

Action on all fronts

- Two years after the streets of Syria were first rocked by demonstrations, the country is locked in a bloody civil war that has already **claimed the lives of nearly 70,000 people and forced nearly 4 million others to take refuge abroad** or inside Syria itself. Faced with this protracted political and military crisis, a large-scale humanitarian relief effort must be launched without delay.
- As well as supplying relief to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon since the summer of 2012, Handicap International began **deploying its rehabilitation teams inside Syria** at the start of 2013. The organization is stepping up its efforts to assist the most vulnerable refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, who are living in an alarming state of physical and psychological distress.
- By assisting health facilities in the north of Syria, and giving increasing weight to **psychosocial support** activities in its projects in Lebanon and Jordan, and by setting up **winter preparation** projects, Handicap International has decided to take action on all fronts.



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Contents:

| | |
|---|------|
| Key data_____ | p2 |
| Three questions for Thierry-Mehdi Benlahsen, Head of the Emergency Mission_____ | |
| Our activities_____ | p4 |
| Testimonies_____ | p5-6 |

Key data

Background: Two years after the start of the current crisis, Syria is bogged down in a bloody conflict that claims the lives of nearly 200 people every day. Fighting has moved into residential areas, with no distinction made between civilian and military targets. Entire neighborhoods are targeted by daily strikes and, in many part of the country, health facilities, which are seen as strategic targets, have been driven underground, with scant resources to cope with the constant influx of injured people.

This situation is forcing more and more people to flee Syria. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expects the number of refugees, already estimated at 1 million, to triple over the course of the year. Handicap International's teams in the field have warned that people crossing the border are increasingly vulnerable and in a state of psychological distress.

| Syrian refugees ¹ | |
|---|-------------------------|
| Total Syrian refugees registered by the UNHCR | > 1 million |
| Lebanon | 340,252 ² |
| Jordan | 162,050 |
| Number of Syrians displaced inside Syria (UNHCR estimate) | > 2.5 million |

| Handicap International's actions | |
|---|---------------|
| Beneficiaries targeted by our actions in aid of injured and the most vulnerable people in Lebanon and Jordan ³ | 36,000 |
| Including people with injuries | 3,085 |
| Beneficiaries of weapons/ERW risk prevention actions (Jordan) ⁴ | 9,000 |
| Injured and disabled people who benefited from our actions in the north of Syria ⁵ | 775 |

Needs

The escalation of fighting in residential areas and the current military stalemate have increased humanitarian needs to alarming levels, demanding an immediate scale-up of the international community's relief effort.

The most vulnerable people also find it hard to individually access existing humanitarian aid in areas with a high concentration of refugees.

Lastly, some services do not adequately meet the needs of refugees. These include post-operative rehabilitation care, psychosocial support, and weapons/ERW risk prevention.

Means

Promoting access to humanitarian aid for the most vulnerable refugees⁶

Handicap International has set up permanent and mobile DVFPs (Disability and Vulnerability Focal Point) in Bekaa Valley, in northern Lebanon, and along the northwest border with Jordan to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, including people with disabilities. Since the end of 2012, specialists in psychosocial support for refugees have systematically been included on the organization's teams.

Because most refugees live scattered between small apartments, shared and makeshift shelters, or unoccupied houses, rather than in camps, our mobile teams are the ones who identify the most vulnerable people and assess their needs. By distributing mobility aids, they provide them with direct support. Physiotherapists and psychosocial advisors are included on each team to assist vulnerable families.

Handicap International puts vulnerable people in contact with the organizations able to meet their needs, and monitors their ability to access emergency aid. Under the current circumstances, it is extremely important to ensure the most vulnerable refugees are not prevented from accessing humanitarian aid due to a lack of information, resources or social support.

Assisting the injured

Handicap International places a particular onus on people who have suffered disabling injuries. The organization's team of physiotherapists is working closely with hospitals to assist the large numbers of injured refugees in Syria, as well as those arriving Lebanon and Jordan. Handicap International provides rehabilitation services to people who have been amputated and need to learn how to live with an artificial limb, as well as people whose injuries could result in a permanent disability, due to a prolonged period of inactivity, a complex fracture, etc.



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¹ Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (consulted 11 03 2013). 1,086,975 - includes people awaiting registration.

² 420,000 according to the Jordanian government

³ Goal set for June 2013, including people identified as injured or vulnerable and care takers.

⁴ Number of beneficiaries at the end of the first phase of the project (January 2013). The organisation is planning to launch a second phase.

⁵ This figure only includes injured or disabled people already case-managed by Handicap International (and does not include care takers).

⁶ Projects funded by the Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department of the European Commission (ECHO).

“Many refugees have physical injuries, but many more are traumatized by what they’ve seen”



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Thierry-Mehdi Benlahsen, the regional coordinator of Handicap International's emergency operations, tells us why it's important to include the most vulnerable people - including people with disabilities - in humanitarian relief operations.

What's the current situation in Syria and the surrounding region? How has Handicap International responded to this situation?

According to the Syrians we've been helping, in the region of Idlib, and in countries where they have sought refuge, the situation is getting worse. In

Lebanon and Jordan, the first people to arrive chose to flee, but those arriving now had no other option - they haven't brought anything with them and they are far less well prepared. Many have physical injuries, but many more are traumatized by their experiences.

How have you adapted to the situation?

We've expanded our mobile teams, who supply aid to the most vulnerable refugees and supply them with the information and assistance they need. We do everything we can to avoid a situation in which people who've been injured or tortured, or are disabled, isolated, elderly or pregnant, are prevented from accessing humanitarian aid. This often happens during large-scale humanitarian operations because they need a specific response that major humanitarian organizations aren't able to provide.

We've also adapted our response to take into account the growing psychological distress suffered by refugees. Obviously, as our assessments have shown, it's essential to provide refugees with a space where they can make friends and talk about their experiences. We've recruited specialist staff to organize leisure activities for children in the communities we visit. We've set up discussion groups for people identified as being particularly fragile, and their families and communities. These discussions foster the inclusion of these vulnerable people and help them accept their situation, if necessary. These small forums also enable communities to share their experiences and identify ways of helping each other in a secure environment.

Why is inclusion such an important part of humanitarian aid?

In emergency situations, such as this one, almost everyone is vulnerable. The humanitarian relief effort, in general, is therefore targeted at all refugees, based on their status. But we've noticed that some groups find it hard to access humanitarian aid and we do everything we can to put that right.

Particular attention needs to be paid to extremely vulnerable people. Yet they are often ignored during emergency operations.

That's why we have worked, for example, with United Nations agencies in Jordan to ensure refugee camps are designed to provide access to people with specific needs, including those with reduced mobility.

Foreigners who had been living in Syria are not eligible for refugee status when they arrive in neighboring countries. That's why there are a large number of returning Lebanese and Jordanian people among our beneficiaries, and among the communities that play host to refugees. All of them should receive assistance based on their needs not their status.

What is Handicap International doing to help people with disabilities?

We ensure people with disabilities receive rehabilitation care, psychosocial support and equipment (prostheses, orthoses and mobility aids) to help them adapt to their new situation and to reduce their disability.

But in a situation such as this one, it's also extremely important to intervene while it's still possible to prevent the development of a permanent disability. As a result, we help out in clinics and hospitals providing rehabilitation care to people with injuries who risk developing a disability. We've been doing this work in Jordan and Lebanon, but since the beginning of 2013 we've started doing the same in Syria. We can rely on excellent staff in all three countries to help hard-pressed hospitals, and who focus their efforts on performing the most urgent operations. If the injured are not given rehabilitation care, many of them will develop permanent disabilities that could have been avoided.

Our actions

Syria, Lebanon and Jordan: Case-managing the injured



Handicap International helps hospitals and clinics care for injured refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. The organization supplies them with rehabilitation equipment and organizes physiotherapy sessions for patients.

These services are essential for:

- Patients who have lost all or some of their mobility, who need to perform exercises to avoid developing permanent disabilities.
- Patients who have permanently lost some of their mobility and who need rehabilitation care to avoid medical complications, enhance their comfort and - in many cases - recover a certain level of mobility.

Since the beginning of 2013, Handicap International has also been performing these activities inside Syria itself. We have deployed physiotherapists in the Idlib Governorate, opened a rehabilitation center and begun setting up a prosthesis production workshop, which should be operational in the coming weeks. Around a dozen people currently work in three hospitals, caring for injured and disabled people from four displaced people's camps. Humanitarian aid is in extremely short supply in this part of the country where makeshift health facilities attempt to help the dozens of recently injured people who arrived in the area from Aleppo and other conflict zones every day.

Lebanon and Jordan: Identifying the most vulnerable people and ensuring they have access to services



Since the summer of 2012, Handicap International has been identifying the most vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, in order to assess and meet their needs. Handicap International has set up permanent and mobile Disability and Vulnerability Focal Points in northern Lebanon (five teams), Bekaa Valley (six teams), and along the northwest border with Jordan (seven teams). Between now and the end of June, 36,000 people will receive assistance as part of this initiative.

Aiding the most vulnerable people: These teams start by identifying vulnerable people, put them in contact with organizations able to meet their needs, and monitor their ability to access emergency aid. Most of this work is performed by mobile units since the majority of

refugees do not live in camps.

Providing care: Handicap International directly meets needs falling within the scope of its expertise. This includes:

- distributing mobility aids/technical aids (wheelchairs, crutches, hygiene kits, mattresses, etc.)
- supplying orthoses or prostheses, produced by our local partner
- rehabilitation sessions with our physiotherapists
- psychosocial activities to discuss or monitor the development of psychological disorders with vulnerable people and their families

Lebanon: Winter preparation



The winters are harsh in the mountainous areas of Bekaa Valley, where temperatures often drop below zero. Handicap International has therefore distributed isolation kits for the many people who have fled Syria and taken refuge in this area.

These kits include a wooden frame and plastic sheets to block openings through which the cold passes, and 200 heating oil burners, to help 650 families⁷ still living in extremely basic shelters survive the winter.

Jordan: Risk education



Every day, our teams case-manage people recently injured by bullets or explosions. Each new day of fighting increases the number of weapons and explosive devices in Syria. These weapons will remain a threat long after the conflict ends. Building on its extensive experience of neutralizing explosive remnants of war and victim assistance, Handicap International is performing prevention activities targeted at refugees in advance of their return to Syria.

Risk education workers meet with refugees in camps and host communities to alert them to the risk of coming across explosive devices on their journey home and around their house. They help civilians, including children, identify and keep a safe distance from dangerous devices. 9,000 people have already benefited from awareness sessions and the project's second phase will be launched over the next few months.

⁷ In March 2013, 500 families have already benefited from these kits.

"Every night we hear the bombing and every morning more casualties arrive"

Jens has been working as a physiotherapist for Handicap International's emergency mission in Syria since mid-January. He attends to the injured in camps for displaced people, hospitals, and the rehabilitation center set up by the organization in Idlib Governorate. As the country's resource-strapped medical services try to cope with the never-ending stream of new victims, he tells us why Handicap International's work is so important.

In Syria, a country ravaged by civil war, doctors and surgeons are forced to work in terrible conditions and care for patients whose treatment is complicated by countless factors. Just tens of kilometers to the west of Aleppo, most of the health facilities in the area covered by Handicap International are makeshift hospitals set up in schools and former public buildings by Syrian doctors. These services have to work with scant resources and are regularly pounded from the air. "Patients arrive by the dozen, with the sort of serious injuries that normally require intensive care lasting weeks, even months. They are given emergency operations and have to leave hospital to allow other injured people to receive care," explains Jens. "The 'least worst' cases are complex fractures caused by bullet wounds⁸, but amputations, and spinal and brain injuries are far from rare. With the few resources they have at their disposal, these hospitals find it impossible to provide patients with regular follow-up care. But patients need to know what's happened to them; they need rehabilitation support, so they don't lose the mobility they have".

Restoring hope to the injured

Handicap International works with the few health operators still in the field to provide injured people with vital follow-up care. Without the organization's help, many injured people would develop complications or permanent disabilities, and feel less hope in the future. "When we come into contact with our patients, they have already experienced one traumatic event after another. These men and women have lived through two years of increasingly bitter fighting that has slowly destroyed their country, city and neighborhood, before ending up as victims themselves, often following an explosion or after being hit by sniper fire. They then find themselves surrounded by other people with injuries, in makeshift hospitals, before generally being moved on to camps where the living conditions are extremely harsh. So when we tell them that, by doing regular rehabilitation exercises, they can improve their or their child's condition, it's their first ray of hope after a string of traumatic experiences. That might not seem much compared to what they've lost, but it's still very important."

Working where needs are greatest

The few operators who have chosen to work inside Syria, particularly the north of the country, which continues to come under heavy attack, have to cope with numerous operational and security problems. Because of the extreme shortage of humanitarian aid in this area, whole populations have little or no access to even the most rudimentary care. "Every night we hear the bombs falling on nearby towns and every morning more casualties arrive. We work in hospitals where you can still see the blood. It's impossible to forget the frontlines are just a few kilometers from here, plus it's not easy to handle psychologically, obviously. But we also know that our work is vital. This is what we all focus on, the fact that by helping them, they'll be able to walk again, eat without help, maybe go to university... everything we do in rehabilitation has a huge impact."



Jens attends to an amputee in Handicap International's rehabilitation center in the north of Idlib, Syria.

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⁸ 28% of our beneficiaries have bullet wounds, 29% have been injured in explosions.

Abdul - a war victim who is trying to get back on his feet

Seriously injured in the leg during a bombing raid on Aleppo, Abdul today had his first rehabilitation session with Handicap International's physiotherapists in the north of Syria. These sessions will help him and his father fix their sights on his recovery after spending four months in the macabre world of makeshift hospitals where an endless flow of casualties arrive every day.



Henri and Abdallah help Abdul Algalil, 10, injured during a bombing raid on Aleppo, Syria.

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For the last four months, Abdul (10) has spent his days surrounded by people with injuries. Every evening, he shares his bed with his father, in a small makeshift hospital in the region of Idlib where Handicap International's physiotherapists run rehabilitation sessions several times a week.

Injured by a bomb during a peaceful demonstration in Aleppo

Four months ago, Abdul and his father were walking through the streets of Aleppo when they heard an aircraft overhead. "There was total chaos. I don't know what hit Abdul, it could have been a piece of shrapnel or debris from the explosion. I just heard a loud bang and then I saw him in tears on the ground. I gathered him in my arms and ran to the nearest hospital. As we were running away, we heard the aircraft coming back and three more explosions. I learned later that seven people died and 15 were seriously injured."

When Abdul and his father arrived at a secret hospital, the doctors said that Abdul's leg was too badly damaged to be treated with the equipment they had to hand. The only solution was to amputate his leg above the knee. "I said it was out of the question. So we left and I managed to get my son into a specialist hospital where I paid 5000 dollars for his operation. We stayed for two months. We had to leave when I ran out of money for his treatment. We arrived here (west of Aleppo) because I wanted to find somewhere where Abdul could get the treatment he still needs."

"He'll need years of rehabilitation care"

Handicap International's mobile team of physiotherapists met Abdul at the beginning of January, shortly after he arrived in this small hospital housed in a former public building. "Abdul is young and full of beans," explains Henri, the manager of Handicap International's emergency rehabilitation project in the north of Syria. "We want him to use this energy to move around and do his exercises every day so that he doesn't lose the mobility in his injured leg. A few weeks ago, he was given a skin graft and it will be months before he recovers, and he'll probably need several more operations. But even if he recovers properly, he'll need years of rehabilitation care to help him learn how to use his leg again. Because of his multiple fractures, he's lost seven centimeters and it's still too early to tell if his muscles and joints will be functional again when his skin and bones heal."

Abdul has already begun this difficult task - one that takes a lot of courage. The exercises are painful, especially when he needs to stand up and put weight on his leg, which is still injured. But it also makes him happy, because coming to Handicap International's rehabilitation center gives him a break from hospital. "I really like all of the physiotherapists at the center," explains Abdul with a grin. "We have a lot of fun and I can play with the big green ball, which I lie down on to stretch my back."

In the shared room in the hospital where he's being treated, his neighbours come and go. Abdul sees them arrive on stretchers and leave a few days later because they need to give up their bed to others whose condition is even worse than their own - people injured by bullets or the bombing that Abdul can hear every night just tens of kilometers from the hospital.

"Since he arrived here he's got to know the whole medical team," says his father. "The other patients see him as the boss in some ways, the one who's been here the longest." Abdul is curious so he quickly makes friends with everyone. "Except that man over there," says his father. "Because his face has been burned and he scares him. But he's even got used to that now."



Abdul doing his exercises in his hospital bed. © B. Blondel / Handicap International

The exercises performed by Handicap International's team are extremely important. They will ensure Abdul avoids developing permanent disabilities as a result of his extended periods of immobility. But they also allow him to get away from the casualties of war.



"The fact that he can get out of hospital, sit up and move around the street on his wheelchair is extremely important, both for him and his father," says Henri. "Abdul is only ten years old and for the last four months he has spent his days surrounded by people with extremely serious injuries, in a room where the nurses regularly have to sponge up the blood that spreads across the floor. He is faced with the horrors of war every day; with things no child should ever have to see. So giving him the chance to think about something else, about his recovery, and allowing his father to help him, by doing things Abdul sees as games, that's something really important".

Abdul performing his stretching exercises in the Handicap International rehabilitation center.

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