



## Media Release

Date: 27/02/2019

**Embargoed until 0001 GMT Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2019**

### **Children leaving last ISIS areas show signs of severe psychological distress says Save the Children**

AMMAN – Thousands of Syrian and foreign children who have recently moved from ISIS-held areas into displacement camps in North East Syria show signs of psychological distress, and many will likely need long term mental health and psychosocial support to recover from their experiences, said Save the Children today.

In Al Hol camp, where the majority of people recently displaced by the offensive to recapture ISIS-held areas have arrived, Save the Children has set up recreational spaces for children, as well as a centre for unaccompanied children. Across all of these facilities, our teams report that children are showing signs of psychological distress, including nervousness, withdrawal, aggression, nightmares and bedwetting, especially among children aged 10 to 14 years old.

Children who have fled ISIS-held areas are likely to have witnessed acts of brutality and lived under intense bombardment and deprivation in the last enclave held by the group.

Mai\*, 11, lived for several years under ISIS with her family. Currently in a camp in the North East, she remembers witnessing beheadings and other acts of violence. Her older brother was detained by ISIS four years ago when he was seventeen and the family hasn't seen him since.

She recalls life under ISIS:

*"They burned our home to the ground to force us out. When ISIS was there, we weren't allowed to go to school or learn and they raised the price of vegetables, so we were all going hungry. Whenever they saw a woman talking with a man they would stone them, and they would behead prisoners in front of their family. I always tried not to look when there were beheadings, I would hide behind my mum."*

Hassan\*, a member of Save the Children's Child Protection team said:

*"Boys we work with show a fear of others and a lack of trust. When we ask them about their life in recent years, they refuse to talk. They remain withdrawn and have a hard time socializing. When night falls, the children express their fears because for them darkness is synonymous with airstrikes and shelling. So they can still not dissociate those memories from the fact that they are in a camp where there is no fighting."*

In order to accelerate their healing, children who have experienced conflict, violence and traumatizing events need sustained access to mental health and psychosocial services in a protective environment. Family unity and education are also vital for children's wellbeing.

Save the Children's Syria Response Director, Sonia Khush, said:

*“Many children arriving in Al Hol have been displaced multiple times with their families, and dozens have arrived on their own. They have moved from shelter to tent, from town to camp, and their sense of home and belonging has been lost. For months, and sometimes years, they are likely to have missed out on regular schooling, proper nutrition and health services. While we are responding to the needs as best as we can, much more needs to be done to help these children recover. That includes funding and access for case management and protective services, and for foreign children repatriation to their countries of origin.”*

## **ENDS**

Caption: Mai\* is eleven years old and lives with her parents and three sisters in a displacement camp in North-East Syria. Mai\* and her family used to live in Aleppo and had a happy life. The family moved to a village in Raqqa where ISIS later took control of the area. During this time, Mai\* witnessed beheadings and other acts of violence, which she tried not to look at but which scared her. Her older brother was detained by ISIS four years ago when he was seventeen and the family hasn't seen him since.

\*Not her real name

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

- Spokespeople are available. If you wish to arrange an interview, please contact: Ally Clelland, Communications Specialist, Save the Children NZ, phone 022 531 9514 or email [ally.clelland@scnz.org.nz](mailto:ally.clelland@scnz.org.nz)
- Save the Children announced last week that more than 2,500 foreign children from more than 30 countries are living in three camps for people displaced in North-East Syria, including 38 who are unaccompanied in three camps Al Hol (more than 40,000 people), Ain Issa (more than 12,000 people) and Roj (more than 1,500 people).
- Save the Children is working in the three camps to provide much-needed support, including tents, food and non-food items such as heaters and jerrycans, as well as case management and referrals.
- According to the UN, more than 60 children of Syrian, Iraqi and other nationalities died in January and February 2019 fleeing the ongoing offensive in Hajin and Baghouz or upon arrival at displacement camps.