

Press Release

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“Two to three million Syrians face food insecurity,” according to UN food expert

DAMASCUS – The UN Special Rapporteur on right to food, Olivier De Schutter, estimates that today, following four years of severe drought in the north-eastern part of the country, between two to three million people may be considered food insecure in Syria. He applauded the efforts of the Government of Syria in seeking to provide food security to its population, including through providing subsidized basic food items and support to its agricultural sector. But Syria faces huge challenges, both because of climate change and because of the large influx of Iraqi refugees and the occupation of the Golan.*

At the end of the first mission of a UN Special Rapporteur to Syria, Mr. De Schutter stressed that “a rights-based approach should be integrated into the Government’s policies and programmes to tackle hunger and malnutrition. Unfortunately, no appropriate mapping of food insecurity and vulnerability exists in Syria. This presents obstacles in targeting policies to reach the poorest and most vulnerable in society,” said Mr. De Schutter, mandated by the UN Human Rights Council as an independent expert to monitor the right to food.

The UN expert travelled to the north-eastern region of Syria, most impacted by the recent droughts. “For both small-scale farmers and herders, the impacts have been dramatic. In the affected regions, incomes of these groups have declined by as much as 90 per cent. Many families have had to choose to reduce their food intake: 80 per cent of those affected were reported to live on bread and sugared tea.” He noted that Syria has undertaken a number of measures to address the successive droughts, together with the international community. Nevertheless, it is estimated that some 600,000 people have migrated out of the affected regions to urban centres, on both a seasonal and semi-permanent basis.

Regarding the Iraqi refugees, the UN Special Rapporteur commended Syria for its generosity in hosting those seeking refuge within its borders, although the high number of refugees have resulted in significant stress on the public education and health services. Mr. De Schutter noted however that “the absence of legal status for Iraqi refugees remains a concern.” In this regard, he urged the authorities to recognize the rights of Iraqi refugees to be employed in the formal sector. On both the challenges of drought and refugees, Mr. De Schutter said, “the level of response of the international community has been unacceptably low. I call upon the international donors to increase their level of support in order to allow both the Syrian government and the UN agencies working in the field to provide vital support at this critical moment.”

Recognizing the challenges for Syria in managing the transition from a centrally-planned economy to a social-market economy, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food was encouraged by the current plans of the Government to introduce a conditional cash-transfer programme, the National Social Aid Fund. “This would dramatically improve the food security of 548,000 targeted families, and it would be particularly effective if women were made the direct beneficiaries, rather than men as heads of households, and if human rights principles were taken into account in implementing the programme.” The Special Rapporteur also noted the vital role played by the public distribution of subsidized food commodities,

although adding that coverage could be expanded to include a greater range of food items, such as fruits and vegetables, in order to improve the nutritional intake of the population.

An additional issue examined by the Special Rapporteur was food insecurity among the Kurdish minorities in Syria. “The situation of the 250,000 to 300,000 stateless Kurds is of particular concern to me, as their lack of legal status presents a major obstacle in enjoying the full range of their human rights, including their right to food.”

After the visit, the Special Rapporteur will submit a report on his mission to the Human Rights Council, in March 2011.

(*): See the Special Rapporteur’s full end-of-mission statement:

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Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization.

Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm> and <http://www.srfood.org>

OHCHR Country Page – Syrian Arab Republic:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/MENARegion/Pages/SYIndex.aspx>

For more information and press inquiries, please contact:

Geneva (French) – Beatrice Quadranti (Tel: +41 79 444 39 93 / email: bquadranti@ohchr.org)

Geneva (English) – Yoonie Kim (Tel: +41 79 444 49 17 / email: ykim@ohchr.org)

Damascus (Arabic) – Khalid al-Masri (Tel: +963 93 3494267 / email: khalid.al-masri@undp.org)