21 March 2018, Damascus – The World Health Organization (WHO) is supporting the delivery of critical health care for Syrians fleeing the escalating violence in besieged East Ghouta. WHO has activated an emergency operations centre that works around the clock to assist the tens of thousands of Syrians from East Ghouta who have taken refuge in collective shelters in Rural Damascus.

"Civilians arriving at the shelters are exhausted, traumatized, and suffering the effects of long-term deprivation. Large numbers of people have been sheltering underground to avoid the worst of the violence, and have symptoms of skin disease and vitamin deficiencies. Many of them are suffering from malnutrition, while others have chronic diseases that require urgent attention," said Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria. "WHO is promptly responding to the urgent health needs of these people", she added. "We will continue to scale up our response to ensure that those who need health care are able to obtain it."

Mobile health teams supported by WHO have been deployed to the shelters and are providing up to 550 medical consultations and treatments per day. People in need of advanced medical care are being referred to hospitals in Damascus, many of which are supported by WHO. At least 277 patients have been referred since 11 March.

WHO is helping health partners respond to outbreaks of diarrhoea, hepatitis B and influenza in the shelters. WHO has delivered 9 tonnes of health supplies, including 40 patient beds and medical equipment, enough for 180 000 medical treatments. WHO has also prepared an additional 7-tonne shipment of life-saving medicines, sufficient for more than 190 000 medical treatments, to be delivered to health care facilities in Rural Damascus.

Many children have not been vaccinated for several years and are at high risk of contracting life-threatening diseases such as measles and polio. WHO is supporting an emergency vaccination campaign to immunize against measles, mumps, rubella, tuberculosis, hepatitis and polio. Thousands of children under 5 have been vaccinated in the past week.

More than 400 health care providers in 60 facilities in Rural Damascus are available to provide mental health and psychosocial support services to people from East Ghouta, many of whom are traumatized by what they have lived through. These health care providers were previously trained by WHO on basic mental health and psychosocial support interventions.

As the situation in East Ghouta evolves, WHO continues to work with heath partners on the ground to monitor health needs and provide a timely response.