12 November, 2017, Cairo, Egypt - Up to 400 000 people remain besieged in eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus, where they face deteriorating humanitarian, health, and security conditions. More than 240 people require urgent advanced medical care, including 29 priority patients (mostly children) in critical condition who need immediate medical evacuation.

"The situation is heartbreaking," says Ms Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria. "For months, the people of eastern Ghouta have been subjected to sustained deprivation, restrictions on humanitarian access and serious human rights violations. We have now reached a critical point, where the lives of hundreds of people, including many children, are at stake. If they do not immediately get the medical care they urgently need, they will most likely die."

WHO and health partners have prepared a plan for medical evacuations from eastern Ghouta to medical facilities in Damascus, Rural Damascus and Idlib depending on patients' consent. Medicines have also been prepared for immediate dispatch to minimize the number of medical evacuations needed.

On 6 November, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) was able to medically evacuate a four-year- old girl from Douma in eastern Ghouta. At this stage, however, no formal approval for evacuations has been received from the responsible national authorities.

WHO is also concerned at reports of malnutrition in eastern Ghouta, especially among children. Recent World Food Programme (WFP) reports indicate severe shortages of food supplies. Children who are already weak and hungry are much more likely to contract life-threatening infectious diseases.

Due to restrictions in humanitarian aid reaching the area, almost all medicines and medical supplies are limited, and there are patients dying as a result, including one patient with kidney failure who reportedly passed away today.as a result of lack of safe drinking water, diseases like brucellosis, hepatitis A and tuberculosis have reappeared.

On 30 October, an Inter-Agency convoy led by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) entered besieged Kafr Batna and Saqba in eastern Ghouta with food, health, and nutrition supplies for almost 40 000 people. As part of this convoy, WHO delivered five tons of life-saving and life-sustaining health supplies to provide 35 000 medical treatments. Among other items, WHO supplies included four different kinds of therapeutic milk, antiepileptic medicines, psychotropic medicines and medicines for chronic diseases, including insulin.

As the situation in eastern Ghouta deteriorates, WHO demands that all parties to the conflict comply with their legal obligations to stop attacks on civilians, especially children; facilitate the immediate and safe evacuation of the sick and wounded; and allow the safe passage for

medicines and medical supplies.