



Statement

2nd October 2020

RR warns of the consequences of inaccurate representation of the Safety in Syria

While Rethink Rebuild Society (RR) acknowledges and appreciates the committed work of the UNHCR and their efforts to help Syrians everywhere, including those under the control of the regime, statements regarding a recent trip to East Ghouta made by UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi are giving a false impression that Syria is safe to return to. Mr Grandi's statements that 'there were increasing signs of stability' and that 'some life is starting again' are dangerous and misleading, though they are right.

The report includes an urgent appeal for donations to the UNHCR Syrian Operation. The UNHCR is right to highlight the humanitarian hardships faced by Syrians and currently exacerbated by the Covid-19 Pandemic and RR does not intend to take away from this. Those in Syria are living in dire conditions and particularly at risk of infection without working electricity or water. However, the UNHCR report does not acknowledge the elephant in the room. Safety is not at all guaranteed for returning refugees; families remain fearful of erratic and nonsensical arrests, disappearances, and harassment in Assad-held areas and young males are forcefully taken to join Assad's army.

The consequences of such a significant institution, like the UNHCR, misrepresenting the situation in Syria could be catastrophic. As tensions rise in neighbouring Lebanon, potential returnees may be even more inclined to make decisions based on inaccurate information. Policymakers in neighbouring countries and all over the world may now feel it is appropriate to input additional policy encouraging return. The UNHCR are openly contradicting their own mandate which promises 'to communicate accurate and timely information to potential returnees about conditions' and to ensure return is in 'safety and dignity'.

RR works very closely with the Syrian Community and as such knows of the harm this could cause. We therefore urge the UNHCR to fulfil their duty and report accurately on the situation in Syria. Any statements that may lead to the repatriation of Syrian people is completely unacceptable at this time.

ENDS

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