

Syrian Arab Republic

March 2023

The Syria crisis entered its thirteenth year in March 2023. The UN estimates that **15.3 million** people need humanitarian assistance across the country, a 5 per cent increase from 2022.

The 6 February earthquakes further exacerbated the situation in Syria, and UNHCR is responding to this new emergency. An estimated **8.8 million** people in Syria were affected by the earthquakes.

UNHCR also continues to provide protection and assistance to refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people, returnees, stateless people, and host community members based on identified needs and vulnerabilities.

HIGHLIGHTS

127,400

People affected by the earthquakes were supported with protection services

168,000

People affected by the earthquakes received core relief items from UNHCR as of end-March

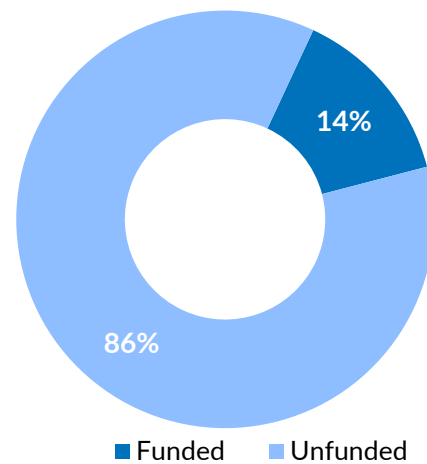
562,000

People received winter core relief items between November 2022 and March 2023 as part of UNHCR's regular winterization programme

FUNDING (AS OF 5 APRIL 2023)

USD 504.3 million

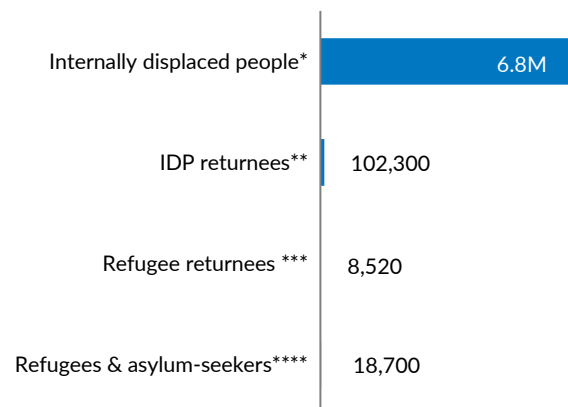
requested for the Syria Operation in 2023



PEOPLE AFFECTED BY DISPLACEMENT IN THE WHOLE OF SYRIA



Installation of showers at a collective shelter hosting people affected by the earthquakes in Aleppo. ©UNHCR/H. Maarouf



* Source: 2023 HNO

** Source: OCHA, October 2022

*** Source: UNHCR verified returns in 2023 as of 31 March

**** Source: UNHCR, March 2023

Operational Context

The [2023 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview \(HNO\)](#) estimates that over 15.3 million people need humanitarian assistance in Syria. This is the highest number of people in need since the beginning of the crisis. Syria also has the largest number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the world with 6.8 million people internally displaced. The 2023 HNO states that humanitarian and economic indicators in the country continue to deteriorate, and many basic services have collapsed. The 6 February earthquakes have further compounded existing needs in a country exacerbated by over 12 years of crisis.

UNHCR supports refugees, IDPs and returnees (refugees and IDPs who have returned to their home areas) by providing assistance to those most in need using a *community-based and area-based approach*. UNHCR's *community-based approach* focuses on community mobilization and building self-reliance. It aims to reduce vulnerabilities and protection risks by providing services through community-based structures and networks. UNHCR's *area-based approach* entails working with partners to enhance support in geographic areas where the needs are greatest.

In 2023, UNHCR is working with 29 partners including international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national NGOs.

Operational Updates

Earthquake emergency response

A major earthquake of magnitude 7.8 struck south-east Türkiye and northern Syria on 6 February. Another magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck the Türkiye-Syria border on 20 February. The UN estimates that around **8.8 million** people in Syria have been affected by the earthquakes. The most affected Governorates are Aleppo, Hama, Idleb, Latakia and Tartous.

Protection

The UNHCR Syria operation and partners have been providing protection services to those affected by the earthquakes, including awareness-raising sessions on child protection and gender-based violence, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in collective shelters, referral of people in need of case management services, psychosocial support and psychological first aid. UNHCR, in partnership with 15 national NGOs, has so far provided around 127,400 protection interventions to people in need.

UNHCR continues to identify the needs of affected populations by conducting focus group discussions and

household visits to families staying in collective shelters. UNHCR also keeps monitoring and identifying the pressing needs of vulnerable individuals hosted by local communities and referring them to the required services based on their identified needs through its network of community centres and outreach volunteers, which were mobilized immediately after the earthquakes.

UNHCR has developed complaints and feedback mechanisms, and a designated hotline and email were activated to receive feedback from communities. Posters were distributed in UNHCR-supported community centres and in collective shelters. UNHCR and partners are disseminating information about available reporting channels.

Core relief items

Since the beginning of the emergency, UNHCR has distributed approximately 35,250 core relief item kits reaching 168,000 affected individuals in Aleppo, Latakia, Tartous, Hama and south Idleb Governorates. A core relief item kit consists of high-thermal blankets, mattresses, kitchen set, plastic sheeting, jerry can, solar lamp and sleeping mats. Items such as mattresses and blankets were critical for families who fled their homes with almost no belongings to take refuge in collective shelters or with the host community. UNHCR also distributed some 120,000 additional relief items to affected families, including winter jackets, winter clothing kits, rubber boots and adult diapers. Additional relief items are being released regularly from UNHCR warehouses in Aleppo, Tartous and Homs for distribution to affected families.

Shelter

In coordination with the Operations Rooms led by the authorities, UNHCR and partners in the Shelter/Non-Food Item Sector have supported rapid structural assessments to damaged buildings. These are aimed at mapping the damages to better plan shelter interventions according to the identified needs.

Two months following the earthquakes, the number of temporary collective shelters reduced from a peak of 300 to around 100 (70 in Aleppo, 16 in Latakia, 15 in Hama and two in Homs). The number of collective shelters continues to fluctuate each week as the assessments are ongoing and mid-term collective shelters and other solutions are being identified. Many of the initial temporary collective shelters were set up in schools and mosques which had to be vacated to resume their regular activities.

Over the last two months, UNHCR and partners have been supporting the adaptation of the collective shelters that were identified as mid-term solutions. The adaptation works include installing partitions for privacy, equipping collective shelter spaces with lighting and ensuring gender-segregated toilets and

washing facilities. Interventions were informed by UNHCR's findings through safety audit assessments, which identified an increased risk of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse incidents inside the collective shelters.



Partitions installed for added privacy at a collective shelter in Latakia. ©UNHCR/E. Kabbas

Cash assistance

UNHCR plans to reach over 7,000 vulnerable families (35,000 people) affected by the earthquake mainly in Aleppo, Latakia and Hama Governorates with emergency cash assistance. The assistance will be provided in two instalments and is aligned with the recommendations of the Cash Working Group. Disbursements to affected families started in March, and as of the end of the month 37 households (132 individuals) had received their cash entitlements while over 400 families were being verified for assistance.

Regular response



Protection

- In line with its community-based protection approach, as of end-March, UNHCR was supporting 114 operational [community/satellite centres](#) and 104 mobile units across the country. UNHCR also engaged around 2,400 community outreach volunteers in all 14 governorates.
- Out of 31 community centres in Aleppo Governorate, 27 of them were active as of end-March (an increase from 24 as of end-February). The four remaining centres were damaged during the earthquakes or are still under assessment.
- At a community centre in Damascus, UNHCR's partner this month completed a training on sign language that had started in December 2022. The training was suggested by the local women's committee after they encountered challenges in reaching out to people with speaking and hearing impairments. The training targeted 20 community volunteers to strengthen communication with

people that are deaf and mute. It also provided information on how to refer people to UNHCR protection services, particularly gender-based violence services.



Core Relief Items

- The UNHCR Syria winterization programme started in November 2022 and was completed by mid-March 2023. During those months, UNHCR Syria provided core relief winter assistance to over 562,000 vulnerable Syrian IDPs and returnees (121,600 families) across all 14 Governorates. The winter kit for a family of five comprises high thermal blankets, winter jackets, plastic sheets and winter clothing. In addition, sleeping bags were distributed to the most vulnerable people residing in camps in the north-east. UNHCR prioritized the needs of the most vulnerable people such as those recently displaced, new returnees, families residing in hard-to-reach and newly accessible areas, among others.



Livelihoods

- During March, UNHCR conducted business trainings for 54 people in Aleppo and Hama Governorates. UNHCR plans to provide these trainings to more than 2,500 people in 2023 so that they can acquire specific business skills and knowledge to be eligible to receive small business start-up grants.
- In Deir-ez-Zor, north-east Syria, UNHCR and partners supported an irrigation project that has resulted in the community's improved access to water for agriculture. The project entailed minor repairs to an irrigation system and has increased the irrigated areas from 200 to 650 hectares, securing water for an estimated 4,000 families. UNHCR also provided the most vulnerable families in the area with agricultural inputs such as seeds and farming tools.



The irrigation system repaired by UNHCR in Deir-ez-Zor. ©UNHCR/M. Abssi



Refugee Response

- **Registration:** As of end-March, some 18,700 refugees and asylum-seekers were registered with UNHCR. The majority of the registered refugees are from Iraq and reside primarily in urban areas in Damascus, Al-Hasakeh, Aleppo, Homs, Tartous and Latakia Governorates. Meanwhile, in March, UNHCR renewed identification cards for more than 1,600 refugees. The identification cards will protect against *refoulement*, ensure access to basic rights and services, and facilitate freedom of movement.
- **Refugee Status Determination (RSD):** In March, eight asylum-seeking families comprising 12 individuals were interviewed to determine if they are refugees. During the same period, 16 families comprising 37 individuals were recognized as refugees, ensuring that they could be protected from *refoulement* and detention due to irregular stay and could access basic services. UNHCR also provided counselling on the RSD process and individual cases through its hotline. Inquiries received during March were primarily related to the status of individual cases and requests for cash assistance.
- **Cash-Based Assistance:** Some 6,230 refugees and asylum-seeker families (17,727 individuals) benefitted from winter assistance which was provided in cash at the counter between November 2022 and February 2023. This represents a 27 per cent increase compared to the number of families reached during the 2021-2022 winterization programme.

UNHCR Co-led Inter-Agency Sector Updates

- UNHCR leads the inter-agency Protection and Shelter and Non-Food Item (SNFI) Sectors as part of the Syria and Whole of Syria inter-agency response.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED:

- For UNHCR's latest updates on the earthquake emergency response, please visit <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria>
- [UNHCR Whole of Syria Earthquake Emergency Response – Update #7](#) (29 March 2023)
- [Response to the main protection concerns in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes](#) (April 2023)
- [Syria Earthquake Response: Protection Sector Update - Flash Update #13](#) (13 April 2023)
- [SNFI - Earthquake Response Factsheet - Syria hub](#) (16 March 2023)
- [UNHCR Syria Key Figures & Achievements](#) (January-December 2022)

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CONTACT: Alessia Pignatti, Reporting Officer, UNHCR Syria, Email: pignatti@unhcr.org

LINKS: [UNHCR Global Focus](#) | [UNHCR Syria Data Portal](#) | [UNHCR Syria Website](#) | [UNHCR Syria Twitter \(@UNHCRinSYRIA\)](#) | [UNHCR Syria Facebook](#)

- The Protection Sector this month organized a workshop on enhancing the inclusion of people with disabilities in humanitarian programmes in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The workshop was used as a platform to discuss the response of institutional and humanitarian partners, the challenges and needs, and to find avenues for better collaboration.
- The Protection Sector issued a [report](#) on the response to the main protection concerns in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes. The paper takes stock of gaps and the response to main protection concerns as a result of the earthquakes, including gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, accountability to affected populations, psychological distress, limited services to people with disabilities and challenges to access to housing, land and property rights.
- Since the onset of the earthquake response, SNFI Sector partners have [supported](#) more than 266,000 individuals with emergency relief items in different collective shelters and in hosting arrangements, and 167,000 individuals with shelter assistance.



Return

- In March, UNHCR verified or monitored the return to Syria of 2,700 individual refugees from Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.¹ This brought the total number of refugee returnees verified or monitored by UNHCR in 2023 to 8,520 – slightly higher than the same reporting period last year (around 8,170 individuals). The impact of the earthquakes on this movement trend in 2023 remains to be seen. In total between 2016 and March 2023, UNHCR verified or monitored the return to Syria of some 362,300 individual refugees.²

¹ Provisional figures pending further verification.

² The numbers reported are only those verified or monitored by UNHCR and do not reflect the entire number of returns, which may be significantly higher.