Damascus, 4 April 2018 – Marking the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF are calling for concerted international action in response to the devastating health consequences of explosive hazards in Syria. More than 8 million people are exposed to explosive hazards in Syria, including over 3 million children.

In 2017, at least 910 children were killed and 361 children were maimed in Syria, including by explosive remnants of war and victim-activated improvised explosive devices. In the first 2 months of 2018 alone, 1000 children were reportedly killed or injured in intensifying violence.

The situation in Ar-Raqqa city is of particular concern. An estimated 200 000 children, women, and men have returned to the city and outskirts since last October. These families are at tremendous risk of being killed or maimed by explosive hazards that litter the city. At least 658 people were reportedly injured and more than 130 killed by landmines, booby traps and unexploded ordnance in Ar-Raqqa city from 20 October 2017 to 23 February 2018 – an average of 6 blast wound incidents per day.

“Explosive hazards are having devastating health consequences in Syria, especially in Ar-Raqqa, where people are being killed or terribly injured almost every day,” said Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria. “Demining activities need to be accelerated as a matter of urgency, and much more support is needed to help injured Syrians recover.”

Only 2 private hospitals are currently functioning in Ar-Raqqa city. The nearest public hospital is more than 100 kilometres away in Tal Abyad. For those who have sustained serious injuries or lost limbs, only 2 public physical rehabilitation centres in Syria provide prosthetic limbs – one in Damascus and one in Homs. This severely restricted access to medical care has caused some injuries to turn into lifelong impairments which could otherwise be prevented through proper and timely care.

Children’s injuries are worsened or prolonged by the lack of adequate medical and psychological care. There is an urgent need for more specialized medical services and supplies, physical rehabilitation, and psychological support for survivors. Children with

disabilities are exposed to even higher risks of violence and difficulties accessing basic services, including health and education.

Initially, most of the blast injuries in Ar-Raqqa were reportedly among young adult males returning to check on their homes immediately after the fighting. But injuries and deaths among children are now on the rise as families return to their homes, despite the dangers posed by explosive hazards.

“Because of the high contamination with unexploded remnants of war and victim-activated improvised explosive devices, children and families returning to their homes in conflict-ridden areas across Syria are faced with life-threatening risks,” said Alessandra Dentice, UNICEF Deputy Representative in Syria. “In addition to mine clearance actions in Ar-Raqqa, much more needs to be done to shield children and their families from explosive risks. Mine risk education is key to protecting children by helping them and their families recognize and report explosive hazards.”

Explosive hazard contamination is also a danger in parts of Aleppo, Dara’a, Rural Damascus, Idlib, and Deir-ez-Zor governorates.

UNICEF is supporting mine risk education across Syria in schools, collective shelters and community centres to teach children and caregivers safe methods to identify and protect themselves against explosive ordnance. In 2017, more than 1.8 million children and 100 000 caregivers received mine risk education.

WHO is increasing its assistance for Syrians with injuries and disabilities, including by supporting 2 public physical rehabilitation centres and helping rebuild 2 more. WHO also supports partner organizations that provide physical rehabilitation services in NGO-run health centres across the country.