Terrified of going home. ShelterBox aid shades families sleeping outdoors after the Syria chemical incident

Photos just in from Syria are of families huddling in open countryside, fearful of returning to the town where so many died in last week’s chemical incident that shocked the world. ShelterBox aid distributed by partner charity Hand in Hand for Syria brings them a little comfort.

These photos just received at ShelterBox HQ from partners ‘Hand in Hand for Syria’ show families that fled their home town of Khan Sheikhoun after last week’s chemical incident. The reported gas poisoning, at 6.30 am local time on 4 April, is said to have killed 74 people and injured over 550.

Here, in a makeshift camp many miles away from Khan Sheikhouen, dozens of families have been sleeping in the open ever since the air strike, too traumatised to return home. People often flee towns after bombing raids, but once bombardments are over they usually feel able to go back home. This time it is different. The scenes they witnessed were too frightening, and the thought of further chemical warfare is too dreadful.

Despite ShelterBox and Hand in Hand supplying tarpaulins, ropes and other aid items, conditions here are still very basic. Daytime temperatures are around 20 degrees, but nights are chilly, and frequent rain and thunderstorms can turn the desert scrub into quagmire. This makeshift camp has little in the way of facilities, shelter or wind protection. Tarpaulins are stretched between flimsy trees providing only limited cover.
As well as acting as an in-country distributor of ShelterBox aid, Hand in Hand for Syria also runs eight hospitals, health centres, mobile clinics, ambulances and other emergency vehicles. After the chemical incident they saw over 70 cases, and transported many to Turkey. Eight were pronounced dead at their facilities.

ShelterBox Operations Coordinator Sam Hewett says, ‘We are more often used to seeing ShelterBox aid used in managed displacement camps. But these people have abandoned their homes in the most awful circumstances, and need shelter where they are now, however basic.’

‘ShelterBox is pleased that our colleagues in Hand in Hand for Syria were able to respond so quickly to this crisis. Their medical and ambulance teams were in Khan Sheikhoun to help men, women and children get treatment straight away, and now over a week after the gassing they are looking after families too scared to return home.’

‘ShelterBox supporters will be pleased to see their donations put to such prompt and effective use, and with the help of our in-country partners we will continue taking aid to Syria’s most vulnerable.’

Hand in Hand for Syria has been delivering ShelterBox aid to displacement camps across norther Syria, including those nearby Khan Sheikhoun. But there are already more displaced people in this area than the camps have capacity for, which severely limits the kind of aid that can be provided to those who have most recently been displaced.

Already in 2017 ShelterBox relief has been provided to 3,430 households, and to over 20,000 families since the war began. In the last five years ShelterBox supporters have funded around £2.5 million worth of aid in this region.

Hand in Hand for Syria is a UK registered charity that was set up soon after the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Established by a group of British-Syrians, it is one of very few aid agencies able to operate on the ground inside Syria, with more than 300 members of staff working in the war-torn country.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

- The photos above are free to use in the context of this press release, but please credit ©Hand in Hand for Syria
- More information on Hand in Hand for Syria https://hihfad.org/
- ShelterBox can offer expert interviews on this subject. Please bid via marknicholson@shelterbox.org or Tel 07584 489194