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Covid-19: Northern Syria faces severe wave of infections, MSF warns

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Northern Syria is experiencing its most severe wave of covid-19, with facilities running out of tests, oxygen, and ventilators, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has warned.¹

Only 16 out of 33 covid-19 treatment centres in the north west of the country are currently functioning, while the number of confirmed cases has nearly doubled from 39 000 in August to 73 000 in September.

However, MSF has said it's impossible to assess the real extent of the spread because of the limited health infrastructure and the lack of tests.

Just 3% of people in the northwest are fully vaccinated against the virus (four million), and in Afrin in northern Syria 44% of the patients currently admitted to MSF supported centres are aged between 16 and 40 years old.

Meanwhile, the charity has warned that in the north east of Syria covid-19 is spreading at a worrying pace, with an average of 342 people testing positive per day by the end of September—the highest since the pandemic began. More worryingly, the only laboratory able to perform polymerase chain reaction tests in the region may have to halt all testing within weeks because of a lack of materials.

Francisco Otero y Villar, MSF's head of mission for Syria, said, "We see people in desperate need of oxygen or intensive care stuck in queues because no beds or ventilators are available, which is leading to higher mortality compared with previous waves."

MSF is trying to scale up operations to meet the increasing needs. It has reopened two covid-19 isolation centres in Idlib Governorate and is running mobile testing clinics for displaced people living in camps.

After a decade of war, more than 13 million Syrians have been displaced, around 6.7 million of whom have been displaced inside the country. Before the pandemic, healthcare facilities and workers were being targeted by airstrikes and more than 13.2 million people—nearly three quarters of the population—were estimated to be in need of health assistance in 2019.²

1 Worst wave yet of covid-19 in northern Syria overwhelms health system. www.msf.org/health-system-overwhelmed-northern-syria-most-severe-covid-19-outbreak-yet.

2 Mahase E. "Thoroughly and deliberately targeted": bombarded doctors in Syria hold on to hope for the future. *BMJ* 2019;365:l4012. doi: 10.1136/bmj.l4012 pmid: 31209111

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