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Fear of More Refugees Flowing Into Turkey as UN Aid to Syria Expires

Posted By *Kristina Jovanovski* On July 11th 2022 @ 4:11 pm In By Region, Syria, Turkey

There are fears of a new flow of refugees into Turkey after a United Nations Security Council resolution allowing aid deliveries into Syria expired Sunday night, after Russia vetoed its renewal.

The resolution, first passed in 2014, allows for essential supplies to enter through the Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey into a rebel-held area of northwestern Syria; it has been renewed on a yearly basis until the Russian veto on Friday.

It is the only crossing from which UN aid is sent into Syria, since Russia and China closed three other crossings.

"The panic will start quite immediately," said Iyad Agha, a coordinator with NGO Forum – Northwest Syria, which helps organize cross-border aid delivery.

Agha, who spoke to The Media Line from Gaziantep, Turkey, on the border with Syria, said that 80% of the food going into the region is from the UN.

Failure to renew the resolution for cross-border aid will be a catastrophe for over four million people in northwest Syria

The crossing is in the northwestern Idlib region where many of Syria's internally displaced people now reside, reported to be about 4 million people.

The US, which has argued for a one-year renewal of the resolution, has said that 70% of food needs would not be met without the UN and that the Bab al-Hawa crossing allows for aid to reach about 2.4 million Syrians a month.

Aid workers say medicine and vaccinations also will be impacted.

"Failure to renew the resolution for cross-border aid will be a catastrophe for over four million people in northwest Syria," according to Mark Cutts, the UN's Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, who is based in Gaziantep. ·

The AFP news agency, citing unnamed sources, reported that a vote early this week is possible.

Russia, which backs Syrian President Bashar Assad, has called into question whether the UN resolution would be renewed since 2019, arguing that aid should go through Damascus instead.

Tensions between the Kremlin and the West are at their lowest point since the Cold War over Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the responding sanctions it has faced.

Meanwhile, news reports said that Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke on Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin and urged him to vote to extend the authorization of cross-border aid deliveries. "Erdogan emphasized that he attaches importance to the extension of the cross-border mechanism in Syria," his office said in a statement.

Agha warned that civil unrest is likely.

"It's going to destabilize the whole area ... and probably a lot of pressure on the Turkish border is going to be there, as well," he said. "Anything is possible."

The International Crisis Group has also warned that such a significant drop in aid could lead to an influx of refugees into Turkey.

Other organizations could continue to provide some supplies but humanitarian workers and governments have said it is very unlikely that they could fully replace supplies from the UN.

Agha said that, based on analysis done by his organization, NGOs could send between 18% and 30% of the supplies that the UN gives.



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Carsten Wieland, a former UN advisor to talks on Syria and author of “Syria and the Neutrality Trap,” a book about delivering aid to Syria, told The Media Line that shifting to NGOs to deliver aid will significantly increase the amount of work required because they will need to be vetted and audited, and they will not have the same level of protection as UN aid deliveries have had.

“It will not match the UN,” he said.

The potential crisis comes at an especially precarious time for civilians in Syria.

The pandemic, Russia’s war in Ukraine and the resulting disruption in supply chains have put pressure on aid delivery.

Civilians in northwestern Syria also may have to deal with a new military operation that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced his country is planning on launching in the area, which could lead to more internal displacement.

Russia had backed a resolution that would allow for aid to be delivered for six more months but it was rejected by some Western countries.

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Agha said that such a six-month extension would be disruptive because the deadline would not give enough time to prepare for the humanitarian demands of the winter months.

“Russia could leverage more because the situation is even more difficult,” said Wieland.

He stated that shorter periods for a resolution give Russia more of a chance to negotiate for more concessions, such as reconstruction efforts.

“The Russians actually want to make it fail in a way,” said Wieland.

Wieland said Russia’s rejection of the resolution and its new proposals is a provocation that would help shift more money and food aid under the control of Damascus.

“This is, of course, a very obvious imbalance,” said Wieland.

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who visited the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in June, tweeted on Sunday that the decision is a matter of life and death.

“Cross-border aid is vital in responding to the rising protection needs of children, who are increasingly being forced into child marriage and child labor,” she tweeted.

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