

Repatriation of foreign children in Syria slowed by COVID-19, as new footage emerges of life in camps

Save the Children is calling on all states with nationals trapped in the camps to step up efforts to return them, with urgent action needed for medical cases

Amman, 1 February 2021 — The repatriation of foreign children living in camps in North East Syria to their home countries has declined to an unacceptable level in 2020, new data shows, as the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic. Save the Children has released new footage of the ‘Annex’, a part of the Al Hol camp where the children from foreign fighters are kept.

Some 27,500 children are waiting to be repatriated, Save the Children said. With living conditions in the camps deteriorating rapidly, the agency is calling on all states with nationals trapped in the camps to step up efforts to return them, with a particular urgency for medical cases.

New figures gathered by Save the Children show that the number of children repatriated from North East Syria dropped to an estimated 200 children in 2020, from 685 in the previous year. The numbers of repatriations fell from 29 in 2019 to 17 in 2020.

This leaves around 42,500 foreign and Iraqi nationals, 27,500 of whom are children, in camps where overcrowding, disease and violence are rampant.¹ Of the children, 90 percent are under twelve years old.

So far, 975 children have been repatriated from Syria since 2017, 70 per cent of whom were returned home to safety in 2019.

Save the Children’s Syria Response Director Sonia Khush said:

“These new figures show that before the outbreak of the virus, things were finally starting to move in the right direction. But sadly, for many children, the opportunity for a better life has been put on hold as repatriations by international governments decreased notably throughout 2020.

“Yet we know it is still possible. Last month [France repatriated seven children](#), and in September a [British child](#) supported by Save the Children was taken back home to safety. It is possible to save a young life when the political will is there.

“Of the children left in these camps, 90% were no more than two years old when the conflict in Syria began almost ten years ago. Many of them will have known nothing but war. There should be no place in conflict for children.”

While the exact number of COVID-19 cases in North East camps are unknown, there are fears that the virus is spreading rapidly within communities since the first case was [identified](#) in Al Hol in autumn last year. Lack of access to adequate healthcare, hygiene items, clean water and testing might be contributing to an outbreak that remains undetected, while poor nutrition and sanitary conditions mean other [illnesses are also rife](#), [Save the Children said](#).

¹ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17512/pdf/childrens_crisis_report_06052020.pdf

Violence also features heavily in children's day-to-day lives, with twelve deaths recorded in Al Hol camp over the first two weeks of January.² Save the Children has previously [warned](#) that children and their families living in such conditions are at risk of violence, abuse, and deliberate poisoning.

Sonia Khush continued:

“Foreign children in displacement camps in North East Syria are living through the hardest conditions imaginable; those who get sick are unlikely to receive treatment. They don't have access to clean water or adequate food. Recent examples of violence and fears of a mass COVID-19 outbreak only add to their suffering.”

“Like millions of Syria's children, children of foreign fighters have endured years of conflict, loss, and deprivation. It is critical that they are supported to recover from their experiences and restore a sense of normality.”

Save the Children calls on foreign states to honour their legal obligations and take concrete steps to identify, repatriate, rehabilitate and reintegrate children. The organisation urges international governments to prioritise medical cases with an urgent need for treatment.

ENDS

Notes to editors

- The number of repatriations does not necessarily correlate with the total number of children repatriated and vice versa. Often, repatriations will involve several children at one time.
- Save the Children is delivering programmes in Nutrition, Education and Child Protection in the Al Hol Annex, a section of the Al Hol camp for foreign nationals.
- In Al Hol camp, Save the Children is delivering gender-based violence (GBV) response, child-friendly spaces and interim care, as well as nonformal education and Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (IYCF-E).
- In Al Roj camp, Save the Children is delivering child protection activities, with a focus on case management, child friendly spaces and protection monitoring. In the Nutrition sector, Save the Children is managing Mother Baby Areas and providing IYCF-E services to pregnant and lactating mothers. Save the Children is also the lead Education actor in Roj Camp, and manages Temporary Learning Centre, and Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Centres.

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/united-nations-resident-coordinator-and-humanitarian-coordinator-syria-6>