

Syrian refugees at risk of being forced back home despite ongoing violence, report warns



PHOTO: Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees are at risk of being forced to return as violence continues.(Reuters: Muhammad Hamed, file photo)

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Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees risk being pushed to return home this year despite ongoing violence, a report by a coalition of aid agencies has warned.

Key points:

- NGOs claim governments in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have sent refugees home
- 10,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley have been issued eviction notices
- Report says for every Syrian who did return home last year, three more were newly displaced

The NGOs said Syrian Government victories in the conflict have fuelled "misleading rhetoric" suggesting Syria is safe for refugees to return.

The report added that for every Syrian who did return home last year, three more were newly displaced.

"There is this narrative that maybe Syria will be safe to return, but our research shows this is not the case," Save the Children's Middle East regional advocacy manager Yousra Semmache said.



PHOTO: Many parts of Syria are still experiencing violence. (AP)

She said in the wake of the defeat of Islamic State (IS) in many parts of Syria, and de-escalation zones in others, governments, political parties and politicians have begun openly contemplating the return of Syrian refugees.

“It is definitely present in the discourse, both in host countries, but also something European governments are discussing for maybe the near future,” she said.

Some 5 million Syrian refugees live in neighbouring countries and 1 million are taking refuge in Europe.

Ms Semmache said while many Syrians did return home last year, a far greater number fled their homes.

“There are still massive protection risks inside Syria,” she said.

“For every Syrian that returns home, three have to flee.”

The report from a coalition of NGOs including Save the Children, Care International and the International Rescue Committee, found while 66,000 refugees returned to Syria in 2017, Turkish and Jordanian authorities prevented nearly 300,000 people who were trying to leave Syria from crossing their borders.

There is also evidence of the deportation of Syrian refugees living in neighbouring countries.

Joelle Bassoul, who works for aid agency Care in Lebanon, said Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have sent a number of refugees back to Syria.



PHOTO: Syrian refugees are being sent back home by some neighbouring countries. (Reuters: Erik De Castro, file photo)

She added the failure of some wealthy countries to share responsibility for the world’s largest refugee crisis enabled Syria’s neighbours to justify harsher measures.

“Those countries have borne the brunt of the refugee crisis for years now and they are reaching the point where if the international community doesn’t step up and help them, we will see more and more returns into Syria,” she said.

Lebanon has the highest per capita number of Syrian refugees in the world. One in every four people in the country is a Syrian refugee.

Ms Bassoul said Syrians in Lebanon are now facing increasing crackdowns, as political goodwill towards refugees has slowly worn down.

“Lebanon has called repeatedly for more support from the international community to provide help for refugees,” she said.

“But funding had been lacking every year since the start of the crisis.

“So now we face evictions, raids, arrests, detentions and curfews and generally restrictions on their freedom of movement.”

She said more than 10,000 Syrian refugees living in informal tent settlements in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley were recently issued with eviction notices.

“And those refugees were already among the most vulnerable,” she said.

“And we also saw some municipalities order the eviction of Syria refugees living in those areas.

“So this obviously created a kind of fear in refugees and they limit their movements in the country.”

The aid worker is calling on Western governments to give more.

“I mean overall when you think of it, since the start of the crisis, rich countries have only resettled 3 per cent of all Syrian refugees,” Ms Bassoul said.

“It’s nothing when you think that a quarter of the pre-war population has left Syria and crossed into the neighbouring countries.”



PHOTO: Just 3 per cent of all Syrian refugees have been resettled in the West. (Reuters: Alkis Konstantinidis)

Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-05/syrian-refugees-being-pushed-back-home-despite-ongoing-violence/9396008>

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