

## Impact on Civilians of Military Actions in Idlib

January 14, 2018

The city of Idlib has witnessed new escalations in violence as military operations have targeted it despite its inclusion as one of the four areas included in the de-escalation zones agreement of June 2017, which was signed in Astana. The ceasefire was breached on December 17, 2017 as Syrian regime forces attempted to advance towards Abu al-Duhur Military Airbase. This led to the outbreak of fighting in Hama's northern countryside as well as in Idlib's southern countryside.

This intense fighting in the region has led to a massive wave of displacement. By January 10, 2018, the number of IDPs had reached more than 138,310 civilians,<sup>1</sup> who fled the villages located in Hama's northern countryside and Idlib's southern countryside, and moved towards the north of Idlib and the camps located on the Syrian-Turkish border. This has forced people to seek safety in improvised shelters and camps. Schools and mosques have been crowded with IDPs, and many IDPs are living in the open air due to the lack of shelters. The local communities have been unable to accommodate such a large number of IDPs.

This report attempts to highlight recent events taking place in the city of Idlib as well as Hama's northern countryside, and it focuses on the possibility of continued military campaigns. Furthermore, it provides recommendations for urgent interventions to stop the ongoing military campaign.

### Idlib Province

- Idlib is one of the first Syrian provinces that was taken out of the Syrian regime's control, and is the main stronghold of various armed groups in Syria. Moreover, the province has become a battleground for regional players under the pretext of countering terrorism.
- As a result of shifts in military actions in most Syrian territories, Idlib was one of the Syrian provinces to which IDPs moved; camps are widespread throughout the area, especially in areas adjacent to the Syrian-Turkish border.

### Implications of the de-escalation zones agreement on civilians

- The relative calm experienced in Idlib at the beginning of the ceasefire contributed to the cessation of military operations and shelling between June and December 2017, which made a positive impression among local residents as well as IDPs. In addition, the ceasefire allowed IDPs to return to their villages and homes, as well as to areas close to military lines.
- The ceasefire also led to an improvement in economic activity; the recovery of markets, resumption of agricultural activity, launching of small business projects and the rehabilitation of houses, as well as infrastructure and schools.
- More importantly, the agreement contributed to facilitating movement between various areas, which promoted trade and transport of goods. In addition, it enabled civil society organizations to operate more easily in the city, and its surrounding areas.
- Over time, the ceasefire has increased the population's sense of security and stability, as people had greater hope for a better future through the success of reducing violence and the sustainability of truces. Furthermore, the ceasefire has contributed in bringing back hope of a political transition that will help achieve lasting peace, as well as justice.

### The breach of the Syrian ceasefire and the renewed violence

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*Emergency Humanitarian Response Report-IDPs from rural Hama and Idlib*, UN Protection Cluster, UNHCR, January, 2018. <sup>1</sup>

- Military operations have resumed as a result of advances by Syrian regime forces, along with its militias, towards Abu al-Duhur Military Airbase. The ongoing battles are considered to be some of the most intense yet seen. Civil activists documented the arrival of regime military reinforcements to areas near the countryside of Hama and Idlib. They also documented the use of heavy and medium weapons as well as the occurrence of intensive air support.
- Predictably, civilians are the first victims of these battles. More than 138,310 civilians have fled the villages located in Hama's northern countryside as well as Idlib's southern countryside, and moved towards the north of Idlib and the camps located on the Syrian-Turkish border.
- This new wave of displacement has exacerbated the humanitarian situation in Idlib as a result of service providers' inability to meet the basic needs of IDPs.

### Scenarios if the military campaign continues

- The breach of the ceasefire in Idlib will affect the course of others in the areas covered by the de-escalation zones agreement, especially if this breach confirms the fears of many Syrians who consider these truces to be in the interest of the Syrian regime and its allies., giving them more time to dissipate and eliminate the Syrian opposition armed groups.
- In addition, the violation of the agreement as well as the province's descent into renewed armed conflict between regime forces and armed groups will enable ISIS to re-organize itself and restore its ability to expand its control in its recent strongholds in Hama's eastern countryside as well as its villages of Rahjan, Um Myal, Maakarath and Athriya villages.
- On the humanitarian level, if these military operations continue to take place, many Syrian people will die as Idlib province is overcrowded with IDPs from all Syrian territories.
- Most of the displaced families are scattered in the open air among farms and on the side of roads. This is because most of the IDPs work in livestock breeding and they cannot enter cities, camps or small villages as they have moved with their herds.
- Furthermore, the intensification of fighting will badly affect all service sectors that are already impoverished, in addition to the negative repercussions on the educational system. This will increase the cost of the humanitarian crisis in the province.

### In order to avoid a humanitarian tragedy, the Syrian Civic Platform recommends the following:

- I. The situation in Idlib and Hama's countryside requires the UN Security Council to hold an emergency session to pressure the Syrian regime and its allies to end the military campaign against Idlib.
- II. The international community must warn the truce violators and identify those violators by name.
- III. The UN must take on a monitoring role for the areas covered by the truce by assigning a neutral party to act as a buffer force.
- IV. An urgent humanitarian response must be organized by United Nations organizations to assist IDPs who are constantly moving.
- V. Direct support must be provided to build and expand existing camps to accommodate the high number of IDPs.
- VI. Establish new ambulance points on paths and corridors used by IDPs fleeing the war.
- VII. Provide food aid to centers near displacement points.
- VIII. Open safe passages towards the safer areas with the aim of decreasing the pressure on the city of Idlib.