1. On 3 May 2013, the IASC Emergency Directors met with donors in Geneva to discuss the humanitarian situation in Syria and in neighboring countries. The meeting sought to further build a shared understanding of humanitarian needs and operational challenges, as well as to discuss future perspectives on the crisis in relation to funding and contingency planning. The meeting also allowed for a sharing of views on the future of the Syria Humanitarian Forum. The meeting was chaired by OCHA’s Director of Operations.

The Humanitarian Situation in Syria

2. The Regional Humanitarian Coordinator provided an overview of the humanitarian situation in Syria, highlighting its rapid deterioration. The number of people in need (estimated at 6.8 million) has significantly increased and will likely continue to do so, due to worsening living conditions and weakening coping capacities. The arrival of the summer season poses particular risks in regard to outbreaks of water-borne diseases, given the damage and deterioration to the water supply system, health infrastructure/services, and the refuse collection system. While noting that humanitarian actors have been providing increased levels of assistance across the country, the needs continue to out-pace response.

3. The Emergency Directors of WFP, UNICEF and WHO provided an overview of the response in key sectors. WFP’s food assistance is now being targeted to some 2.5 million people in need (up from 1.5 million in January). UNICEF’s operations have provided access to safe drinking water for 7.4 million people, and have resulted in remedial classes, psychosocial support and recreational activities for 85,000 children, through 330 school clubs. WHO and its partners in the health sector have reached some 2.1 million people, through a range of activities, including the establishment of mobile clinics, drug procurement and distribution, and disease surveillance in all Governorates.

4. The Chair outlined the four key challenges faced in the response: the rise in bureaucratic impediments, insecurity and the limitations on access to people in need, the insufficient number and deployment of national and international partners working on the ground, and the lack of required funding, particularly in key sectors. Also outlined was the fact that the operational challenges are multiplying at the time when needs are increasing.

5. The ensuing plenary discussion touched on the array of operational challenges presented. Donors sought to gain a better understanding of the motivations behind the bureaucratic hurdles, as well as their operational implications. The need to remind parties to the conflict of their obligations on IHL was further noted. Clarification was provided on the coordination mechanisms inside Syria and at the regional level. Appreciation was expressed for the quality of data and information products. It was noted that maintaining consolidated data on relief provided from inside and outside Syria was essential to a well-coordinated and principled humanitarian action. Efforts to obtain data on the diversion of aid were also encouraged.
6. On the question of access, donors commended the significant efforts being made by the UN to provide assistance in all affected areas, including across the conflict lines. The value of partnerships with national actors and the SARC to deepen the reach was recognized. There was also recognition that there are areas where the needs are severe which remain inaccessible and that cross-line convoys to ‘hot spots’, have made an appreciable and positive difference, but have also exposed their limitations as well. As such, additional options for improving access should be considered, while recognizing that no single solution to accessing people in need exists. Neither cross-border nor cross-line operations will alone suffice in reaching all people in need, so the emphasis should be placed on gaining access by all possible means.

The Humanitarian Situation in Neighboring Countries

7. The Regional Refugee Coordinator updated on the situation of the over 1.4 million Syrian refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, mentioning that since 1 January 2013, over 850,000 people have fled Syria – an average of 8,000 a day –making the Syria refugee crisis the fastest growing in the world. The large influx of refugees in neighboring countries – 75% of whom are hosted by local communities whose coping mechanisms are severely overstretched – is placing a considerable burden on the host countries. A prolongation of the conflict risks having severe implications for regional stability.

8. The representatives of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey provided an overview of the refugee response in each of their countries. They expressed concern at the threats that the refugee crisis poses on their economy, national security and societal peace. Whilst noting their commitment to maintaining the borders open to all people fleeing violence in Syria, they also called on the international community to adhere to the principle of “burden sharing” and to provide them with the necessary financial support.

9. During the plenary discussion, donors praised the generous efforts made by neighbouring countries in hosting Syrian refugees. Focus also turned to the regional Refugee Response Plan, currently under preparation. The design of the plan was praised, in particular its holistic approach, which includes livelihoods support for local host communities, as well as programmes for returnees and Palestine refugees. The need for greater engagement with development actors was also noted, given that the crisis has had a broader impact beyond the refugee population.

The Syria Humanitarian Forum

10. The meeting examined the future of the Syria Humanitarian Forum, which was considered to be a valuable mechanism to discuss humanitarian issues in a non-politicized manner. Suggestions were made to make the Forum more interactive and action-oriented, including through the introduction of sessions on specific topics such as humanitarian access, health, gender-based violence, and children.

11. Many participants underscored the importance of inclusiveness and the need to allow the participation of all actors involved in humanitarian operations. Formulas were proposed to allow for all operational organizations active in opposition controlled areas to participate in the Forum,
including, confining the plenary session to member states only and then holding an informal, operational session in the afternoon with the full range of humanitarian actors currently operating inside Syria. No consensus was achieved on a formula, however. It was noted that without a way forward for the Syria Humanitarian Forum, alternative arrangements would likely emerge which would not be fully inclusive and many participants stated they did not wish to see this happen. It was also noted that not involving all operational partners currently involved in facilitating the delivery of aid will likely compromise the good cooperation that currently exists to facilitate cross line operations on the ground.

**Contingency Planning and Preparedness**

12. The Regional Humanitarian Coordinator briefed on the preparedness efforts being undertaken. Agencies are ensuring that adequate buffer stocks are available to respond immediately to increased access or an escalation of the situation. WFP has stocks in place to address the needs of 500,000 people for one month, while other agencies are also prepared to respond although their stock levels vary in range. The contingency planning scenarios in Syria take into account ‘complicating factors’ that can potentially complicate the maintenance of stocks, such as weakening local markets, increasing transportation costs, and fuel shortages. Agencies were encouraged to look at specific situations that would complicate the humanitarian response (e.g. border closures) in their contingency planning.

**Funding Perspectives**

13. Participants highlighted the need for donors to continue providing financial assistance to the humanitarian response as despite recent generous contributions and pledges, the response remains underfunded. Humanitarian agencies are currently focused on updating the response plans for the next six months and are being careful to ensure clear and well-articulated prioritization to maximize the impact of activities in a resource constrained environment. Also underscored was the need to broaden the donor base (while recognizing that the private sector is more likely to support natural disasters), and to build stronger engagement with development actors.

14. Participants welcomed the efforts made by the United Nations to represent funding for both plans in OCHA Financial Tracking Service and encouraged donors to regularly report their contributions through this mechanism.