of tackling human rights violations and

of consistent and widespread delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria. But, more than three months on, the needed step change has not happened.

Civilians continue to be targeted with indiscriminate attacks on residential areas. Humanitarian agencies continue to be denied access to enable the delivery of much-needed aid. In April, less than 10 per cent of people in hard-to-reach or besieged areas received humanitarian assistance. The Security Council is divided over what needs to be done to ensure the implementation of the strong statements it supported in Resolution 2139. This division is impeding progress. Long-term differences between countries with influence on the Syrian Government or with armed groups on the ground are being played out diplomatically and militarily. Another

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complicating factor is the proliferation of factions on both sides of the conflict. Over the past three years, hundreds of armed groups have been formed in Syria.

In February, during negotiations for a humanitarian pause and the evacuation of civilians from Homs, differences emerged between the governor and some local militias allied with the government. On the opposition side, divisions among armed groups have developed into open warfare. Conducting access negotiations with multiple armed groups, including some designated as terrorist organisations by the UN and some member states, is a complex and, at times, dangerous task. These divisions inevitably have an impact on the implementation of Resolution 2139. There is no unified approach; the overriding necessity of getting aid to millions

of people is lost as countries, factions and armed groups push competing agendas and impose conflicting demands and conditions. As happens so often in conflict situations, the humanitarian agenda is pushed into second place, behind political objectives.

Massive humanitarian operation

UN agencies are already engaged in a massive humanitarian operation in Syria, thanks to the courage and dedication of their staff and their implementing partners on the ground. These partners include the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which has lost more than 30 of its volunteer staff to the conflict, and other national and international non-governmental organisations. UN agencies and partner organisations are reaching millions of people every month with food, clean water

supplies, healthcare and household goods. This requires constant negotiations with the government and with armed groups so that relief supplies can be taken across conflict lines and across borders. But the gap between the needs and what humanitarian efforts are able to do to meet them is huge, and growing all the time. When Syrians ask me why the world has abandoned them, I have no answer.

With an estimated 5,000 people dying each month, each of us needs to ask: what will it take for the international community to demonstrate the political will to find a solution to the crisis in Syria? How can we best support and help the people of Syria? It is crucial that all UN member states fulfil their responsibilities under the UN Charter, not only for the sake of the people of Syria, but for the people of the world. ■