

High Commissioner for Refugees warns of moment of truth for Syria, risk of unmanageable crisis

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UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres on Tuesday told United States senators that Syria's worsening humanitarian crisis risks overwhelming the international community's capacity to respond.

"All of the agencies involved in this humanitarian response are dramatically underfunded, with some fearing they will run out of money as early as Easter [March 31]," Guterres told the US Senate's Foreign Relations subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs in Washington, D.C. "I appeal to governments and parliaments to urgently approve extraordinary funding for the victims of the Syria crisis, to ensure that their most basic needs are met and the stability of the region preserved."

Last week, Guterres visited Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, where he met with Syrian refugees, government officials and host communities.

"The refugee numbers are staggering, but they cannot convey the full extent of the tragedy," said Guterres on Tuesday, noting that three-quarters of the 1.1 million Syrian refugees were women and children. "There are harrowing reports of rape and sexual abuse of women and children," he added, noting the need to fund programmes for victims of sexual violence and women at risk.

He stressed the "severe pressure" that the host countries are under and called for international solidarity. "Helping them deal with the consequences of the refugee crisis is imperative, as the preservation of their economic and social stability is in everyone's essential interest," he added.

The High Commissioner told the senators that the most tragic consequences of the crisis were being felt inside Syria, with an estimated 3.6 million people displaced and many more in need of aid. He noted UNHCR's commitment to delivering aid to all those in need, in both opposition and government-controlled areas and highlighted the high security risks faced by UN agencies and NGOs inside Syria as they try to assist displaced people.

"Convoys have been shot at, hijacked, warehouses destroyed and looted, and several UN-contracted truck drivers have been killed since the beginning of the conflict," said Guterres.

The High Commissioner expressed his appreciation for the tremendous financial support provided by the US for the humanitarian response, but warned the members of the sub-committee of "a real risk of this conflict spilling over across the region."

He said that "what is happening in Syria today risks escalating very quickly into disaster that could overwhelm the international response capacity - political, security-related and humanitarian." He closed his

statement calling for a political solution, insisting that: “If this conflict is not stopped, we will probably have an explosion in the Middle East. Nobody wants that.”

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