

# UNHCR appoints regional refugee coordinator for Syrian refugees

---

News Stories, 13 March 2012



© UNHCR

Panos Moumtzis, UNHCR's newly appointed Regional Refugee Coordinator for Syrian Refugees, briefs journalists at the Geneva Palais, March 13, 2012

GENEVA, March 13 (UNHCR) – The UN refugee agency announced on Tuesday the appointment of a veteran of emergency operations to coordinate its approach to the refugee crisis in Syria and neighbouring countries, which have received some 30,000 Syrian civilians.

As Regional Refugee Coordinator, Panos Moumtzis will be based in Geneva and work closely with the refugee agency's Middle East and North Africa Bureau and UNHCR representatives in concerned countries. The Arabic speaker's brief will also be to ensure smooth cooperation with inter-agency coordination mechanisms. He will travel frequently to the region.

Moumtzis will also work closely with the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria Radhouane Nouicer in ensuring effective linkages and cohesion between the refugee operations in neighbouring countries and the broader humanitarian response plan.

At a press briefing in Geneva to announce his appointment, Moumtzis told journalists that around 30,000 people had fled to neighbouring countries since the turmoil erupted in Syria a year ago. "Significant numbers of Syrians are thought to be displaced inside Syria," he added.

UNHCR teams in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have been working during this time to support the governments and non-governmental organizations providing shelter, aid and protection to the refugees. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey all maintain a policy of open borders for Syrians fleeing the violence.

Inside Syria, the government continues to host and support 110,000 refugees registered with UNHCR, the majority from Iraq.

Moumtzis said UNHCR and the Lebanese government have jointly registered just over 7,000 Syrians in north Lebanon and registration is to continue in Tripoli, where several thousand more are believed to have taken refuge. They have mainly arrived from Homs province. There are also an estimated 4,000 people sheltering in the Bekaa valley.

UNHCR is working to verify the numbers and is carrying out distribution of food and other items. In other parts of Lebanon, an additional 1,000 Syrian refugees are receiving assistance from UNHCR and partners.

In northern Lebanon, UNHCR and its partners regularly distribute food and other aid to registered refugees and host families in need. Primary health care is available through public and private clinics, with UNHCR covering most of the costs. More serious cases, including some 268 war wounded to date, are referred to hospitals and their care paid for by the government.

Moumtzis said refugee children in the north had been able to enrol in local schools, with UNHCR and partners providing the costs of educational supplies and remedial classes. UNHCR was also helping the displaced in the Bekaa Valley, he said, adding that teams were liaising with the authorities and assessing needs.

In Jordan, more than 5,000 Syrians have registered with UNHCR, with a further 2,000 awaiting registration. The majority are living with host families, from Irbid and Ramtha in the north to Amman and as far south as Maan.

UNHCR is providing assistance to urban refugees (including cash grants and aid items), and is assisting the government in renovating and running a transit facility at the Ramtha border. The centre has seen over 1,000 Syrians transit through it, and currently houses some 380 people in very cramped conditions.

The new regional coordinator said that local humanitarian aid groups in Jordan, as with Lebanon, were playing an important role in responding directly to needs, and in referring vulnerable Syrians to UNHCR for registration and community services support. Access to health care is a key concern for Syrians; UNHCR, the UN country team and government are working together to provide these services.

In Turkey, where camps are being managed by the government, almost 23,000 people have received protection in seven camps in Hatay province. Some of this population has returned to Syria and the camps now hold more than 13,000 refugees. The government plans to move the majority to Kilis province, where a purpose built container city has been prepared. The Turkish government is providing the majority of assistance to the refugees.

Moumtzis said that inside Syria, Iraqi refugees report a significant increase in the price of basic commodities, due to inflation and the devaluation of the Syrian pound. UNHCR continues to support more than 11,000 of the most destitute refugee families through a financial assistance programme. From March, the agency will help meet the food needs of approximately 97,000 refugees through a cash assistance-ATM programme. Together with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and other national and international partners a number of basic services are also

provided to help the refugee population to cope with an increasingly difficult socio-economic situation

UNHCR has observed that refugees and Syrians have moved out of areas of unrest, with many choosing villages at the outskirts of the main cities, as well as rural Damascus and Damascus Governorate itself, that are considered more secure.

Moumtzis, a Greek national, joined UNHCR in 1990, after working with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. He has worked on crises in places like Iraq, Kenya, Rwanda and Côte d'Ivoire and last year served as UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Libya.