News

Syrian refugee children play at Zaatari refugee camp Feb. 12 in Jordan. (CNS/Muhammad Hamed, Reuters)

Dale Gavlak

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan — February 13, 2018
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As Syria's war soon enters its eighth year, many decry the recent dangerous escalation in the conflict, whether in the country's north, between Turkey and the Kurds, or in the south, between Iran and Israel.

Speaking from the sprawling Zaatari Refugee Camp housing 80,000 Syrians near Jordan's border with Syria, the head of the U.N. refugee agency condemned the recent Israeli-Iranian confrontation over Syria, which threatens to open a new and unpredictable front in the war.

The "escalation in the last few days of war in Syria is of extreme concern," Filippo Grandi told reporters during his Feb. 12 visit.

"We are witnessing an extended failure of political action by states to find a solution to this war" and "an increasing internationalization of the conflict," Grandi said. "This is extremely worrying" because it "makes a solution more difficult."

Israel carried out a series of airstrikes in Syria Feb. 10, hitting Syrian as well as Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah military targets after it said an Iranian reconnaissance drone had entered its airspace. Israel also lost one of its aircraft during these attacks.

Pope Francis has named the conflict in Syria the worst humanitarian disaster after World War II. He said that on Feb. 23, the day of prayer and fasting for peace, he would "make special mention of Syria, afflicted in recent years by unspeakable suffering."

Israel and Syria have remained officially in a state of war for decades. The relations are further strained as three of Israel's enemies operate in the Syrian theater: the government itself, Hezbollah and Iran.

Meanwhile, the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions called for an immediate end to the Turkish invasion of Syria's northwestern town of Afrin, "one of the last undamaged regions in the country." The network of 31 national Catholic justice and peace commissions said it supports demands by Afrin's citizens for an

"immediate cease-fire and establishment of a no-fly zone as well as humanitarian corridors for medicines and relief supplies." It also urged the European Union and its member states to demand a "negotiated solution from Turkey and international observers to access the area."

Thousands of internally displaced Syrians have sought shelter in Afrin from other war-ravaged areas. Many civilian causalities have been reported since Turkish military forces, with the support of radical Islamist groups, invaded Jan. 20. Afrin, located in a Kurdish-controlled area, is about 30 miles from Aleppo.

Other Christians have condemned Turkey's military operations against the Kurds and Christians of Afrin.

Fr. Emanuel Youkhana, an archimandrite of the Assyrian Church of the East, has urged an immediate end to the military operations and immediate aid to the people, telling CNS that "the civilians cannot be attacked under any claim."

"Attacking (those) who fought ISIS is shocking and questionable action," he said. "We pray for decision-makers to work for peace. Battle cannot be a path to peace."

"The situation in Afrin is very bad and has everything to do with the indiscriminate bombing of civilians," Dutch human rights advocate Johannes de Jong told CNS.

Advertisement

He said the Syrian Democratic Forces are fighting with sheer courage, lacking air power, tank brigades, or modern small arms against NATO's second-largest army — Turkey — and al-Qaida and other jihadists.

"I don't have any hope for Syria. The only hope I have is in God for its future," said a Syrian refugee woman at Zaatari, Um Mahmoud, who used her familial Arabic name. She spoke, reflecting on the upcoming seventh anniversary of the Syrian conflict in March.

"Although many Syrians do hope to return home one day, it seems like a far-off dream for me," said the 32-year-old mother. "Now, I, my husband and our five children want to be resettled anywhere else in the world."

Some 5.5 million Syrian refugees are living in Jordan and other neighboring countries. Hundreds of thousands of others made the perilous Mediterranean crossing, seeking shelter in Europe. About 15,000 Syrian refugees have returned home, with some several thousand forcibly repatriated due to security concerns.

The U.N. refugee chief urged the United States to reconsider its stricter refugee resettlement policy under the Trump administration.

Grandi said he expected to travel to Syria in March to ask that the U.N. and other humanitarian agencies be granted access to civilians in besieged areas controlled by both the government and opposition forces.

"The borders of Syria are closed. People cannot go out. So they will have to escape desperately, within Syria," he said, "Civilians must be accessed by humanitarian organizations wherever they are, because it's their suffering that keeps us awake at night."