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Statement by Office of the Coordinator for International Advocacy (OCIA)

The NGOs Have Access to Rojava through Semelka River

Coronavirus has comprehensively and relentlessly targeted almost every spot in the world. Its fatality is growing in a steady trend. Following the partial closure of the borders and airports, health sectors are facing a huge pressure and new challenges.

The Fayshkhabur river-also known as Semelka River-is considered a crucial humanitarian crossing point between Kurdistan Region and North East of Syria. The government and a large number of NGO activists are utilizing this river to deliver humanitarian aids to the people in the war-torn spots.

With the early stages of the outbreak, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria decided to close Fayshkhabur border with the Kurdistan Region until the viral disease gets under control. They announced that "The Semalka border crossing with the Kurdistan Region will be completely closed from 1 March until further notice; as a precautionary measure to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus to the areas of autonomous administration of North and East Syria, excluding emergency cases."

It is noteworthy that the "Semalka - Fayshkhabur" crossing on the banks of the Tigris River, which separates the Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava) and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, is normally full of travellers crossing on a daily basis. It is also normally a medium for active commercial movement in both directions, as well as the movement of humanitarian NGOs.

The decision to close the crossing between the two borders (Fayshkhabur-Simalka) initially stopped movement of all kinds, including the movement of humanitarian NGOs to help refugees in Syria to send humanitarian and medical aid to them. On their side humanitarian organizations requested the re-opening of borders in order to send the necessary medical assistance to fight Coronavirus in the North and East Syria. And upon their request, it has been decided that Tuesday in each week be dedicated to open the humanitarian passage in order to pave the way for them to send humanitarian aids including food, medicine, medical materials and laboratory equipment to detect the epidemic of the Coronavirus diseases.

Among these humanitarian organizations, the Italian UPP (Un Ponte Per) organization, on April 7, sent aid of 2 ton medical materials and supplies to hospitals in Northeastern Syria. No request to send humanitarian aid by humanitarian organizations has been neglected. And the total humanitarian aid that was sent to Rojava from March 1 to April 15, 2020, was ten tons of medicines and medical materials. KRG has provided all the

logistical assistance to the humanitarian agencies involved in delivering the relevant assistance to Northeastern Syria.

On April 9, the first batch of laboratory equipment was sent to detect Coronavirus. A number of medical cadres from the Kurdistan Region went to help and train their coworkers in Syria, as well as some specialized engineers went to install the laboratory equipment. This initiative was made by the President of the Kurdistan Region, Mr. Nechervan Barzani. This assistance lasted for four days consecutively. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria appreciated and commended the President of Kurdistan Region for the medical units, describing them as a "quick and kind response".

The last assistance was sent on April 23, consisted of 2 tons of medical supplies and equipment. A total of 4 laboratories sent to Rojava by the Kurdistan Regional Government authorities.

1. The agencies are currently not able to buy Coronavirus-related medical aid in Kurdistan Region markets; they should import them. This measure is in place as the Kurdistan Region is having a shortage in terms of medical supplies due to the current outbreak. Back in January, the General Consulate of China purchased 200,000 masks from Kurdistan Region markets to be exported to China. But upon KRG request, they kindly donated back the supplies. While the medicine factories have been working excessively to produce the medical supplies since the outbreak, the local markets are in need of sustainable supplies to fulfill the needs.

2. Nevertheless, KRG not merely allows but also welcomes any attempt to deliver assistances to Rojava, if the supplies were imported in the first place for this purpose. KRG even lifted tax burden on the humanitarian agencies that aim to lent assists to Rojava. The non-governmental organizations, however, on the basis of laws and the issued regulations of government high committee to fight the coronavirus, have to be registered to work in the Kurdistan Region, present tax relief documents, have an active license (not expired), and their supplies pass the standards of Kurdistan Medical Control Agency (KMCA). The KRG Department of Foreign Relations (DFR) is now receiving the organizations requests in this respect. The Ministry of Health was previously in charge of granting these permissions. But this role has been reassigned to DFR in the recent days for further facilitation, while having coordination with the ministeries of Health and Interior.

3. From March 1 towards April 15, a number of organizations submitted requests to deliver medical assistance to Rojava, such as MSF Holland, the Mentor initiative, and the International Medical Corps (IMC). All the requests have been approved. Today, April

27, 2020, another group of organizations will be granted permits to launch their course of action in this respect.

4. Agencies are required to submit a request for each delivery of medical supplies to northeast Syria. However, KRG has streamlined the import - export procedures with its neighbors since the very first of the Covid-19 outbreak, including with Syria. The people and products crossing or coming from the borders are subjected to the necessary health criteria.

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