

Military incursion in northeast Syria : protection of civilians and humanitarian workers is vital

After nearly a decade of nation-wide conflict, the Turkish incursion into northeast Syria reignites the cycle of violence, worry and uncertainty for people living in the area. HI is deeply concerned about how the military escalation will affect the civilian population. HI calls on all parties to the conflict to protect civilians, especially people in populated areas that are being attacked with airstrikes and artillery.

According to UN OCHA, at least 1,650,000 people in the northeast are in need of humanitarian assistance. With humanitarian organisations on the ground already reporting the interruption of vital services, including medical facilities and water supplies, people's access to humanitarian assistance is expected to deteriorate while the number of people in need is expected to increase if the violence continues.

The 5km-strip along the border between Turkey and Syria is currently seeing the most incessant attacks. It is home to an estimated 450,000 civilians, of which 90,000 people are internally displaced. The United Nations reports that more than 64,000 people in the border region fled their homes looking for safety within the first 12 hours of the offensive, and humanitarian organisations on the ground underscore the increased need for humanitarian assistance both in- and outside of the 5km-zone.

Moreover, some populated areas, Tal Abiyad, Ras el Ain, Quamishly and others, were targeted with explosive weapons, predominantly in the form of airstrikes and artillery. The majority of explosive-weapon related casualties in populated areas are civilians, and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas leads to forced displacement and disproportionately damages vital infrastructure, which has devastating effects on people's ability to safely access humanitarian services, livelihood opportunities and, for example, education long after the end of hostilities.

The ongoing offensive could significantly weaken the network of already scarcely available primary services, and makes it even more difficult for people in need to reach humanitarian services. As stated by a humanitarian worker in the field: 'I work in the humanitarian sector to provide aid to those in need. When the conflict started yesterday evening, I could not reach the office due to severe clashes and shelling. Being blocked from working put me far from my ambition to respond to the needs of the people living in my area, and to provide real support to my family, friends and colleagues.'

HI believes that urgent action is needed to ensure that the humanitarian situation in northeast Syria does not deteriorate further:

- the UN Security Council and international community should insist on an immediate ceasefire, knowing that the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including civilians' access to humanitarian assistance, is severely obstructed by any type of violence;
- all parties to the conflict and the international community should ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, and ensure that freedom of movement and humanitarian access are guaranteed to all civilians in northeast Syria;

- all parties to the conflict should stop the use of explosive weapons with wide areas effects in populated areas, and the targeting of any civilian infrastructure like hospitals, schools and markets.

About Humanity & Inclusion

HI is an independent international aid organisation. It has been working in situations of poverty and exclusion, conflict and disaster for 35 years. Working alongside people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, our action and testimony are focused on responding to their essential needs, improving their living conditions and promoting respect for their dignity and basic rights. Since it was founded in 1982, HI has set up development programmes in more than 50 countries and intervenes in numerous emergency situations. There are eight national associations within the network (Germany, Belgium, Canada, United States, France, Luxembourg, UK and Switzerland), working tirelessly to mobilise resources, co-manage projects and increase the impact of the organisation's principles and actions. HI is one of six founding organisations of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), co-recipient of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize and winner of the Conrad N. Hilton Award in 2011. HI takes action and campaigns in places where "living with dignity" is no easy task.