Collapsed Buildings, Crushing Politics: Refugees International Calls for Immediate Humanitarian Pause and Unfettered Aid Access in Northwest Syria

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Bottom Line Up Front

The massive earthquakes on February 6 have shattered the lives and livelihoods of countless people across Türkiye and Syria. But nowhere will the devastation be more acute than in the embattled territories of Northwest Syria, where the quake’s impact is compounded by more than a decade of conflict, aid obstruction, and protracted displacement. Aid access to these areas has long been used as a political pressure point by the Syrian regime and its allies. This dynamic now threatens imminent peril for millions of people in what has suddenly become a disaster zone layered upon a war zone.

An enormous international relief operation has swiftly and admirably deployed to affected areas in Türkiye. However, the quake has left Northwest Syria with dramatically diminished humanitarian access and support, notwithstanding the best efforts of humanitarian agencies. More than 4 million Syrians in this region depend on aid from the UN and NGOs, provided through Bab-al-Hawa, a single—now badly damaged—border crossing with Türkiye. The recently renewed UN Resolution allowing cross-border aid only authorizes UN agencies access via this crossing. All other routes into Northwest Syria remain closed to UN agencies due to Russian and Syrian government objections.

A number of logistical options exist to get large-scale earthquake relief into Northwest Syria, but all will require political and diplomatic pressure to become a reality. As a first step, the United Nations Security Council should convene immediately to:

- Demand that the conflict parties agree to a humanitarian pause in hostilities for at least 30 days;
• Grant unfettered humanitarian access for earthquake relief efforts in Northwest Syria; and
• Authorize UN agencies’ access to Northwest Syria through all available crossing points, not solely through the Bab-al-Hawa crossing.

If sufficient earthquake aid fails to reach Northwest Syria, it will be a political failure rather than a logistical one.

Inspiring Global Support for Türkiye

In Türkiye, the international community has mobilized to respond to the disaster, joining an estimated 53,000 Turkish relief personnel participating in the emergency response. A number of countries are also deploying emergency teams to support the relief effort, including the United States and EU members states. The need in Türkiye remains high, but the overwhelming response has enhanced the capacity and scale of emergency response to impacted areas.

Northwest Syria Remains Cut Off

In Northwest Syria, the quake has massively increased humanitarian needs even as it undermined much of the humanitarian service architecture. The number of confirmed casualties has soared to nearly 2,000, with many more likely remaining in the rubble. Many thousands more displaced Syrians were again made homeless overnight with limited options for avoiding bitter winter conditions. This will have a disproportionate effect on women and children, who make up the majority of the region’s vulnerable population.

Meanwhile, political obstruction of the aid operation, layered atop the new logistical impediments, has left Northwest Syria to largely go it alone in the first days since the earthquake. Local Syrian responders, including the White Helmets, are at the helm of the search and rescue response with limited resources and equipment relative to the overwhelming scale of the crisis. However, only 5 percent of the damaged sites in Northwest Syria have been covered by search and rescue operations. Local stockpiles of aid inside Syria, which were prepositioned to support these communities against the challenges of a normal winter season, are not expected to last long. The logistical backbone of the UN aid operation into Northwest Syria is headquartered in Gaziantep—in the center of disaster zone in Türkiye. The earthquake crippled critical infrastructure, warehouses, coordination mechanisms, and supply chains necessary to organize deliveries of aid into Syria. Local relief groups in Northwest Syria reported to Refugees International that they lost communication with the UN agencies operating as part of the cross-border aid mechanism. The first UN delivery of aid—six trucks—has since entered Northwest Syria for the first time since the earthquakes struck. Even as those links are
restored, and UN and international NGO aid resumes, it will struggle to go beyond a trickle unless urgent access obstacles are addressed.

Options for Access

Multiple options for expanding relief aid to Northwest Syria exist—if the political obstacles can be overcome:

1. Authorizing Additional Cross-border Access Points from Türkiye

It is urgently necessary to authorize additional cross-border access points from Türkiye into the northwest to allow relief efforts to flow around the worst of the infrastructure damage. It is being reported that Türkiye has authorized aid to go through two additional crossings, Bab al-Salamah and Al-Rai, providing additional lifelines into Syria. These border crossings, including Bab al-Salameh (a previously authorized UN crossing that was later removed to avoid a Russian veto), should be reopened for all humanitarian aid and personnel, especially UN agencies, to provide a more direct route into northwest Syria. At the UN Security Council, Russia and China have blocked UN agencies from sending aid into Syria via other border crossings. This must change quickly.

2. Moving Aid in from Northeast Syria

While Northeast Syria was modestly impacted by the earthquake, conditions are stable and could allow for aid actors to move aid, particularly fuel, overland into Northwest Syria to bolster the response. The Northeast already has some functional humanitarian infrastructure, which could be expanded if political restraints on access from Türkiye were removed.

3. Supplying Cross-line Aid from the South

Without reliable access from Türkiye, all options for alternative access must be activated to save lives. Drastically expanding cross-line aid deliveries from other parts of Syria could be a helpful means of access to the quake zones. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) office in Damascus could potentially manage the cross-line delivery of humanitarian aid into Northwest Syria overland. However, the Syrian government has a well-documented history of weaponizing aid and coopting humanitarian actors, as reported by Human Rights Watch and other observers. Given this backdrop, this access channel will only function if the UN and other aid agencies receive full and unfettered administrative and operational autonomy for the earthquake relief effort, free of interference or manipulation from Damascus, and in close cooperation and coordination with Syrian NGOs on the ground in Northwest Syria. This must be a priority in any UN Security Council action.
Specifically, the Syrian government would need to agree to no prior inspection nor veto of earthquake aid deliveries that transit into the northwest region. It would need to give full permission and consent to the free movement of aid and UN personnel without the threat of harassment, diversion, or exploitation at all points along the mission. All humanitarian aid deployed for earthquake relief via OCHA Syria must be delivered in accordance with humanitarian principles. Damascus would resist such an arrangement, but should face intense diplomatic pressure to accept it at least for the duration of the initial earthquake relief effort; otherwise cross-line aid will not be viable.

4. Opening an Airbridge

Due to the extensive damage to overland aid delivery routes, it may be necessary to open an airbridge operation to allow for the rapid deployment of critical aid supplies, and medical and rescue teams, to Northwest Syria. This would require the use of regionally based aircraft, potentially including U.S. and NATO aircraft, as well as a large degree of coordination between Türkiye and participating nations. U.S. and NATO bases in Türkiye near the impacted areas are one potential launching point for an airbridge. The presence of Western air assets deployed to the region—including in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—means that a bridge could be stood up in a timely period.

This is a well-established operational strategy in other earthquake relief operations (e.g. Nepal in 2015). Similar actions, including the large-scale evacuation of civilians from Afghanistan, also set a precedent for the use of such aerial assets to participate in the emergency response. Politics would be the primary obstacle to this; the conflict parties should be subjected to intense diplomatic pressure to cooperate with and safely facilitate a temporary airbridge operation.

Detailed Recommendations

Refugees International calls on members of the UN Security Council to:

- Hold an emergency session on humanitarian access to Northwest Syria and pass a resolution calling on all parties to the armed conflict to agree to an immediate humanitarian pause for at least 30 days. This pause should enable safe and unhindered delivery of emergency relief and services by humanitarian relief agencies. The parties to the conflict should allow aid to be delivered in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

- Authorize more cross-border access points for UN agencies to deliver lifesaving aid from Türkiye into Northwest Syria. The current UN Security Council
A resolution governing cross-border access into Northwest Syria is restricting the capacity, capability, and access for UN agencies and systems to carry out critical lifesaving assistance and services. There are strong arguments that, under international law, UN agencies do not require a UN Security Council approval to deliver aid to communities in Northwest Syria. However, UN agencies have been so far reticent to do so without an explicit mandate from the Security Council. Therefore, the Security Council should expand the number of cross points that UN agencies can use to move aid from Türkiye into Syria.

- **Press all parties to guarantee unfettered aid access for all possible modalities and access points for delivery into Northwest Syria.** It is imperative that all possible modalities and points of access be open and available for the safe and secure movement of humanitarian aid and personnel into impacted regions. In addition to cross-border aid from Türkiye, this includes cross-line aid from Southern Syria, and overland from Northeast Syria. All parties should also facilitate the establishment of a temporary humanitarian airbridge into Northwest Syria, given the damage to overland transportation infrastructure in the region.

Refugees International calls on the donors, including Türkiye, the U.S. government, the European Union, and other UN Member States to:

- **Deploy search and rescue support to Northwest Syria in collaboration with the White Helmets and local Syrian civil society.** There has been an outpouring of international support for search and rescue in Türkiye. The same needs to happen in Northwest Syria. Donors need to deploy—and parties to the conflict need to safely allow access to—emergency medical teams, engineering teams, and search and rescue support to assist the White Helmets and local Syrian civil society on the front lines of the response.

- **Provide resources directly to local and diaspora Syrian civil society at the front lines of the response.** Unlike Türkiye or other parts of Syria, there is no government to speak of in Northwest Syria. Service delivery relies heavily on the humanitarian actors, particularly local and diaspora NGOs and civil society groups like the White Helmets. Donors need to prioritize direct funding to these organizations, rather than relying only on international NGOs and UN partners. While international organizations play an important role, local groups currently have the most remaining operational presence and capacity in the area. They are the first line and the last line of defense for the communities of the Northwest. An airbridge could supply them with critical assets and resources to scale their response across Northwest Syria.
• **Ensure displaced people are included in strategy and decision-making for relief and recovery efforts.** In the coming weeks and months, relief and recovery efforts on both sides of the border must include displaced people, including Syrian refugees in Türkiye and internally displaced people in Syria.

• **Increase longer-term humanitarian and stabilization support to the region.** Going forward, a massive humanitarian response is needed. The region is already reeling from years of war, devastating aid cuts, and a recent outbreak of cholera. More than 4 million people already depended on critical humanitarian aid and protection services. The previous UN humanitarian appeal for these 4 million people is less than half funded. In addition to humanitarian assistance, stabilization support will be critical for the initial phases of recovery, including repairing damaged buildings, roads, water infrastructure, hospitals, and more.