

Date: March, 25, 2020

Distinguished members of the UN Security Council, members of the World Health Organization WHO,

I'm writing on behalf of the *Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD)* team and many of our Syrian Constituencies to ask for your help. We join Secretary-General António Guterres and UN Special Envoy Mr Geir O. Pederson in calling for an immediate nationwide ceasefire in Syria. We appeal for your support and intervention to counter COVID-19 in Syria.

In the last ten days, when I talked with many Syrians, both within our CCSD team and beyond, I realized that they all share what I feel. I am scared, I am sleepless. After surviving the horrors of war for nine years, all that time fighting for peace, human rights, and democracy for Syrian people, *it is this pandemic that frightens me the most.* COVID-19 knows neither borders nor boundaries, nor if you have a specific religion, ethnicity, or political views. This universal public health emergency will have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable, among them many Syrian people who do not have the right structures in place to provide the necessary care.

Now is the time for decisive action, starting with a strategy of prevention, protection and containment. Civil society organizations such as CCSD have networks, inside Syria and neighboring countries. Through our networks, working with women and partner civil society organizations, we are well positioned to reach people. We are:

- Disseminating accurate fact-based information (using WHO guidelines) about this virus and advising people on how to take prevention measures and protect themselves and their families.
- Asking community leaders to step up and heighten their influence to lessen the negative results of this impending disaster, and counter-message fake news.
- Reporting and information sharing from the field with partners and policy makers.
- Advocating on behalf of all Syrians, communicating the impact of COVID-19 on the different geographies and regions, and finding ways for directing and coordinating support to those in most need.

But organizations like CCSD, can't do this alone. **COVID-19 needs to be tackled without thinking of political gains** – politics should help in finding solutions for the benefit of the Syrian people. We are dealing with a public health issue, a human rights issue, a life and death issue. It is not a time for fighting, it is a time for Syrians to find solutions and also to be supported by the international community. To combat COVID-19, we need your support for Syrian civil society to continue to be responsive, and to adopt the right measures. Local initiatives led by CCSD and others are already being undertaken, it is through our communities that we will save lives. We need urgent intervention by UN Security Council and WHO to:

- **Call for and help deliver a permanent nationwide ceasefire in Syria. Convene international support to sustain it and stop the supply of weapons to Syria.**
- Collaborate with CCSD and other civil society organizations to deliver consistent fact-based public health campaigns to help convince Syrians to take prevention and protection measures. We need to reach all communities – in every home, in every tent, on every roadside, under every tree. We need adequate hygiene materials to be widely distributed, free or priced fairly depending on the situation. We need everyone to be aware and take responsibility in containing COVID-19.
- Provide free COVID-19 testing. We ask for equality of access to testing and medical care.

- Ensure accurate information-sharing and modelling to work in tandem with these efforts and immediately. The Assad government needs to be convinced and required to provide testing for all, without fear of detention or arrests, and publish the results (locations and number of cases). Hospitals and staff need to be prepared with the necessary medical equipment, PPE and training.
- Support for a Syria-wide strategy for tackling COVID-19.

The most vulnerable groups are refugees, IDPs, and detainees. There are opportunities to reduce the risks for them:

- We appeal, on humanitarian grounds, for a concerted initiative to release all detainees and abductees. At a minimum, immediate humanitarian and adequate healthcare access to all detainees, in all prisons and all detention centers, is essential to ensure adequate medical care and protective measures.
- We welcome the [Interim Guidelines for scaling up COVID-19 readiness and response in humanitarian situations](#) and emphasize that there must be humanitarian and healthcare access to all refugee and IDP camps.
- Refugees need to have equal access to testing and medical care. (i.e. there should be no discrimination in access to tests and healthcare).
- Refugee and IDP camps need to be expanded, so that it is feasible for people with COVID-19 to be isolated.
- Humanitarian support when people are ill and unable to work.

We recognize that restrictions and containment measures may need to be put in place, and for civil society compliance, however human rights should not be abused. Also, comprehensive, sustained, and unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of the country must be ensured.

We know that at the time of writing this letter that most Syrian people are not yet alerted to this virus, and many who have heard about it are not hearing the alarm bells and taking it seriously. In government controlled areas many ill people have been told they have a “lung problem” and die at home without medical support. Life goes on, more and more people are falling ill. An 18 year old man in military service reports a high incidence of flu like symptoms among recruits, they are receiving no information, no preventative measures are being taken. Ordinary people in all parts of Syria face the same situation. There is no medical preparedness, no testing, no quarantining (self-isolation), there are just many suspected cases.

For nine years we have been ravished by war, famine, and trauma. We are weak and undernourished. In overcrowded IDP and refugee camps social-distancing is impractical. In some camps there is no access to clean water to wash your hands. They are death-traps should this contagious virus take hold. We estimate this virus could kill more people in a month in an IDP camp than all those who died in the war so far. Our situations are precarious. For example, in Homs, recently under government control, most people live in absolute misery. For the displaced, hungry, unemployed, and homeless – a “virus” may seem silly. People are unaware of the risks, why they must protect themselves, their families, and communities. And even when they do understand, there are challenges, people who don’t have food need to work every day. For refugees in Lebanon, the price of a test \$100-150 is simply beyond their reach (it’s the equivalent of a month’s worth of food and water for the family).

This pandemic is testing healthcare systems in every country around the world. We see what is happening in Italy and Spain. We are woefully underprepared in all of Syria. Let me give you an



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example from this week, one hospital made a handful of beds available, just beds, no oxygen, no extra medical supplies, and no protective equipment for medical staff.

What keeps me awake at night is the tragedy that is about to unfold. We are among the most destitute and vulnerable people in the world. Without your support, COVID-19 threatens the survival of many Syrians and everything we have struggled to achieve these past nine years. WE NEED TO ACT NOW. As this virus spreads, we are all reminded of our fragility and dependence on each other. I appeal for your urgent support and intervention to call for the nationwide ceasefire, and to save the lives of our most vulnerable.

Thank you. I am available to speak with you and your teams at your convenience.

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