

**U.N. says 1.5 million Syrians in need of help**  
**By Stephanie Nebehay, Reuters**  
**22 June 2012**

(Reuters) - The number of Syrians needing humanitarian aid has soared 50 percent since March to 1.5 million as escalating violence drives more people from their homes, the United Nations said on Friday.

The fighting between President Bashar al-Assad's forces and rebels is making it difficult to reach vulnerable civilians, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

"More and more people are leaving their homes, vulnerability is growing and assistance is needed," OCHA spokesman Jens Laerke told a news briefing in Geneva.

"The overall problem is the lack of security and the lack of access."

The displaced include 350,000 in northern Idlib province and some 250,000 in the flashpoint city of Homs, where more than 100 public buildings have been turned into temporary shelters for the homeless, the OCHA said, citing figures from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

Aid workers hoping to evacuate hundreds of trapped civilians and the wounded were unable to enter hard-hit areas of Homs on Thursday due to shooting, the International Committee of the Red Cross said.

Transport fuel in Syria is running short, while only half of the 38 hospitals surveyed in seven provinces are fully-functioning, the OCHA said in its latest update.

The United Nations announced on June 5 that it had reached an agreement with Syrian authorities to implement a major assistance program but the worsening violence means that no further aid workers are being sent to the field.

Reconnaissance missions have been conducted in the past weeks and humanitarian hubs will be established initially in Homs and Deir al-Zor in the east, the OCHA report said.

"However, given the deteriorating security situation, the deployment of staff to field locations is on hold", it said.

U.N. aid agencies have a "very, very thin presence on the ground" in Syria, Laerke said.

With the help of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP) had provided food rations to 461,000 Syrians by mid-June, the OCHA statement said. WFP aims to increase that number to 850,000 in July.

More than 86,000 Syrian refugees have now been registered in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey - a rise of nearly 20,000 since May 31, according to the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR.

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