Forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad gained ground in the cities of Idlib and Deraa last week intensifying efforts against the opposition. The uprising is approaching its first anniversary with no negotiated settlement in sight. The United Nations estimates some 8,000 people, many of them civilians, have died in the increasingly bloody revolt.
THE ARAB SPRING MOVEMENT

- Syria was not immune to the pro-democracy Arab Spring movements. Anti-government protests erupted in the southern governorate of Daraa in mid-March 2011 and quickly spread to other parts of the country.

- For nearly a year, security forces have responded, killing at least civilian protesters and detaining thousands, including children under age 18.

- In response to the protest movement, the Syrian government enacted several reforms, such as lifting the state of emergency that had been in place since 1963, introducing a new media law, and granting citizenship to stateless Kurds. However, armed action has continued on both sides.

NOVEMBER 2011 TO PRESENT

- Since Nov 2011, the government’s use of armed forces against opposition groups has been characterized as “collective punishment” of civilians. With both pro- and anti-government groups engaging in violence, there is concern that the situation will escalate into a full-blown civil war.

- The widespread violence and deteriorating socio-economic conditions have left many communities with difficulties in meeting basic needs.

THE OPPOSITION

- One of the main opposition groups, the Syrian National Council (SNC), is an umbrella organization that was formed by activists in Istanbul on 24 August. The SNC called for the Syrian government to be overthrown by a united opposition, rejected dialogue with President Assad, and, though officially against military intervention, requested international protection of the civilian population.

- Another main group, the National Co-ordination Committee (NCC) advocated for dialogue with the government, believing that toppling the Assad regime would lead to further chaos.

- On 31 Dec 2011, these two groups signed an agreement to unite against the government.

THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

- In late 2011, civilians and army defectors formed fighting units, which began an insurgency campaign against the Syrian Army. The insurgents unified under the banner of the Free Syrian Army and have fought in an increasingly organized fashion; however, the civilian component of the armed opposition lacked an organized leadership.

- The uprising has sectarian undertones, though neither faction has described sectarianism as playing a major role. The opposition is dominated by Sunni Muslims, whereas the leading government figures are Alawite Muslims.

- Western and Arab governments have considered options for response, including more aggressive diplomacy, providing arms to the rebels, or direct military intervention. These discussions have been encumbered by a lack of cohesion among the Syrian opposition, and allegations that foreign-based or terrorist-group-affiliated fighters are joining participating in the conflict.

SOURCES:
WORLD NEWS: SYRIAN REBELS FORM NATIONAL COUNCIL, 24 AUG 2011
BBC: GUIDE TO THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION, 1 MAR 2011
AL JAZEERA: ARAB MISSION WARNS SYRIA AS OPPOSITION UNITES, 01 JAN 2012
PBS: INSIDE THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY, 12 MARCH 2012
NYTIMES: SYRIA EXPANDS ASSAULT, Hitting Rebel Forces in City In Northm 13 MAR 2012
OVERVIEW

• Heavy violence continues to be reported in the Karm al-Zaytoun neighborhood of Homs, the northwestern Idlib province, and the eastern city of Deir al-Zor.

• Syrian forces have placed land mines near the borders with Lebanon and Turkey, resulting in more civilian casualties (HRW 13 MAR 2012).

DIPLOMATIC FRONT

• UN Security Council officials from 15 countries met on 12 March 2012 to discuss upcoming regional challenges in light of the past year's Arab uprisings. However, the focus of the discussions turned to the crisis in Syria.

• Despite mounting international pressure on Assad in the form of sanctions, he has significant allies, notably in Iran. And world powers remained at odds over how to tackle the crisis, with Russia and China continuing to back the Syrian leader.

• All of the countries are calling for a “cease fire” but it is unlikely that the Syrian government will comply until its opposition is crushed.

HUMANITARIAN FRONT

• On Monday, 12 March 2012, investigators told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva that Syria's government has subjected civilians to collective punishment, including executions and mass arrests in Homs.

• UN Humanitarian chief Valerie Amos was the first senior international official allowed into Homs since the month-long bombardment of the city. She reported widespread destruction. She has asked the Syrian government for aid access into the worst-hit areas. However, the Syrian government asked for more time to examine the agreement.

• Syrian Red Crescent workers were initially denied access to Homs, and upon entering, found the Bab Amr neighborhood empty of its residents.

SOURCES:
RELIEFWEB: ARMY PLANTING BANNED LANDMINES, 13 MAR 2012
COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS: MIDDLE EAST MATTERS, MARCH 2012
ICRC: SITUATION IN SYRIA LATEST UPDATE
VOA: SECURITY COUNCIL DIVIDED AMID CALLS FOR HALT TO SYRIAN VIOLENCE, 13 MAR 2012
On Wednesday, 14 March 2012, a joint team from the ICRC and Syrian Arab Red Crescent went to the towns of Rastan, Talbiseh and Al Zaafaraneh, in Homs province, to assess the need for humanitarian action. ICRC and Red Crescent teams spoke to the residents and conferred with local medical personnel.

The main needs that the joint team identified were: mattresses, blankets, food, baby formula, basic medicines and medication for chronic illnesses.

Residents who have remained in Rastan and Talbiseh are receiving aid from the Syrian Red Crescent.

WHO has received approval from the Syrian authorities to conduct a health facilities assessment of hospitals and primary health care facilities. The first stage of the assessment will cover four governorates: Darea, Rural Damascus, Homs and Der Al Zoor. This assessment will target primary health care and public hospitals and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

WHO has received request from nongovernmental organizations for life-saving medicines, trauma kits, international emergency humanitarian kits and noncommunicable disease kits.

The number of displaced Syrians currently registered with UNHCR and the High Relief Commission (HRC) in north Lebanon is 7,913 persons. Many of the newly registered are in the Tripoli area.

The vast majority of new arrivals to Lebanon have come into the Bekaa from Homs, Qusayr, Zabadani and Hama.

From 9-16 March, 40 wounded Syrians were admitted to Lebanese hospitals (1 died). This bring the total admitted for wounds to 307 since September 2011.

During 9-16 March 2012, thousands of refugees streamed into Turkey from Syria, as the crackdown by Syrian government forces moved north towards the Turkish border.

About 14,700 Syrians are in eight camps set up in Turkey’s southern provinces of Hatay and Gaziantep.

UNHCR says 23,000 people have received protection there since April 2011, but many have returned to Syria.

The Turkish government plans to move most of the refugees to a purpose-built container city in Kilis province.

Turkey's prime minister has warned Damascus that they are considering creating a buffer zone in Syria to stem the stream of Syrian refugees fleeing over the border.

In Jordan 5,391 Syrians have been registered over the last year, and about 2,000 are awaiting registration.
NUMBER OF DEATHS FROM THE CONFLICT

NUMBER OF DEATHS REPORTED BY GOVERNORATES (18 MAR 2011 – 12 MAR 2012)

NUMBER OF DEATHS REPORTED AS MALE, FEMALE AND CHILDREN (18 MAR 2011 – 12 MAR 2012)

TOTAL NUMBER OF DEATHS REPORTED PER DAY (18 MAR 2011 – 12 MAR 2012)

SOURCE: RELIEF WEB: SITUATION MAP, 12 MAR 2012
MEDICAL SERVICES

- Over the past months, several reports have documented that hospitals, patients, and medical professionals have been targeted by the state (see VIOLATIONS OF MEDICAL NEUTRALITY).

- In October 2011, Amnesty International published a report detailing how hospital facilities are becoming places of torture for wounded individuals and that healthcare workers are being targeted by government forces. Since its publication, further reports and video evidence has substantiated these actions.

- Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in February 2012 released evidence in a dossier of testimonies from wounded patients treated outside the country and doctors inside Syria taken between Jan 30 and Feb 6, 2012. According to the testimonies:
  - There is a heavy presence of government forces inside hospitals
  - Injured detainees are being denied access to medical care
  - Severe delays in treatment are occurring.
  - Basic medical supplies are in short supply
  - There are suspicions of torture and the possible execution of injured protesters inside hospitals.

- In Homs, the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that the situation is particularly dire for the injured:
  - Hundreds of severely wounded civilians are not able to use the hospitals.
  - Medical personnel lack medication, anesthesia, surgical equipment, and in some cases, water and power to perform surgery.
  - Doctors are being detained for working in field hospitals or helping bring medical supplies to the wounded.
  - Possession of drugs and basic medical materials, such as gauze, is currently considered a crime of complicity with the rebellion.

- These circumstances have encouraged the development of an underground health care network, which faces a unique set of challenges as it struggles to provide care for civilians (see VIOLATIONS OF MEDICAL NEUTRALITY).

- Syrian residents are also fleeing the country to seek medical treatment in Lebanon and Turkey.

HEALTHCARE WORKERS

- Healthcare employees at private hospitals are being watched by government forces because they have started to provide patients with false diagnosis in order to treat them for wounds sustained during clashes so they do not have to report them to the government.

- As a result of being watched, private hospital employees are setting up ad hoc medical equipment in alley ways and homes to treat the wounded. However, these ad hoc facilities have limited or no medical supplies.

POPULATION AT RISK:

- In areas of Syria where the conflict in recent days has become more widespread, residents do not have adequate supplies of water, sanitation, food, or medicine.

- The situation remains difficult in many parts of the country. Needs are great in Homs and Idlib following the recent fighting there and in other affected regions.

- The ICRC and other international organizations have had limited access to the parts of the country involved, so their ability to provide medical assistance and supplies is limited.

- Cold weather and a deteriorating economic situation are making it even harder for people to cope.

SOURCES:
USA TODAY, SYRIAN FORCES TARGET DOCTORS AND PATIENTS, 13 MAR 2012
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: SYRIAN GOVERNMENT TARGETS WOUNDED AND HEALTH WORKERS, SEPT 2012
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT: A new report, issued by Amnesty International on 14 Mar 2012, contains testimony by survivors of abuses by Syrian forces including torture of detainees, shelling civilian areas, firing live ammunition at peaceful protesters, carrying out extrajudicial executions and arbitrary arrests, burning and looting homes, targeting medical professionals, and denying treatment to injured protesters. The report, titled “I WANTED TO DIE: SYRIA’S TORTURE SURVIVORS SPEAK OUT”, accuses the Syrian government of “a widespread – as well as systematic – attack on the civilian population,” amounting to crimes against humanity.
MSF, SYRIA: MEDICINE AS A WEAPON OF PERSECUTION
THE LANCET, SYRIA’S HEALTH AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS, 18 FEB 2012
CURRENT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- Although it has been difficult to obtain independent evaluations, stakeholders – including the Ministry of Health (MoH), local NGOs and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) – agree that there is acute need for:
  
  - Restoring trauma management capacity and referral systems in the affected areas, including ambulance transport capacity.
  
  - Addressing the lack of medicines and supplies, especially in relation to trauma care and chronic diseases.
  
  - Ensuring the ongoing provision of basic health services, with particular emphasis on child health, maternal health, and chronic disease care.
  
  - Strengthening health workforce in specific areas with mobile clinics and fixed health posts.

PLANNED INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENTS

- The Syrian government will allow the UN to assess the basic medical needs of Syrians in four areas where opposition forces have clashed with government troops and to carry out a preliminary humanitarian needs assessment.

- This rapid health sector needs assessment will be conducted by WHO and UNFPA, and will take place in Homs, Dara'a, Der Ezzour and Rural Damascus.

- This is a rare opportunity for the two UN agencies to gain access to Syria. Their success in conducting the assessment will depend on the cooperation of local medical students, SARC aid workers, and other NGOs.

DEPLOYMENT OF AID

- On 7 March 2012, WHO hosted the first inter-agency Health Sector Coordination meeting, bringing together UN agencies, international NGOs, and SARC. These coordination meetings will take place on a weekly basis.

- A rapid response team composed of an Emergency Coordinator and a Public Health Officer has been deployed to reinforce coordination.

MENTAL HEALTH

- Children are especially affected by stress and violence related to the conflict. UNICEF has issued several statements condemning the impact of the situation on children in Syria, and called for all parties to protect children better.

- UNICEF is assisting displaced Syrian children in Jordan, with psychosocial services and remedial education for 120 children in Ramtha and 180 in Ma'an.

Men picking up shipments of blood smuggled into Syria from Turkey, for treatment of wounded from the fighting in Hama. PHOTO: Natasha Fillion

SOURCES:
RELIEFWEB: WHO, PALAIS BRIEFING NOTES, 9 MAR 2012
RELIEFWEB: ICRC SITUATION UPDATE, 9 MAR 12
LANCET: SYRIA'S HEALTH AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS, 18 FEB 2012
HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH: COUNTRY SUMMARY JANUARY 2012
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: SYRIAN GOVERNMENT TARGETS WOUNDED AND HEALTH WORKERS, SEPT 2012
VIOLATIONS OF MEDICAL NEUTRALITY

- Widespread violations of medical neutrality have been reported from within Syria and by neutral observers. Government forces have invaded, attacked, and misused hospitals and medical transports, preventing civilians from receiving health care.

- People wounded in protests or other incidents related to the uprising have been verbally abused and physically assaulted in state run hospitals, including by medical staff, and in some cases denied medical care. Many of those taken to hospitals have been detained.

- In Homs, one of Syria’s major cities and governorates, government security forces have obstructed ambulances on their way to pick up wounded people and when ferrying the wounded to hospital, threatened Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) workers with violence or detention, and interrogated wounded patients while they were being transported in ambulances.

- Health care workers who encounter people wounded in the unrest face the dilemma of whether to obey the government’s instructions and report patients to the authorities – knowing that this may lead to the patients’ arrest, detention, and possible torture – or to ignore or disobey those instructions, and expose themselves to reprisals.

- An estimated 250 doctors have been detained and tortured for treating wounded civilians.

- An investigation by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) revealed that these circumstances have led to the rise of an underground health network:
  - Many people are now reportedly avoiding state-run hospitals if they or their relatives have been wounded during the protests and unrest.
  - They are turning to private hospitals, or to makeshift field hospitals that have been set up by some communities to treat the wounded.
  - However, these hospitals face problems in obtaining adequate medical supplies, including blood for use in transfusions, which can only be obtained from the Central Blood Bank controlled by the Ministry of Defense.

NOTE: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, PHR, and others have not been able to conduct research on the ground in Syria; like other international human rights organizations, most international journalists, and other independent observers, they have been effectively barred by the government from visiting Syria since the current protests and unrest broke out in mid-March.
POPULATION DISPLACEMENT

UNHCR

- In mid-March 2012, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) António Guterres has appointed Panos Moumtzis, previously UNHCR’s Head of Donor Relations, as its Regional Refugee Coordinator for Syrian Refugees, to address the rising number of displaced persons.

- According to UNHCR’s registration figures, around 30,000 people have fled to neighboring countries, and significant numbers of Syrians are believed to be displaced inside Syria. UNHCR’s teams in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have been working for the past year to support the governments and NGOs by providing refugees with shelter, assistance, and protection.

- Despite its own conflict, the Syrian government has stated it remains committed to hosting and supporting 110,000 refugees registered with UNHCR, the majority of whom are from Iraq.

- To date, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have all maintained a policy of open borders for Syrians fleeing the violence. The bulk of assistance to refugees is being offered by the host countries and local communities.

TURKEY

- Almost 23,000 persons have received protection in seven camps in Hatay province since April 2011. Although some of this population has returned to Syria, the total camp population still numbers over 13,000 refugees [DATE].

- The government of Turkey plans to move the majority of refugees to Kilis province, where a purpose-built container city has been prepared.

- UNHCR has established a permanent presence in Hatay to support the efforts of the government, with a plan to establish an office in Kilis.

- Primary health care is provided in the camps, and anyone with a more serious medical need is treated in the hospital in Antakya. All medical services are free of charge, including prescriptions, optical, and dental care.

LEBANON

- Lebanon officials estimate that they received between 11,000 and 15,000 Syrians; approximately 40% are children under 10 and pregnant women with small children. However, only 7,913 have registered with the UNHCR.

- Primary health care is available through public and private clinics, with UNHCR covering most of the costs. Serious conditions and the wounded are referred to five hospitals in North Lebanon, with the cost of care covered by the government. Some 268 wounded persons have been treated since the beginning of the influx.

JORDAN

- The Jordanian Health Aid Society (JHAS), estimates that approximately 9,000 Syrian refugees are in Jordan and in need of aid. 5,391 Syrians have registered with UNHCR since March 2011, with a further 2,000 awaiting registration.

- The majority of refugees are living with host families, from Irbid and Ramtha in the North and as far as Amman and Maan in the south of Jordan.

- JHAS has a mobile clinic making regular visits to Ramtha and Mafraq, with the government covering the cost of medical treatment in Mafraq.

SOURCES:
RELIEFWEB: UNHCR APPOINTS REGIONAL REFUGEE COORDINATOR, 13 MAR 2012
AFP: SYRIAN REFUGEES ON THE RISE AT TURKISH BOARDER, 9 MAR 2012
NYT: UNDER COVER OF THE NIGHT, SYRIANS CROSS INTO SAFETY
ALERTNET: SYRIAN GUARDS SHOOT FLEEING REFUGEES, 2 MAR 2012
BBC: SYRIANS FLEE TO LEBANON AMID HOMS ATROCITY CLAIMS, 6 MAR 2012

A family in Idlib, Syria, after a tank shell hit their home on 4 March 2012. (PHOTO: Rodrigo Abd/AP)
FOOD INSECURITY

- According to the World Food Programme (WFP), since the start of the uprising, around 1.4 million people are at risk for food insecurity, mainly in conflict areas such as Homs, Hama, Damascus, Daraa, and Idleb.

- The conflict has affected herders by limiting livestock mobility, access to water and pasture, and supply of veterinary medicines.

- An estimated 300,000 small farmers and herders in northeastern provinces, who have already suffered four consecutive seasons of drought, are also affected by the loss of opportunities from seasonal labor migration to the south and east.

- The UN Food and Agriculture Office (FAO) and WFP have distributed food aid and vouchers for 100,000 people (UN).

- Although international agencies currently cannot reach the most affected areas, the UN has put together a 90-day plan to provide emergency food to 1.5 million people in Syria (ALERTNET).

IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

- According to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, inflation increased between June and Dec 2011 by about 15%, mainly driven by sharp increases in food prices and by fuel shortages that are impacting transportation costs.

- Overall, the economic downturn is also expected to impact the government’s fiscal capacity to support current consumer and producer subsidies.

SOURCES:

UN NEWS CENTRE: UN-ARAB LEAGUE ENVOY RECEIVES RESPONSE FROM SYRIA, 14 MAR 2012
GIEWS: GLOBAL INFORMATION AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEM ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE, 14 MAR 2012
IRIN: INSECURITY MAKES DROUGHT-HIT FARMERS EVEN MORE VULNERABLE, 17 FEB 2012
IRIN: ANALYSIS: WORRYING SIGNS FOR FOOD SECURITY IN SYRIA, 21 FEB 2012
ALERTNET: U.N. DRAWS UP SYRIA AID PLAN TO FEED 1.5 MILLION, 8 MAR 2012

Syrian herder in the drought-hit area. (PHOTO: Joe Bombardier/Flickr)
SEXUAL ASSAULT

- A fact-finding mission was dispatched by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) to investigate alleged violations of human rights in the conflict between the Syrian Arab Republic government and opposition forces.

- While the commission was not allowed into Syria, it interviewed 180 victims and 223 witnesses, including civilians, and defectors from Syrian military and security forces. The commission documented a number of reports of conflict-related sexual violence, including sexual assault, rape, and sexual torture.

- The commission found that sexual torture was used on male detainees by Syrian military and security forces in facilities of political detention and military intelligence centers in Damascus, Jisr Al Shughour, Idlib, Al Ladhiqiyah, and Tartus.

- Detainees reported threats of rape against them and their families. Testimony was received from several men who stated that they had been anally raped with batons and that they had witnessed the rape of boys between the ages of 11-15.

- Defectors from the military and the security forces indicated that they had been present in places of detention where women were sexually assaulted. The commission received limited evidence of this.

- According to the Syrian government, incidents of sexual violence against women and girls have also been committed by members of the armed groups participating in the uprising.

- Despite widespread reports and rumors of mass rape being used by various groups as a weapon of intimidation, specific incidents and survivors have been hard to identify, in part due to the displacement of affected populations and the strong cultural taboos and shame associated with rape.

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL: On 1 Mar 2012, the UNHRC, in a resolution adopted by a vote of 37 in favor, 2 opposed and abstention, condemned “the continued widespread and systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian authorities, such as the use of force against civilians, arbitrary executions, the killing and persecution of protestors, human rights defenders and journalists, including recent deaths of Syrian and foreign journalists, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, interference with access to medical treatment, torture, sexual violence and ill-treatment, including against children.”

A Syrian woman walks in a refugee camp in the Altinozu district in Turkey on 17 June 2011 (Photo: Mustafa Ozer / AFP / Getty Images)

SOURCES:
UN: CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE. REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL, 13 JAN 2012
TIME: STORIES OF MASS RAPE – SIFTING THROUGH RUMOR AND TABOO IN SYRIA, 20 JUN 2011
VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS AND CHILDREN

MASSACRE IN HOMS

• The Local Coordination Committees of Syria, a network of opposition activists, said at least 45 women and children had been murdered and burned in the Homs district of Karm al-Zeitoun on 11 March 2012. The opposition accuses pro-government militiamen, known as "shabiha", of perpetrating the killings.

• The Syrian Network for Human Rights has reported that 31 bodies have been recovered. The group describes children being stabbed to death in front of their mothers, and women and minor girls sexually assaulted before being shot. Some of the bodies had their throats slit, while others bore marks of torture.

• Syrian officials have confirmed the deaths, but attributed the deaths to "armed terrorist groups", blaming these groups for kidnapping, killing, and mutilating civilians in order to show their bodies to media outlets.

• UNICEF issued a statement denouncing the reported killings and demanding that all sides in this crisis live up to their responsibility to safeguard children.

ARAB LEAGUE RESPONSE: Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Elaraby has called for "an international neutral investigation into the massacres of Homs, Hama, Idlib, Baba Amr, and other areas where dozens of citizens including women and children were killed, leaving many questions on who committed them as they are clearly crimes against humanity". (CNN 13 MAR 2012)

UN RESPONSE: On 15 March 2012, the UN has announced that it will send a humanitarian delegation to Syria to assess the situation on the ground. The delegation will work with the Syrian government, as well as staff from the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, and will visit Homs, along with several other areas of recent conflict. (BBC 15 MAR 2012)

On the same day, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon issued a statement saying, "It is urgent to break the cycle of violence, stop military operations against civilians and prevent a further militarization of the conflict in Syria. The status quo in Syria is indefensible" (UN 15 MAR 2012). Earlier in the week, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, acting as UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, visited Damascus and presented President Assad with proposals for a process to end the crisis. The results of the meeting have not been specified (UN 14 MAR 2012).

SOURCES:
UN NEWS CENTRE: UN-ARAB LEAGUE ENVOY RECEIVES RESPONSE FROM SYRIA, 14 MAR 2012
UN NEWS CENTRE: STATUS QUO IN SYRIA "INDEFENSIBLE", BAN SAYS ON ANNIVERSARY, 15 MAR 2012
BBC: UN TO SEND HUMANITARIAN MISSION TO SYRIA, 15 MAR 2012
CNN: HOMS MASSACRE KILLS 45 WOMEN AND CHILDREN, SYRIAN OPPOSITION SAYS
UNICEF: UNICEF DENOUNCES KILLINGS OF CHILDREN, WOMEN IN SYRIAN CITY OF HOMS