

# Brussels Syria pledging conference meets amid upsurge in Idlib violence

Foreign ministers from more than 50 countries gathered on Thursday at a joint European Union-UN pledging conference seeking nearly \$9 billion in lifesaving support for Syria, as the threat of intensifying conflict loomed once again across the war-torn country.

In a video appeal to those attending the high-stakes event, UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) urged countries to “renew your financial, humanitarian and political commitments to the Syrian people, and to the countries and communities hosting refugees”.

He added: “Only a political solution based on [Security Council Resolution 2254](#) can bring sustainable peace to Syria.”

In Brussels, UN emergency relief chief and head of [OCHA](#), [Mark Lowcock](#) expressed increasing alarm at the deteriorating situation in Idlib in the north-west of Syria, where more than 90 people were killed by shelling and airstrikes last month, nearly half of them children.

His comments follow reported airstrikes on the opposition-held Governorate of Idlib, which is home to around three million people and numerous armed groups, who established themselves there are being driven from previous rebel strongholds.

Describing the conflict as “one of the great crises of our time”, Mr. Lowcock added that a large-scale military assault on Idlib “would create the worst humanitarian catastrophe the world has seen in the 21st century”.

Elsewhere in Syria, “many places are calmer than a year ago”, the UN official added, before warning that the “last pockets of ISIL-controlled land” in the north-east are experiencing “ongoing and even escalating violence”.

Apart from the constant threat of violence, Syrian families face increasing hardship, Mr. Lowcock explained, with eight in 10, living below the poverty line and food-costs six times higher than before the war.

Healthcare provision is “hopelessly inadequate”, the UN official continued, from maternal to reproductive services, nutrition support and treatment for disease, while the majority of the 6.2 million people displaced inside Syria need help with shelter.

## **Hopeful signs from Brussels**

By the middle of the day, Mr. Lowcock told journalists that it looked as if “at least \$6.5 billion” and possibly close to \$7 billion had been pledged. “That is a very significant result and if that is where we end up at the end of the day we will be pleased,” he said.

"Firstly, because this will be an important signal of the international community solidarity with the people of Syria inside the country and with the neighbours of Syria hosting huge numbers of refugees feeling the strain of that generosity. Secondly, having the position clarified on funding levels so early in the year gives us confidence that we will be able to sustain very high level of programming throughout the year."

### **Needs are becoming more, not less, severe: Grandi**

Echoing that message, [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#), Filippo Grandi, warned that "needs are becoming more, not less severe" for Syrian refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries and the "many" Syrians returning home.

Despite these returns, Mr. Grandi suggested that it would be some time before larger numbers of people left neighbouring countries, owing to huge level of destruction to basic infrastructure inside Syria, along with ongoing insecurity and a lack of basic essentials.

The High Commissioner called for "more predictable investments" from donors to alleviate the strain on host communities in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, where governments were finding that it was "a difficult sell for them to tell their populations that they have to continue to host large numbers of Syrians".

### **Conflict 'not over yet': EU's Mogherini**

Conference co-host Federica Mogherini, the EU's top foreign affairs official, underlined the need to show solidarity with the people of Syria and demonstrate support for a UN-led political solution. The more than eight-year conflict is "not over yet", she said.

"We want the people of Syria not to be forgotten at a moment when the international community seems to care a little bit less about this," Ms. Mogherini added. "A military situation...might be developing in one sense or another, but what is clear to anybody is that winning the peace will require a political, Syrian-owned process led by the United Nations in Geneva."

Today, 12 million Syrians are either refugees or displaced inside Syria, around half of the pre-war population.

Under the UN appeal, \$3.3 billion is required to help those displaced inside Syria, and \$5.5 billion is needed for refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries.

Without continued funding, humanitarian activities "would be interrupted, cutting deliveries of life-saving food, water, health, shelter and protection", Mr. Lowcock warned.