

## **Stop conflicts and get back to development in the Near East region**

By José Graziano da Silva

FAO was established some seventy years ago to improve food security and raise nutrition levels following the most destructive war in human history; a war that had left dozens of millions of people dead, triggered huge displacement and refugee flows and spared almost no country from the spectre of food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition.

This week, as I am visiting Lebanon, a very dear country to me, we are reminded once again that war and conflicts are the worst enemies of food security.

Our own reports and other have described, sometimes in rather horrible detail, the unrelenting process through which the conflicts in the region are destroying people's lives and livelihoods, disrupting agriculture production, increasing food prices, stoking fears and insecurity and triggering large-scale displacement of people and alarming flows of refugees.

Lebanon, a small country that has itself suffered the misfortunes of war and internal conflict, has courageously and generously hosted more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees. To put that in perspective, that's the third of the country's population, the proportional equivalent of the European Union taking in more than 170 million people.

The unprecedented influx of refugees has put extraordinary pressure on Lebanon's economic and social infrastructure, its food security and its social cohesion.

The conflicts in Syria and neighbouring Iraq have also severely disrupted a previously flourishing intraregional trade network and resulted in tremendous losses in wealth and economic opportunities across the subregion.

FAO has played and will continue to play its part to support the countries affected by the Syria crisis, in joint UN initiatives such as the Resilience Refugees Response plan.

But we know that these responses are not enough. The numbers of undernourished and food insecure in the region continue to rise.

The unfolding conflicts and crises are not only undermining food security and nutrition right now, they risk diverting precious resources and political attention away from fundamental challenges such as the increasing water scarcity in the region, climate change and youth unemployment.

It is essential, even amid turbulence, to keep our focus on concrete priorities, notably fostering resilience, pushing the transformation to sustainable agriculture and creating solid anchors for food security for all.

Early this year, the FAO Near East and North Africa regional conference convened in Rome provided a forum for discussions and exchange on the various challenges to food security and nutrition around the region, including those stemming from climate change and the conflicts.

The member countries agreed on the issues and the solutions and on the importance of regional collaboration to address them.

FAO's action plan, which started in 2016 and will continue throughout 2017, is focusing on the heroic communities that are hosting millions of Syrians who have fled their country. Focusing on support for local smallholder crop and livestock production, sustainable farming practices and natural resource use, sustainable employment opportunities and enhancing the capacity of civil society organizations, cooperatives and farmers' associations, our aim is to bolster and deepen the resilience of local livelihoods and the individuals, households, communities and agro-systems that make it possible. The goal is to help absorb the impacts of the current Syria crisis and also to enable longer-term sustainable adaptation to future challenges.

As evidence has demonstrated times and again, there cannot be food security without peace and neither durable peace and stability can be attained without addressing food security and malnutrition in a sustainable and equitable manner.

Only a joint and collective action can stop conflicts in the region, promote the adoption and pursuit of a shared sustainable development agenda and prevent the current protracted crisis from taking even deeper roots that may take decades to overcome.

It is my fundamental conviction that this region, one of the birthplaces of human civilization, can – as it has in the past - overcome today's woes.