

Destruction caused by aerial bombing in Eastern Ghouta, 25th February 2018



VOICES FROM SYRIA'S DANGER ZONES

Introduction

“Seven years of war has drained us a lot, destroyed us. People are looking for peace, a moment of rest and safety. Instead, the situation is now even worse.” – Adnan, a displaced father in Idlib

In besieged Eastern Ghouta, just a few miles from the Syrian Presidential Palace, six-month-old Katr and eight-month-old Emad never stood a chance. Born into war with congenital heart disease, they desperately needed treatment to stay alive, yet this could not be found at the bombed and bare hospitals that have struggled to operate under a nearly five-year siege that has prevented aid entering and barred people from leaving. The two infants died this January, after months of aid agencies being denied permission to evacuate themⁱ.

As the Syria crisis enters its eighth year – 2,557 days of brutal violence – children like Katr and Emad are being killed, maimed, forced from their homes and denied access to education, healthcare and aid on a daily basis. The conflict is not de-escalating. Indeed, as this briefing shows, there has been a significant recent increase across the spectrum of violence, and for hundreds of thousands of children in Syria this is the worst point of the conflict so far.

The world continues to fail these children. The so-called ‘de-escalation zones’ⁱⁱ announced with great fanfare by Russia, Turkey and Iran in mid-2017 have turned out to be a sham – a brief, tantalising promise of improvements that quickly deteriorated into even greater bloodshed and suffering. In truth they have actually become ‘escalation zones’. Since December 2017, intense fighting in the Idlib area in northwest Syria has created a displacement crisis of a speed and magnitude not seen for many years. Meanwhile the siege of Eastern Ghouta – a noose around the neck of some 400,000 peopleⁱⁱⁱ trapped in the enclave – has tightened even further. In the past few weeks, bombing which Save the Children partners on the ground described as ‘apocalyptic’ has killed hundreds, pounded homes, schools and hospitals, and forced terrified families to hide underground.

On 24th February the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 2401, demanding an immediate cessation of hostilities, medical evacuations of the sick and wounded and humanitarian access across the country for a period of 30 days. This has been blatantly ignored and was violated within hours. The one UN aid convoy approved to Eastern Ghouta since then had most of its medical supplies removed before delivery, and nearby violence forced it to leave before nine truckloads of food could be unloaded. Not one single sick child has been evacuated since UNSCR 2401 was adopted. Yet again, the

words of world leaders are ringing hollow to children and parents trapped in basements or stuck in squalid camps.

This briefing paper brings together new analysis to expose the failure of the ‘de-escalation zones’ and other international action to protect civilians in Syria, and demand changes to improve the humanitarian situation for children trapped in the seven-year conflict. We have witnessed record displacement, huge increases in casualties, the continued targeting of schools and hospitals, and worsening denial of aid – all carried out with impunity.

Since July 2017, shortly after the ‘de-escalation zones’ (DEZs) were announced, new analysis by Save the Children shows:

- **Record levels of displacement, with up to 250 children fleeing every hour^{iv}:** The number of people forced to flee their homes increased by 60 percent after the DEZs were announced. The last quarter of 2017 saw the highest rates of displacement inside Syria for the past five years with more than one million people made homeless in just three months.
- **Civilian casualties across Syria increased by 45 percent^v:** At least 37 civilians were reportedly killed by explosive weapons every day in the second half of 2017, the highest rate for several years. In early 2018 this has become even worse with 600 people killed and 2,000 injured in Eastern Ghouta alone in just two weeks in late-February^{vi}.
- **Rising attacks on education:** Save the Children-supported schools in northwest Syria report the number of days they have had to close due to violence has quadrupled during the current school year^{vii}. More than 60 schools in Eastern Ghouta have been damaged or destroyed by bombing in the first two months of 2018, according to Save the Children partners there^{viii}.
- **A health facility or ambulance attacked almost every two days,** and a health worker killed or injured every three days, between July and January^{ix}. In 2018 attacks have become almost daily. In February, 24 health facilities were hit by bombing in just five days in Eastern Ghouta alone. These attacks have disrupted or stopped services to thousands of people in need of medical care, including major surgeries and pregnant women about to give birth.
- **Systematic denial of aid:** More than 2 million people – half of them children – in ‘hard to reach’ or ‘besieged’ areas have been prevented from receiving a single aid convoy of vital food and medicine.^x As a result, child malnutrition has

reached record levels and doctors are forced to re-use bandages and needles on multiple patients.

All parties to the conflict are showing a daily disregard for civilian lives and international law. The bombs that continue to rain down with impunity have struck civilian homes, schools and hospitals, crowded marketplaces and even the camps where fleeing children have sought refuge. The UN has confirmed reports of chemicals being used as weapons in populated areas^{xi}.

Save the Children is working with local Syrian partner organisations to provide humanitarian aid in many of the areas worst hit by the current escalation. For this briefing, we spoke to dozens of aid workers, children, parents, teachers, medical staff and youth workers in Eastern Ghouta and northwest Syria^{xii}. Many are heroically trying to assist people in need in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances imaginable, yet their pleas for help are being largely ignored by the international community and parties to the conflict.

After seven years of tolerating grave violations against children, the war on children in Syria must finally end. The international community is in danger of allowing egregious violations against children to become the new normal. The credibility of international systems of governance is at stake.

Save the Children is calling on governments to:

- Pressure all parties to the conflict to fully and immediately comply with UN Security Council Resolution 2401 and all other relevant resolutions^{xiii} and put an immediate halt to the recent escalation in violence in the areas of Idlib and Eastern Ghouta, enable the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid and services across Syria, and facilitate medical evacuations of the sick and wounded;
- Emphasize the failure of de-escalation zones to provide protection for civilians in Syria and call on all parties to seek a political solution to the crisis;
- Ensure those who violate children's rights are held to account by calling for independent investigations into all attacks on schools and hospitals and other violations of international humanitarian law.

All names have been changed to protect identities. Partner organisations who provided information to support this briefing include Shafak, Syria Relief, Violet, and numerous others who prefer not to be named.

All photos: Syria Relief / Save the Children



Eastern Ghouta, February 2018

The daily terror of bombing

“Some people flew out of their houses from the second or third floors (because of the force of the blast). There are women and children who flew out of their houses and landed on the ground, and their bones are completely broken.” – Ghaith, a Save the Children partner, Eastern Ghouta

“Our children will scream and yell when an airplane passes over them. They panic and hide – they hide under a cardboard box. They are very frightened.” – Aseel, a mother in Idlib

“It’s been four days that we are here. We haven’t left at any point and the planes are bombing. We’ve not been able to go to school – they shelled the school, the teacher was killed. There is no food and we can’t go outside, the shops are closed, the planes are bombing.” – Ahmed, a young boy trapped in a basement in Eastern Ghouta

“There was bombing near my home last month. 30 people were killed and many children died. My neighbours have a four-year-old child – now he’s terrified. He refuses to go to kindergarten, he doesn’t want to study, or even leave his home. There are children who are shelled as they fled or in their tents.” – Tarek, a father in Idlib

Bombing is a daily fact of life for hundreds of thousands of Syria’s children. Nine-year-old Nour and her elder brother Issa left their home in Eastern Ghouta one morning, heading out to buy biscuits which they planned to resell at a small profit for their family. On the way their bicycle broke down and as they stopped to fix it, a bomb fell close by. Nour was rushed to hospital and despite multiple surgeries she lost part of her thigh bone and joint. Today she can barely walk and only with great pain and difficulty. Just three hours after we spoke to Nour, in a children’s centre run by a Save the Children partner, the centre itself was badly damaged by an airstrike.

The widespread use of explosive weapons in populated areas has resulted in a massive civilian death toll. Children are particularly at risk from the impact of these weapons – epidemiological studies demonstrate that penetrating injuries (e.g. from shrapnel) to the face, head, neck, upper limb and trunk affect 80 percent of child patients, markedly higher than the 31 percent in adults^{xiv}. Analysis of data collected on Syria by Action on Armed Violence shows that civilian casualties from explosive weapons across the country rose by 45 percent after the announcement of the de-escalation zones, with more than 37 civilians a day killed in the second half of 2017^{xv} - the highest rate for at least four years. In 2018 this has gotten even worse, with more than 600 people killed in just two weeks in Eastern Ghouta alone.

One medical worker there explained the devastating impact of the use of cluster munitions on civilians:

“Most of the amputation cases in Ghouta result from the launch of these cluster rockets, because these rockets release many cluster bombs before they hit the ground and they spread over a large area. In some situations it might not explode instantly, it might stay still for a couple of minutes before it explodes, and in other situations it might only explode if someone touches it. We have lost many children’s and civilians’ limbs because of that.” – Rifat, Eastern Ghouta

In parts of Eastern Ghouta, the destruction from the bombing is now even greater than at the height of the Aleppo crisis,^{xvi} yet with only a tiny fraction of the global attention and outrage. In the Ein Terma neighbourhood, where 18,500 people are still living, the most recent satellite images showed 71 percent of buildings destroyed or damaged even before the recent intensification of the violence^{xvii}. In Zamalka, 59 percent are destroyed or damaged and there has been no water or electricity network for at least two years^{xviii}. The poorest families, living in poorly-built homes and shacks, are most vulnerable to the destruction, with interviewees describing how ceilings have caved in on residents after bombings in the area. One aid worker described the aftermath of a bombing:

“I hear a child screaming and saying ‘help me’. People are digging, men are working under the shelling and in danger, and he is stuck under the rubble until he suffocates. This is a humanitarian disaster.” – Khalil

Thousands of families now spend most of their days and nights in hiding. In Arbin, just one town in Eastern Ghouta, partners reported 1,400 families now living in a network of 75 underground basements and shelters – more than half without water, sanitation or ventilation systems, making children vulnerable to the spread of disease. One medical worker said: “Many families are (living as if they are) under house arrest in poor-conditioned small damp basements with bad lighting. It’s similar to a tomb. (In these 75 shelters) there are 100 diabetic patients, 110 patients with high or low blood pressure, 20 asthma patients.” Similar situations were reported in other towns. One local organisation told us its office basement had turned into a shelter for 46 families, before it too was bombed.

Armed Opposition Groups have also launched attacks on civilian areas, killing and wounding children. Clashes between armed groups disrupt aid delivery and force schools to close. Although smaller scale, shelling from Eastern Ghouta into Damascus in February reached its highest levels since 2015, causing civilian casualties and widespread panic. In Idlib, fighting between armed

opposition groups has rendered the streets unsafe, preventing people from leaving their homes, and denying children the opportunity to return to school.

Previous temporary cessation of hostilities announcements have brought little or no respite, generally collapsing within days. People we spoke to told of becoming even more afraid as ceasefires are announced: “In every agreement we come under heavy attack for hours before it comes into effect. Upon the announcement people get ready to be attacked.”

The daily bombing has had an enormous impact on children’s psychological wellbeing, with many children exhibiting signs of severe “toxic stress”, which, if not properly addressed, can have a life-long impact on children’s mental and physical health^{xix}. Many parents told of children unable to sleep due to nightmares, suffering from involuntary urination and going into panic at the sound of a bang, even the slamming of a door. One father said:

“Children used to dream innocently of getting on a plane to travel. Children in our days used to wish to see airplanes flying over them. Today it’s become a phobia to them – ‘there is an airplane, it’s going to kill us.’ Elephant rockets (a type of weapon reportedly used widely in Syria) are named because it makes a sound similar to an elephant. When teachers ask children in schools to draw anything, some of them draw a flying elephant. He imagines a flying elephant that falls to the ground and destroys.” – Yaman, Eastern Ghouta



Devastation after bombing in Eastern Ghouta, February 2018

Fleeing for their lives

“When there is shelling, people take their young children and head towards the agricultural lands or shelter between trees or in caves, so they are not targeted by military aircraft. Usually they strike the same area four or five times, with a few minutes interval in between. So when the first strikes come, people ride their cars, motorbikes or run out of the village.” – Usama, a father in Idlib

“Families’ tents are drowned from the rain and mud. A child was soaked in water from his head to toes, and they do not have any dry clothes for the children. There are children who died because of the cold weather. Some children even died due to malnutrition.” – Reem, an aid worker with Shafak organisation, Idlib

A major escalation of fighting in the Idlib area of northwest Syria has forced more than 385,000 people from their homes since mid-December 2017^{xx} – one of the biggest concentrated movements of people for years, with more than 3,500 children displaced daily in just this one region. Across Syria, more than one million people fled their homes in the last quarter of 2017, a 60 percent increase since the announcement of the de-escalation zones.

Families have sheltered wherever they can – those with the means rent homes at vastly inflated prices, while others seek refuge in bomb-damaged buildings or are stuck in camps without basic services such as sewage systems and with up to 11 people crowding into a single tent^{xxi}. Fierce winter storms destroyed many of the flimsy tents and turned camps into quagmires of mud. One mother told us: “There was a storm, it was raining and windy. We drowned, the mud was up to our knees, children were crying. Children died.” Medical staff and aid workers reported receiving cases of children with pneumonia from having to sleep outside or on the side of the road as they fled.

Haya, a mother displaced from rural Idlib, described how she has had to move her family four times in recent months as the deadly bombing followed them around:

“Ours was a simple quiet village, but then we were attacked. They attacked children... children were massacred in front of us. We fled leaving all our belongings behind. We took our children and went to Al Zawya mountain, thinking it was a quiet area. But there were massacres there too. Things are indescribable – we see the flesh of dying children in front of us. We moved to Kafr Nabl and the military aircraft attacked the area. Now we are living in the outskirts of Aleppo, in abandoned houses. The house has no doors, no windows. Children escaped only wearing their clothes and they have nothing.” – Haya, Idlib

Even when in camps, children are not safe from the violence. Samer, a father of four, told Save the Children of witnessing

the deaths of two children in a bombing attack in Atmeh camp in February: “They were sitting around the heater in the camp, when suddenly a bomb fell on them.” Many children in the camps are also at increased risk of being pushed into child labour (especially boys) or child marriage (especially girls) due to the financial difficulties for displaced families^{xxii}.

With fighting closing in all around and neighbouring countries’ borders effectively shut^{xxiii}, families have fewer and fewer options to find safety. Hundreds of thousands of people in Idlib are being driven into an ever-shrinking space, putting increasing strain on already scarce public services and making it harder for aid agencies to help them. In Eastern Ghouta, the siege means families are unable to flee outside the area to escape the massive bombing – many thousands have been displaced within the confines of the siege, moving from town to town as the pattern of bombing shifts. Despite UNSCR 2401, and the subsequent daily five-hour “pause” announced by Russia, families who wish to evacuate have not yet been able to – fifty civilians reportedly tried to leave on 26th February but were forced back by mortar and sniper fire. Others have been unable to even reach the crossing due to ongoing fighting. Many more families have said they are too afraid to even try and leave, with no guarantees of what will happen to them or where they would go.

Mass displacement has also been seen in other parts of the country where military action has intensified. An estimated 30,000 people have fled their homes in Afrin since January 2018, and many more are still displaced and living in poor conditions after fleeing last year’s offensives around Raqqa and Deir-Ez-Zour. Across Syria, more than 6 million people are displaced from their homes^{xxiv}.



Children displaced by the fighting in Idlib, February 2018

Pushed into starvation

“Some children were born under siege and now they are four years old. One of my relatives saw an apple once and he didn’t know what it was. He was afraid of it, he held it not knowing what it is. There’s no electricity in Ghouta so no TV – the child can’t even see apples on TV. Another child ate a banana unpeeled – he didn’t know that it should be peeled first.” – Akram, an aid worker in Eastern Ghouta

“I have seen children hiding their bread after having their breakfast. Why would you hide a piece of bread? Because we might not have bread (for) the next meal. So he hides the bread... he thinks ‘there is bread now, but maybe tomorrow there will be no bread’” – Bassel, a teacher in Eastern Ghouta

Parties to the conflict have repeatedly continued to flout their obligations under International Humanitarian Law and deny vital humanitarian aid including food and medicine to children and their families. More than 2 million people in areas across Syria classified by the UN as ‘hard to reach’ or ‘besieged’ received no inter-agency aid convoys at all in the past year, with only 27.3 percent of convoy requests approved in full by the Syrian government. At least 125 convoy requests were denied. Of those who did receive assistance, many only received one convoy of essential supplies for the whole year^{xxv}. Two years ago the UN Secretary-General noted that the use of starvation as a weapon in the Syria conflict amounts to a war crime, and yet this tactic has continued unchecked and even intensified^{xxvi}.

The impact in Eastern Ghouta has been particularly devastating. Child malnutrition rates there are now the highest ever recorded during the Syria conflict, and almost six times greater than a year ago. At least one in four children are now malnourished^{xxvii} and more than a third of children have stunted growth^{xxviii}. Before classes were suspended due to insecurity, teachers told Save the Children of daily occurrences of children fainting from hunger in the middle of lessons. Others reported how pregnant women and infants are affected:

“We have observed many miscarriages among pregnant women in medical centres, because she is not eating properly and malnourished. This results in the immaturity of the infant during pregnancy. Many newborns die after being delivered. When the baby is born he is frail. Infant formula is rare, and families can’t afford it even if it’s available. If the (government) arrests anyone selling or smuggling infant formula, he will be charged, he might vanish.” – Aboud, an aid worker

Eastern Ghouta is less than five miles from the centre of Damascus and warehouses full of food, yet the siege means

food is now so scarce that a simple pack of bread costs 16 times or 1600 percent as much as in markets a few miles away^{xxix}. A one kilogramme pack of flour or a bag of salt is 20 times more expensive. Eastern Ghouta is traditionally one of the breadbaskets of Syria, yet standard food such as chicken or cucumbers are no longer even available. The incredibly high prices mean even staple foods are unaffordable for many families – even more so as partner organizations reported 80-90 percent of people are now unemployed. One estimated a small family of three now needs around \$600 a month to cover bread, two meals a day, fuel and basic household cleaning items – yet even those with work earn \$100 a month on average.

Many children are eating just one meal a day, often a diet of rice and lentils provided by local aid organisations. Some have even less – one interviewee told of impoverished families who have to alternate the days on which they feed their children, with some having a meal one day and the others eating the next day. Some families rely on locally grown vegetables such as cabbage, spinach and carrots, but without electricity and clean water for irrigation, many fear the crops have become contaminated. An aid worker with Syria Relief, which runs a school feeding programme to provide children with milk biscuits and sandwiches, said:

“We see happiness and joy on the children’s faces when they receive just one biscuit. We gave a child a sandwich and he didn’t eat it, he hid it. When we asked why, he said his brother is at home hungry so he wanted to take the sandwich home and split it between them.” – Hayyan, Eastern Ghouta

Although the child hunger crisis is at its peak in besieged Eastern Ghouta, striking malnutrition rates have also been reported among children fleeing the fighting in Idlib. In January 2018, more than a third of displaced children there showed signs of anaemia and 6.5 percent of displaced pregnant or lactating women were malnourished^{xxx}. One doctor in Idlib said: “People have spent all their savings during the long seven years of war. So some children go to sleep hungry, some only have one meal and they are not nutritious meals. Malnutrition is common and often spotted.”

Education under attack

“(The teacher) was standing by the window and she told us that she’d go and get us pens and paper. Before she could do that she was hit in the head and we saw that she was dead. I am 11 and I can’t read or write. I wish I could but I can’t. Every time there was bombing we couldn’t go to school.” – Hany, aged 11, Idlib

“Seven children were killed and 13 were injured when one school was targeted. Schools now operate in basements – there are no schools above ground because we’re afraid for children’s safety. Nevertheless, children are still being bombed in schools or on their way home.” – Areej, an aid worker in Eastern Ghouta

Attacks continue to rain down on schools, hospitals and other civilian infrastructure. An estimated 43 percent of schools in Syria are no longer functioning^{xxxi}. Since the start of the new school year in September 2017, schools supported by Save the Children partners in northwest Syria have seen the number of days they have had to close quadruple from the previous year, with more than 300 teaching days lost^{xxxii}. In Eastern Ghouta, Save the Children partners report more than 60 schools have been hit by bombing in the first two months of 2018, with at least 18 completely flattened, and more than 57,000 pupils have had their education disrupted or had to drop out of school^{xxxiii}.

One of the deadliest attacks occurred when shells hit the playground of a school for 400 boys in Jisreen, Eastern Ghouta, just as children finished mid-morning classes. Five pupils aged 8-11 were killed and at least 26 others injured, including a boy who had to have both his feet amputated^{xxxiv}.

Schools in northwest Syria and Eastern Ghouta open and close on a daily basis depending on the security situation. When schools do open, classes are held with teachers and pupils constantly on edge, fearfully listening for the sound of planes and missiles overhead. One aid worker said: “Yesterday (2nd February), one of the schools attempted to open its classes again, (then) a female teacher and a number of children were killed because of a direct assault that targeted the school.”

In Eastern Ghouta, many schools have been closed since the end of 2017 because it is too unsafe. When they do open, most have moved underground and open just for a couple of hours in the early morning as the bombing gets more intense later in the day. Children set off for school at 6am, start class at 6.30am and finish by 8.30am. Without fuel or electricity there is no heating, so children huddle together in freezing basements. One aid worker said: “The schools used to be well-built and ventilated, with large sunny schoolyards. Now schools are in basements.”

These attacks on schools come when learning is already disrupted from seven years of displacement and erosion of the education system. Save the Children recently assessed 1,178 pupils (558 boys, 620 girls) aged between 5-11 in northwest Syria. The results showed just how far behind many Syrian children have fallen. More than one third of pupils aged 9-11 showed Arabic reading skills lower than what would usually be expected of a 5 or 6 year-old. Seven percent could not even recognise basic letters. Nearly 50% of children aged 9-11 were unable to solve mathematics problems that would normally be taught to 5-6 year olds, with some children unable to even recognise the numbers^{xxxv}.

“I don’t feel safe sending my children to school. The schools (in my area) were bombed and levelled to the ground and are completely out of service. My daughter studied up to second grade and then she dropped out – she should be in the sixth grade now. My son should be in the ninth grade but he dropped out three years ago. A complete generation have lost their opportunity to learn in Syria, to learn how to read and write. They know nothing. I do not feel safe to send them even if school opens, because they will only be open for one day and then they will shut the school down for 10 days because of the bombing.” - Qamar, a displaced mother in Idlib

Despite the challenges, teachers and communities do everything they can to keep children learning. In one Idlib village, where thousands of displaced people have gathered, community members told Save the Children they had to build a school from mud because of the shortage of buildings, construction materials, and the fear that it may be bombed as soon as it is built. One teacher in Idlib said: “People try hard to continue educating their children. Some turn a small house or tents into a school. If there are no chalkboards, they write on the canvas of the tent.”



Some schools have moved into homes or whatever buildings they can find. A temporary classroom in northwest Syria.

A medical emergency

“Dialysis patients are really dead people waiting to die. The (government) allows a limited number of supplies for the treatment sessions of dialysis patients, then suspends any additional supplies until they are completely consumed and some patients will die. Medicines for diabetes and blood pressure are not always available... we witness a lot of deaths among (those patients)” – Fathi, a medical worker in Eastern Ghouta

Between July 2017 and January 2018, there have been at least 92 verified attacks on health services across Syria including hospitals, clinics and ambulances – almost one every two days – in violation of International Humanitarian Law.^{xxxvi} At least 77 health workers have been killed or wounded. More than 60 percent of these attacks occurred in northwest Syria governorates of Idlib, Hama and Aleppo. These attacks have disrupted or stopped services at facilities that would otherwise have carried out more than 80,000 consultations and more than 2,100 major surgeries. In the three months immediately after the announcement of the de-escalation zones, hospital services to more than 1,000 women about to give birth were disrupted by attacks.^{xxxvii}

As bombing has increased in Eastern Ghouta, hospitals there have also increasingly come under attack. In just five days in February there were 24 attacks on the health sector reported, including 14 hospitals, three health centres and two ambulances^{xxxviii}. However, while the bombing has been devastating, the restrictions on humanitarian access have had an equally grave toll on children.

The siege of Eastern Ghouta not only prevents many medical supplies from entering but also prevents civilians from leaving, including sick children. More than 120 children in the area are now in need of urgent medical evacuation for life-saving treatment^{xxxix} yet permissions are routinely denied. Many are suffering from cancer or kidney disease, and are effectively being sentenced to death by the siege. Not one single sick child has been evacuated since UNSCR 2401 was adopted.

Doctors and health workers are heroically trying to keep services going, yet struggle to work in almost mediaeval conditions. Medical staff told Save the Children of trying to carry out surgeries without electricity or fuel for generators, and without basic equipment. Antibiotics for children are rarely available, and even surgical gloves, gauze and bandages have to be re-used on multiple patients. They reported patients dying from what should be easily preventable illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

16-year-old Salah* was injured in a bombing in Douma in Eastern Ghouta, as he and his family tried to flee to a relative's house. His spinal cord was damaged and his legs are now paralysed. His grandmother, aunt and cousin were killed. One of the aid workers helping him explains the surgery:

"We have to make do in primitive ways. Salah was anaesthetised with a three-year-old expired anaesthesia needle. Because there are no sedatives, you cannot perform a surgery on a child with no anaesthesia. When he underwent the surgery he needed a medical thread, but these haven't entered Ghouta for seven years. We use the threads multiple times, and leftover threads are sanitised and used on other patients. Salah needs urethral catheterization, but he has to use the tools more than once because they are not available. It's been two years since a serum supply entered Eastern Ghouta." – Mohammed, Eastern Ghouta

Hospitals in northwest Syria also report severe shortages. Rana, a nutritionist at a hospital in Idlib, said:

"The hospital took in many malnourished children for treatment, but they had to discharge some due to lack of medicines. The hospital called for urgent medicine to save some children, but due to lack of treatment two severely malnourished children passed away. They didn't have any chance to survive. When the invasion of the area happened, we had to discharge five malnourished children that were receiving treatment and transfer them to other hospitals – but the families were unable to do that. They had to go back to their tents in this harsh cold weather. Other hospitals we used to transfer people to are now bombed." – Rana

Moving life underground has inevitably impacted children psychologically but also physically, with partners reporting growing problems with children's eyesight due to spending their days in poorly-lit basement schools or home shelters. According to one local organisation, there are just three ophthalmologists to serve all of Eastern Ghouta's population of nearly 400,000 people. Among displaced families in underground shelters, Save the Children partners report high rates of lice, scabies and skin diseases among children due to the lack of sanitation, bathrooms and extreme overcrowding. Many families struggle to access clean water, with shallow water sources becoming contaminated and deeper sources inaccessible without electricity to operate pumps. In these appalling conditions, pregnant women have had to give birth in tiny basements surrounded by dozens of other families.

The cold winter months have exacerbated the health crisis. In Eastern Ghouta especially, fuel is widely unavailable or prohibitively expensive due to the siege, with many families burning whatever fabric they can find to try and stay warm.

Others have to burn waste and plastic, increasing the risk of respiratory illnesses among children. Families told us that when their windows are blown out in bombing they have to hang sheets of nylon fabric over the holes in a futile attempt to protect their children from the piercing winter cold.

This briefing focuses primarily on the areas of northwest Syria and Eastern Ghouta, where the violence is currently worse. However, dangers continue in the other so-called de-escalation zones:

Northern Homs: Since it was announced as a de-escalation zone, northern Homs continues to experience regular bombardment. In January, bombing increased further in Rastan and Talbiseh districts, and convoys have rarely been able to reach the nearly 200,000 people in need of humanitarian aid. Communities and humanitarian organisations in the area fear that northern Homs may be the next area to come under siege in the coming months.

Southern Syria/Dara'a: There has been a reduction in conflict since a US-Russian brokered agreement was announced in July 2017. However, the reduction in violence has not drastically altered the humanitarian context, and a critical lack of services persists, especially for hundreds of thousands of people displaced by previous fighting. There is increasing uncertainty about the end of the US-Russia agreement and what will happen next.

Recommendations

The international community has failed to protect Syria's children from the brunt of a brutal war. Despite more than a dozen UN Security Council Resolutions, a Commission of Inquiry established by the UN Human Rights Council and the establishment of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism on international crimes committed in the *Syrian Arab Republic*, parties to the conflict have failed to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

The attacks on hospitals, denial of humanitarian access and specifically the use of starve and siege tactics, which this report has described, may amount to war crimes. As the voices of Syrian children, caregivers and aid workers show, these violations come at disproportionate cost to civilians. As the situation for children and their families deteriorates by the day, Save the Children calls on:

Parties to the conflict to:

- Fully comply with UN Security Council Resolution 2401 and all other relevant humanitarian Resolutions, including the implementation of an immediate cessation of hostilities to enable the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid and services to Eastern Ghouta and across Syria, and facilitate medical evacuations of the sick and wounded
- Meet their obligations to ensure the protection of civilians, cease all attacks on schools, hospitals, and other critical civilian infrastructure, and refrain from using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas
- Urgently allow rapid, safe, unfettered and sustained humanitarian access, ensuring safe passage for the delivery of aid to populations in need, including cross-line and cross-border, and to besieged and hard-to-reach-areas, in order to ensure that life-saving humanitarian assistance reaches people in need through the most direct routes
- Immediately end the use of siege as a tactic in the conflict, allow the free movement of aid and civilians, and permit families to be reunited
- Refrain from using aid as a bargaining chip for political negotiations, and de-link access negotiations from ceasefire and cessation of hostilities discussions

UN Security Council Members and States with influence on the parties to the conflict to:

- Pressure all parties to the conflict to fully and immediately comply with UN Security Council Resolution 2401 and all other relevant resolutions to put an immediate halt to the recent escalation in violence in the areas of Idlib and Eastern Ghouta, enable

the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid and services across Syria, and facilitate medical evacuations of the sick and wounded

- Emphasize the failure of the proposed de-escalation zones to provide protection for civilians in Syria and call for all parties to seek a political solution to the crisis, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254
- Stress the need to protect Syrian aid workers, who are providing life-saving assistance to the besieged population, despite the risks to their own life. Aid workers must never be considered a target
- Emphasize that forced evacuations and displacement are in violation of international humanitarian law, and ensure that civilians who wish to flee or remain in Eastern Ghouta have the right to do so without the threat of being targeted by military intervention. Any humanitarian corridor initiative must meet conditions to ensure the safety and protection of civilians and humanitarians both during and following evacuation
- Ensure those who violate children's rights are held to account by calling for independent investigations into all attacks on schools and hospitals and other violations of international humanitarian law and ensure linkages to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism on international crimes committed in the *Syrian Arab Republic*
- Take a consistent and principled stand against the premature return or *refoulement* of refugees to Syria, and ensure that all returns to Syria are safe, voluntary and dignified. The authorities in Syria must be called upon to make effective guarantees of safety and freedom of movement for refugees who have returned to Syria, and minimum conditions must be put in place to ensure returnees are able to live in safety and dignity.

ⁱ Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), a Save the Children partner organisation in southern Syria: *Critical patients in Eastern Ghouta used as 'bargaining chips'*, 11th January 2018 <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2018/01/11/critical-patients-in-eastern-ghouta-used-as-bargaining-chips-sams>

ⁱⁱ A plan to establish four 'de-escalation zones' in Syria was announced by Russia, Turkey and Iran in May 2017, and formally confirmed during the sixth round of the Astana Talks in September 2017. They were presented as a mechanism for ensuring the protection of civilians, increasing humanitarian and commercial access, and offering a safe place for refugees to return to. The four zones cover the areas of: 1) Northwest Syria including Idlib and parts of Latakia, rural Aleppo and Hama, 2) northern Homs, 3) Eastern Ghouta, 4) southern Syria regions of Dera'a and Quneitra

ⁱⁱⁱ Estimates of the remaining population in Eastern Ghouta vary, as it is difficult to verify data in siege conditions. A UN OCHA Factsheet from 26th February estimates that 393,300 people in Eastern Ghouta are currently in need of humanitarian assistance.

^{iv} Between October and December 2017, there were 1,074,070 displacements recorded across Syria by the Whole of Syria IDP Task Force. Save the Children estimates around half of these to be children (for example a Save the Children assessment in Idlib found 53% of the displaced were children), meaning approximately 5,837 children displaced every day, or 243 per hour. In contrast, between January and June 2017, before the DEZ announcement, there were approximately 3,533 children displaced every day, or 147 per hour. Huge levels of civilian displacement have continued into 2018.

^v Based on analysis of Action on Armed Violence's monthly *Explosive Violence Monitor* reports, https://aoav.org.uk/category/latest_explosive_violence_monitor_updates/. In the first half of 2017 there were 4,656 reported civilian deaths from explosive violence; in the second half of 2017 there were 6,776 reported civilian deaths – a rate of more than 37 per day.

^{vi} Statement by Panos Moutzis, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, 4 March 2018 https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/rhc_statement_on_un_resolution_2401_4_march_2018.pdf

^{vii} Save the Children's internal monitoring of education programmes run by partners in the northwest Syria governorates of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama

^{viii} Information from Save the Children education partners in Eastern Ghouta

^{ix} Analysis of monthly *Monitoring Violence Against Healthcare* reports by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Whole of Syria health cluster, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info>. In 2017 there were 192 incidents reported, of which 122 were verified (at least 64 after the DEZ were announced) against 73 health facilities and 69 ambulances. 28 health workers were killed and 46 injured in these incidents. In January 2018 there were 28 confirmed attacks with four health workers killed and 19 injured

^x UN OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, *2017 UN Inter-Agency Operations in Review*, January 2018

^{xi} UN Human Rights Council Thirty-seventh session, A/HRC/37/72

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-37-72_EN.pdf

^{xii} Names have been changed and specific locations withheld in order to protect people

^{xiii} These include UN Security Council Resolutions 2139, 2165, 2191, 2254, 2258, 2268, 2328 2332, 2393

^{xiv} Centre for Blast Injury Studies, *The Impact of Blast Injury on Children*, September 2017,

<http://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/research-centres-and-groups/centre-for-blast-injury-studies/Literature-Review-on-paediatric-blast-injury.pdf>

^{xv} Based on analysis of Action on Armed Violence's monthly *Explosive Violence Monitor* reports

https://aoav.org.uk/category/latest_explosive_violence_monitor_updates/

^{xvi} Satellite imagery of Eastern Aleppo at the height of the crisis showed the highest level of damage was in al-Aqabeh neighbourhood, with 65% of buildings damaged or destroyed. UNOSAT, *Neighbourhood shelter damage percentages in Aleppo City*, 19th December 2016 http://unosat-maps.web.cern.ch/unosat-maps/SY/CE20130604SYR/UNOSAT_A3_Aleppo_DamagePercentageNeighborhood_20160918opt.pdf

^{xvii} UNOSAT, 'Satellite-Detected Severity of Structure Damage, Ein Terma, as of 3rd December 2017'

http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_syr_map_structure_damage_einterma_eastern_ghouta_december2017_a0.pdf

^{xviii} UNOSAT, *Satellite-Detected Severity of Structure Damage, Zamalka, as of 3rd December 2017*

http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_syr_map_structure_damage_zamalka_eastern_ghouta_december2017_a0.pdf

^{xix} Toxic stress is the most dangerous form of stress response that can occur when children experience strong, frequent or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support. For more information see: Save the Children, *Invisible Wounds*, March 2017 <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/emergency-humanitarian-response/invisible-wounds.pdf>

- xx Between 15th December 2017 and 3rd February 2018 the Camp Coordination and Camp Management cluster tracked 325,443 displacements in the Idlib area <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/turkey-syria-recent-developments-northwestern-syria-idleb-governorate-2>
- xxi Muzun for Humanitarian and Development, *Rapid Needs Assessment of IDPs in Idlib governorate*, January 2018
- xxii Syria Protection Cluster, *Rapid Protection Monitoring Update: Displacement to Idlib and Aleppo Governorates*, February 2018 <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/stima/document/rapid-protection-monitoring-update-displacement-idleb>
- xxiii In 2017, Syria's neighbouring countries kept their borders with Syria closed and turned away tens of thousands of displaced Syrians at their borders. For more information see the joint NGO report, *Dangerous Ground: Syria's refugees face an uncertain future* <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/dangerous-ground---syrian-refugees-face-an-uncertain-future.pdf>
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- xxv UN OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, *2017 UN Inter-Agency Operations in Review*, January 2018
- xxvi <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/14/middleeast/syria-madaya-starvation/index.html>
- xxvii ACAPS, *Conflict in Eastern Ghouta briefing note*, 15th November 2017 https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20171115_acaps_briefin_note_syria_eastern_ghouta.pdf
- xxviii Nutrition SMART Survey report, Eastern Ghouta, Syria, November 2017, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/smart_survey_eastern_ghouta_november_2017_final.pdf
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- xxxii Save the Children's internal monitoring of education programmes run by partners
- xxxiii Information received from Save the Children's education partners in Eastern Ghouta
- xxxiv UN Human Rights Council Thirty-seventh session, A/HRC/37/72 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoLSyria/A-HRC-37-72_EN.pdf
- xxxv Save the Children, *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for Northwest Syria*, November 2017
- xxxvi Analysis of monthly *Monitoring Violence Against Healthcare* reports by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Whole of Syria health cluster, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info>.
- xxxvii Ibid.
- xxxviii Transcript of joint Press Stakeout by UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and UN Senior Advisor, Jan Egeland, 1st March 2018 <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2018-03-01/note-correspondents-transcript-joint-press-stakeout-un>
- xxxix Press briefing by UNICEF Syria Representative Fran Equiza, Geneva, 6th February 2018 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/nearly-seven-years-beginning-war-syria-children-continue-be-killed>



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