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SYRIA CASE STATEMENT

Syria is a country of extraordinary religious diversity whose people have faced unprecedented upheaval and destruction. Following the start of the civil war in 2011 — and the rise of the Islamic State from 2014 to 2017 — more than 30 percent of its population of 22 million has died or fled its borders. Approximately 90 percent of the pre-war population was Muslim, a majority of whom were Sunni, and 10 percent was Christian, but those figures no longer apply as Christians and other minority communities sought safety elsewhere.

Christianity in Syria has a rich, 2,000-year history. In the town of Maaloula in the Rif Dimashq Governorate, residents still use a form of Aramaic, the 3,000-year-old language Jesus spoke. For centuries, Syria served as a sanctuary for Christians fleeing persecution in the region, including the 1915 genocide against Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. It is home to six Catholic Eastern churches — the Armenian, Chaldean, Latin, Maronite, Melkite and Syriac — and numerous Orthodox churches.

This safe haven was shattered by the rise of civil war in 2011 and the Islamic State in 2014. To date, an estimated 585,000 people have been killed. The conflict internally displaced some 6.7 million people. Extremists systematically targeted Christians and religious leaders for killing, forcible conversions and kidnapping. They took large swaths of territory, taking aim at towns and villages with historic Christian communities, displacing large populations.

Today, the country faces multiple, humanitarian emergencies. The value of the Syrian pound fell dramatically in 2021, causing a sharp increase in prices. Meanwhile, an estimated 50 percent of the population has experienced a loss of income from the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic. According to the World Food Program, an estimated 12.4 million people — close to 60 percent of the population — are food insecure. Half of the state-owned hospitals and medical centers have sustained damage from the war. The country is facing a major health care crisis with successive waves of coronavirus cases.

“There are no drugs, the hospitals lack the equipment to save lives,” said Bishop Georges Abou Khazen, the Latin apostolic vicar in Aleppo last November. “The basic essentials of life, including food, are lacking, and many are barely able to get enough to eat every day to survive.”

Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) works closely with more than a dozen church and church-related institutions in Syria to support its diverse populations. Together with its broad coalition of partners, CNEWA funds critical programs that serve to identify and protect the most vulnerable residents from all cultural and religious backgrounds.

PASTORAL PROGRAMS

CNEWA works strategically to support pastoral programs across the diverse array of churches in the country. To maximize the reach of pastoral programs across both geographic areas and cultural communities, CNEWA builds on strong partnerships with eparchies, such as the Melkite Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Bosra, Horan and Jabal al Arab, the Maronite Archeparchy of Lattaquie and Tartous and the Syriac Catholic Archeparchy of Homs, Nebek and Qaryatein. CNEWA works with religious communities, such as the Sacred Heart Sisters, the Sisters of Charity of Besancon and the Jesus and Mary Congregation, as well as church committees and councils, such as the Christian Catechetical Organization of Aleppo and the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient.

Programs serve more than 9,000 beneficiaries within the capital, Damascus, and the surrounding areas; Syria's northern areas of Tartous, Lattaquie and Aleppo; Hassakeh in the northeast; Homs in the west; and in Daraa and Soueida in the south. These works engage communities in catechetical activities that share knowledge and strengthen the faith of believers; renovate catechetical centers to enable them to operate more efficiently; provide special support to displaced persons and their host communities as well as to parishes that have been damaged during the war.

These partners provide intensive catechetical activities to thousands of children in more than a dozen summer camps. The funding covers food, transportation, stationery, fees and salaries and training for hundreds of staff members. Other partners provide pastoral services to adults with special needs.



EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE

As Syria faces extremely high rates of food insecurity, identifying and reaching the most at-risk populations pose extraordinary challenges. CNEWA partners with five church and church-related institutions, the Sisters of Charity of Besancon, Our Lady of the Good Shepherd Sisters, the Jesus and Mary Congregation, Saint George Parish, El Mecherfe, and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, a lay Catholic organization. These institutions operate in Damascus and its suburbs, and Lattaquie, Aleppo and Homs.

The emergency food program provides food packages — consisting of staples, such as canned meat, oil, chickpeas, rice and tomato paste — as well as grocery store vouchers to 1,400 families, an estimated 5,600 individuals. Each institution carefully collects data and screens prospective beneficiaries, prioritizing individuals who have lost their homes, businesses or employment and are now renting. CNEWA works closely with partner institutions to build their capacity to administer program logistics, and coordinates among them to avoid any duplication of benefits.



HEALTH CARE



Working with seven church and church-related institutions, the Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Homs, Hama and Yabroud, the Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Bosra, Horan and Jabal al Arab, the Marist Brothers, the Maronite Archeparchy of Aleppo, the Maronite Archeparchy of Lattaquie and Tartous, the Syriac Catholic Archeparchy of Homs, Nebek and Qaryatein, and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, CNEWA supports programs to provide health care that is urgently needed to save lives.

CNEWA funds the partner institutions to pay for the cost of medication, hospitalization and

diagnostic tests for the most vulnerable residents, supporting 3,000 patients and prioritizes individuals who are experiencing extreme, financial hardship.

RESIDENTIAL CARE FOR AT-RISK ELDERLY POPULATIONS

In Aleppo, CNEWA supports the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to operate a residential care home that provides services to 32 elderly residents who lack family able to care for them. It provides funding to help cover the expenses of the residents, including food, medication and critical supplies.

CHILD CARE INITIATIVES

Children have suffered tremendously from the war in Syria, and CNEWA remains committed to providing critical resources to help children to learn and grow.

Working through 10 church and church-related institutions to maximize the reach of the program, CNEWA supports 9,000 children and youth, from infants through young adults attending college, primarily in Damascus and its surrounding region, Tartous and Lattaquie, Homs, Aleppo and Daraa.

The programs cover two essential interventions. First, partners work to distribute milk, diapers and clothing to equip young children for conditions of extreme heat and cold. Second, they operate a multifaceted, educational program that pays for the cost of educational materials, including stationery and school fees, for students enrolled in primary and secondary schools. They also help to cover transportation costs for students attending universities. They collect extensive data about the families in order to identify those who are most at-risk and select the most vulnerable among them for support.