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Physicians for  
Human Rights

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Dear Ambassador,

The United Nations Security Council will meet next week to vote on the authorization for renewal of the UN cross-border operation to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid to northern Syria. It is up to all Security Council Member States to insist on the right of almost six million Syrians – four million in the northwest and 1.9 million in the northeast – to have equitable and timely access to lifesaving assistance.

I appeal to you to support a 12-month renewal of the authorization of the Bab al-Hawa crossing and to reopen additional crossing points in the northwest, from Bab al-Salaam, and in the northeast, from al-Yarubiyah.

We, at the international nonprofit Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), address you today with a sense of great urgency. The Syrian government and its allies have been weaponizing health and depriving people of their right to access health care for a decade. This has been the case not only in opposition-controlled areas but also in other areas retaken by the government. Thus, relying on the government in Damascus to control and assure the delivery of essential humanitarian aid across the country would pose tremendous risks to the lives of millions of people in need of urgent support. Further, depending on one border crossing to cover the needs of the whole population in northern Syria would create a huge lag in the delivery of urgently needed medical supplies, especially amid the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

For more than 10 years, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, health services have been exposed to deliberate targeting, and health care providers have been subjected to detention, torture, and killing. PHR has documented 600 attacks on 350 medical facilities and the killing of 930 medical professionals, with more than 90 percent of these events being attributed to the Syrian government and its Russian ally. These crimes have left Syrians struggling to access health care in a dismantled health system and destroyed infrastructure with huge gaps in supplies and human resources. The situation has deteriorated with the COVID-19 outbreak that has hit northern Syria hard, causing increased demand for health services and an urgent need for vaccine distribution. Such demand cannot possibly be met by any local or international organization unless supported by the UN humanitarian agencies with access across borders of neighboring countries.

Amid increased demand for health services due to the spread of COVID-19, the Security Council's decision not to reauthorize the Bab al-Salaam border crossing in July 2020 has increased the reliance of four million people, including one million children, on the Bab al-Hawa crossing alone for lifesaving assistance. As Bab al-Hawa remains the sole lifeline to northwest Syria, recent hostilities in the region have served as a reminder of the risk of channeling critically needed supplies to a population through a single crossing. Three months ago, an outbreak of violence occurred near Bab al-Hawa, damaging NGO warehouses and the provision of essential supplies to northwest Syria that are already spread thin due to the lack of an adequate cross-border response. Further, the reliance on a sole border crossing has compromised the timely delivery of aid due to the distance of northern Aleppo countryside from Bab al-Hawa. The rising cases of COVID-19 in northern Syria suggest that such compromised humanitarian aid and the closure of Bab al-Hawa would undoubtedly result in "devastating consequences," as stated by UN Secretary-General António Guterres.<sup>1</sup>



Such devastating consequences have already been witnessed in regions retaken by the Syrian government, such as Daraa, in the south, where the number of COVID-19 cases increased dramatically due to the diversion of humanitarian aid and obstruction of health care and COVID vaccine distributions by the Syrian government, which PHR has documented in a recent study.<sup>2</sup>

Once again, some six million Syrians face uncertainty regarding the protection of their basic human rights, including basic needs essential for survival. It is critical that Security Council Member States ensure the authorization of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing and allow additional crossing points, in order to avoid condemning millions of women, men, and children to a humanitarian disaster of dire proportions. The humanitarian border crossings are a lifeline to the safety and well-being of a population ravaged by destruction of health facilities, detention, torture, killing and forced flight of medical personnel, food shortages, depleted medical supplies and services, a life-threatening pandemic, and dwindling humanitarian support. I implore you to vote to authorize the renewal and reopening of these lifelines.

Sincerely,

Donna McKay  
Executive Director

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<sup>1</sup> UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "Solution to Syria's Humanitarian Tragedy Can Only Be Political, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Stressing 'It Is Time to End This Decade-Long Nightmare,'" June 23, 2021, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20793.doc.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Justine McGowan, "Obstruction and Denial: Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria," Dec. 8, 2020, <http://phr.org/our-work/resources/obstruction-and-denial-health-system-disparities-and-covid-19-in-daraa-syria/>.