Statement attributed to Ali Al-Za’tari, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, on the humanitarian situation in Nashabieh, East Ghouta

Damascus, 16 February 2018

On 14 February, after 78 days without any access to East Ghouta, an inter-agency convoy of the UN and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered life-saving food, nutrition and health assistance to 7,200 people in Nashabieh. Whilst this development is welcome, it is absolutely insufficient. The people reached represent 2.6 per cent of the 272,500 people in need in East Ghouta. Much needed water and sanitation, education materials and non-food items, such as kitchen sets, blankets and plastic sheets, were not allowed to be loaded in the convoy.

In Nashabieh, the UN technical team of the World Food Programme, UNICEF and the World Health Organization found a tired and exhausted population following long months of isolation. Families are forced to skip meals, some only having one meal a day. A young ailing girl informed the team she has been eating yogurt and nothing else. Some basic commodities are available in the market, but stocks are running dangerously low and prices are prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of people. The rations delivered will be shared among families, with five families sharing one basket. This is not enough to sustain them for long.

The increasing levels of food insecurity are impacting children. The UN team witnessed a number of cases of severe acute malnutrition amid growing reports of an impending crisis. Healthcare workers at Shofiniyeh hospital reportedly screened 317 children under five in the last two weeks with 69 cases of acute malnutrition and 127 of children at risk. C-sections now account for 25 per cent of all births, likely caused by malnutrition among women and their lack of strength to give birth.

Health is also a concern, with medical facilities running out of critical supplies. The UN team saw expired anesthetics, the use of which has resulted in two deaths. Reports of cases of communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, typhoid fever and scabies also emerged. Vaccines are running low, with the last campaign carried out in November 2017, and 600 children now reportedly at risk. The overall lack of medical staff and supplies, combined with the effects of conflict-related trauma cases, has significantly increased the number of people requiring medical evacuation from East Ghouta.

The escalation in hostilities over the last weeks has also caused people to flee their homes, with reports of hundreds of families desperate enough to seek refuge in other parts of East Ghouta many of which are not safer.

People in need must be served, wherever they are. If Nashabieh is a sample of communities in need, then the situation is far graver than imagined. People are in need across the country and all must be served. The UN in Syria urges all parties, and those with influence over them, to allow for immediate, safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all in need, particularly those in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. To do so, we repeat our call for an urgently required one-month cessation of hostilities. We will continue appealing for access to all those in need, and remind those responsible of their obligation to grant it under international humanitarian law.

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