

## **Speech about save returns for refugees coming from areas of conflicts at the 21<sup>st</sup> UN International Meeting of Mine**

Madame Chair,

Yesterday, a new report documented that homemade landmines have killed and injured hundreds of civilians, including more than 150 children, in Raqqa, Syria since October 2017. What is even more worrying than this information is that these numbers will most likely increase as more people return to their homes. Even if the level of contamination has to be fully assessed, we already know, based on our past experience in Kobane for instance, that it will take years of clearance before the threat from these weapons is lifted in Raqqa city and in the region.

**According to local authorities, more than fourteen thousand families returned to Raqqa city, by December last year. The authorities expect that substantial numbers of people will continue to return despite the high level of contamination by explosive hazards and the limited services available in the heavily damaged city.**

Syria remains an acute humanitarian situation, despite any narratives to state the contrary. Last week alone saw the highest recorded number of deaths in Syria since 2011.

Contamination in Syria is a major concern and coupled with inadequate health and rehabilitation services, socio-economic deprivation amongst the IDP and refugee populations means that the international community has to raise and insure that they are protected if they decide to come back. And we insist that return should be only voluntary and informed about the contamination risk.

Also, we urge the international community to support and ensure a continuity of services for Syrians and actors and to increase humanitarian access in all its current forms.

We believe that raising the awareness of the population to the presence and threat from explosive remnants of war is vital to ensuring the protection of people affected by conflict. Clearance must be a priority in areas where conflicts have ended and families have started to return to their homes. But the efforts that have been taken so far are not enough. Access to humanitarian demining organizations should be prioritized and permitted, so that clearance is done in a proper and adequate way. Humanitarian mine action is by part of the humanitarian action as a whole, and fully in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence that is the core of work.

Also, providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people who have been injured traumatized or displaced by the fighting remains a priority.

Madame Chair, talking about forced displacement, we in HI strongly recommend that the international community examines the causes of forced displacement in the first place. Over the last two years, HI has documented the correlation between forced displacement and the use of explosive weapons based on information from our programs to provide assistance to the people affected by the Syrian crisis in Lebanon and Jordan. With the support of the governments of Ireland, Luxembourg and Switzerland we have published 2 reports in in last two years, clearly showing that the use of explosive weapons in Syrian villages, towns and cities had been the primary cause of forced displacement.

We in HI call on all engaged in military operations to urgently review their military policies and practices, and to end the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.

Thank you