

Thousands risk lives fleeing fighting in Syria's last ISIL stronghold

North-east Syria is seeing increasing numbers of civilian casualties and large-scale displacement amid intensifying efforts to defeat extremists from ISIL, otherwise known as Da'esh, in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), said on Friday.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, spokesperson Andrej Mahecic warned that, in recent months, clashes and airstrikes in the eastern governorate's Hajin enclave – once part of an ISIL stronghold straddling the Syria and Iraq border – have forced tens of thousands of people to flee northwards in search of safety.

“Over the past six months more than 25,000 people have been displaced in that part of the country, said Mr. Mahecic. ‘We have seen an increase, especially with the escalation that has occurred in the course of December.’”

Those at risk include “many” women, children and the elderly, the UN official said, adding that many families reaching the safety of Al Hol refugee camp in north-east Syria near the border with Iraq had risked their lives to do so. “The dangerous and difficult journey and the conditions inside the enclave are reported to have led to the deaths of six children – all under 12 months. Most died after arriving at Al Hol, too weak to survive,” the UN spokesperson explained.

Emergency health teams in the camp are tending to “wounds, amputated limbs, injuries and frostbite”, Mr. Mahecic continued, before adding that some of those fleeing the fighting had spent “four nights or more” in the desert, in heavy rain and cold weather, with barely any belongings. “People coming out of the conflict zone do also have wounds that have been inflicted. We also know that many of them tell us that they have been targeted while they were fleeing.”

Urging all parties “and those with influence over them” to ensure freedom of movement and safe passage for displaced families, the UNHCR spokesperson explained that the crisis is far from over. “This is still going on and people are arriving daily,” Mr. Mahecic said. “Through the desert, trying to move through the different checkpoints and reach safety in the camps and other areas outside the conflict zone.”

Together with its partners, UNHCR teams inside Syria prioritize protection for unaccompanied or separated children, while also identifying and helping those in need of medical assistance. Tents and other essential relief items are provided to new arrivals, while communal facilities are being scaled up to prepare for an expected increase of arrivals from Hajin.

“It’s estimated right now that 2,000 people remain in the conflict-affected

area of Hajin," Mr. Mahecic explained. "Those fleeing report increasingly desperate conditions, with diminishing services and extremely high prices for basic foods. We are worried for civilians who continue to be trapped in ISIL-held areas."