

OCHA Syria | Flash Update #1

Humanitarian impact of military operation in north-eastern Syria
10 October 2019



Situation overview:

On 9 October, Turkey announced the start of military operations in north-eastern Syria home to an estimated 3 million people. The potential affected area includes SDF-controlled areas, where an estimated 2.2 million people live, including 1.3 million in need of humanitarian assistance, as well as Government-controlled Qamishli and Hassakeh city, hosting 450,000 people.

The scale of the current operations remains unclear, but partners are using a humanitarian planning figure of up to 100,000 people, noting that this figure is very susceptible to be revised depending on developments.

North-eastern Syria is one of the most complex operating environments in the country due to ongoing insecurity, high-levels of displacement and concerns about challenges as people move.



Humanitarian impact:

The humanitarian impact is difficult to ascertain. There have been reports of intense shelling and airstrikes all along the north-east Syrian border, from Jarablus to the west of the Euphrates to the Turkish/Syrian/Iraqi border. There are reports of shelling and casualties on the Turkish side of the border also. Air strikes were confirmed in Tell Abiad, Ras Al Ain, Ain Issa and Derek. Other areas such as Qamishli, Kobane, Darbasiyeh were affected by cross border fire. Local sources report that more than 50 locations were affected on 9 October in Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, Ain Issa, Al Malikeyyeh along the border between Syria and Turkey and areas 5 km east of Qamishli in north-eastern Syria. Qamishli airport was reportedly closed due to insecurity.

So far, reports indicate four civilians were killed as a result of hostilities. Initial reports indicate large numbers of people are on the move in search of safety from Ras Al Ain to Al-Hasakeh city, Tal Tamr town and to villages south of Ras Al Ain District. People in Tell Abiad have also been reported to be moving towards southern villages in the district and to Ar-Raqqa City, while people in Qamishli city have moved to areas in the countryside. Prior to the offensive, about 900 families reportedly left Tell Abiad city pre-emptively. By evening, unconfirmed reports suggest that a large proportion of the population of Tell Abiad and Ras Al Ain and other areas along the border have fled with estimates of 70,000 people newly displaced. Establishing accurate figures on the numbers of people displaced is difficult, with most people relying on local hosting arrangements such as staying with family in friends in areas further away from the border. However, there are a number of reports of schools being used as collective centres, with at least 5 schools reportedly hosting IDPs in Hassakeh city and two schools reportedly hosting IDPs in Tal Tamer Town. An NGO is conducting a Rapid Multi Sector Needs Assessment at the 5 reported schools in Hassakeh city and Tal Tamr today.

There has been at least one report of civilian infrastructure being damaged by hostilities, with the electrical line of the main water station serving Al-Hasakeh city and its surrounding villages affected by shelling and rendering it out of service. Damage to the electric line was immediately repaired but water technical team have not been able to reach the water station in Alok to re-establish the water supply due to clashes in that area. The Alok water station located 10 km east of Ras Alain city services water for Hasakeh city and all its surrounding villages. 400,000 of people in the area rely on this water source. This incident points to the elevated risk of hostilities on civilians in the area.

Humanitarian response and coordination:

Since hostilities began, a number of humanitarian partners in the northeast have temporally suspended movements and activities due to insecurity, or reviewed essential vs non-essential staff. However, UN and NGO staff remain on the ground and ready to respond, access and security permitting, with active discussions among sectors on needs, gaps and immediate response required. Local authorities have also reportedly imposed strict security measures at checkpoints.

In August, humanitarian partners reviewed and updated humanitarian planning assumptions, response readiness and availability of basic humanitarian supplies. This includes stocks of ready-to-eat food, shelter kits, clothing and other relief items, water, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition, health and protection services. With humanitarian partners already assisting an average of 850,000 people per month across the affected area, response capacity is already stretched.

Following the multi-sector needs assessment planned to take place today in Hassakeh and Tal Tamr, humanitarian actors plan to deliver emergency assistance to people who have left their homes and are likely to be particularly vulnerable in the absence of local support mechanisms. Humanitarian partners are on standby to provide emergency food assistance through Ready to Eat rations (RTEs) as well as multi-sector assistance.

A displacement tracking tool has also been developed to better understand where people are being displaced to and to inform a more targeted and coordinated response to people who may be sheltering in collective centres or other sites.

The main challenges identified by partners include insecurity; humanitarian access; and availability of technical staff to provide specialized services such as health, protection, water, sanitation and hygiene, and shelter. Humanitarian partners have received requests from relevant authorities for additional medical support, with services under strain in some areas and anticipation of possible further needs. Several ambulances and mobile health teams have already been mobilized to support healthcare provision and facilitate referral to hospitals. The complex response in the northeast includes UN deliveries of aid from within Syria and a cross-border response from Iraq that provides humanitarian aid and essential humanitarian services.

Readiness planning

A recent stock-take of readiness measures found sufficient stocks in place for a first phase response in most sectors, including food, nutrition, health, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, as well as protection, to respond to these needs for one to two months. An update of this stock-take is currently being conducted to identify any potential gaps and additional resources that may be needed to scale up the response.