Syria civil war: Leaders in new plea for massive refugee aid

World leaders have opened a donor conference in London with an urgent plea for billions of pounds in aid for refugees from war-torn Syria.

“There is a critical shortfall in life-saving aid,” said UK Prime Minister David Cameron.

Germany pledged $2.6bn (£1.9bn; €2.3bn) and the UK $1.7bn in new refugee aid.

However, the conference has been overshadowed by the suspension of peace talks in Geneva on Wednesday, and intense fighting on the ground.

A Syrian government offensive, backed by Russian air strikes, is continuing north of Aleppo.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said an estimated 70,000 Syrians fleeing the bombing were moving towards Turkey.

Focus on children

The goal of the donor conference is to raise $9bn (£6.2bn) for Syrian refugees.

Mr Cameron and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon both spoke of the need to get all Syrian refugee children into education within months.

Sixty countries are represented at the conference, including 30 world leaders.

It is the fourth of its kind, focusing on education and jobs for the 4.6 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. Turkey is hosting 2.5 million – the largest number.

Hours before the conference began, peace talks between the Syrian regime and opposition were suspended.

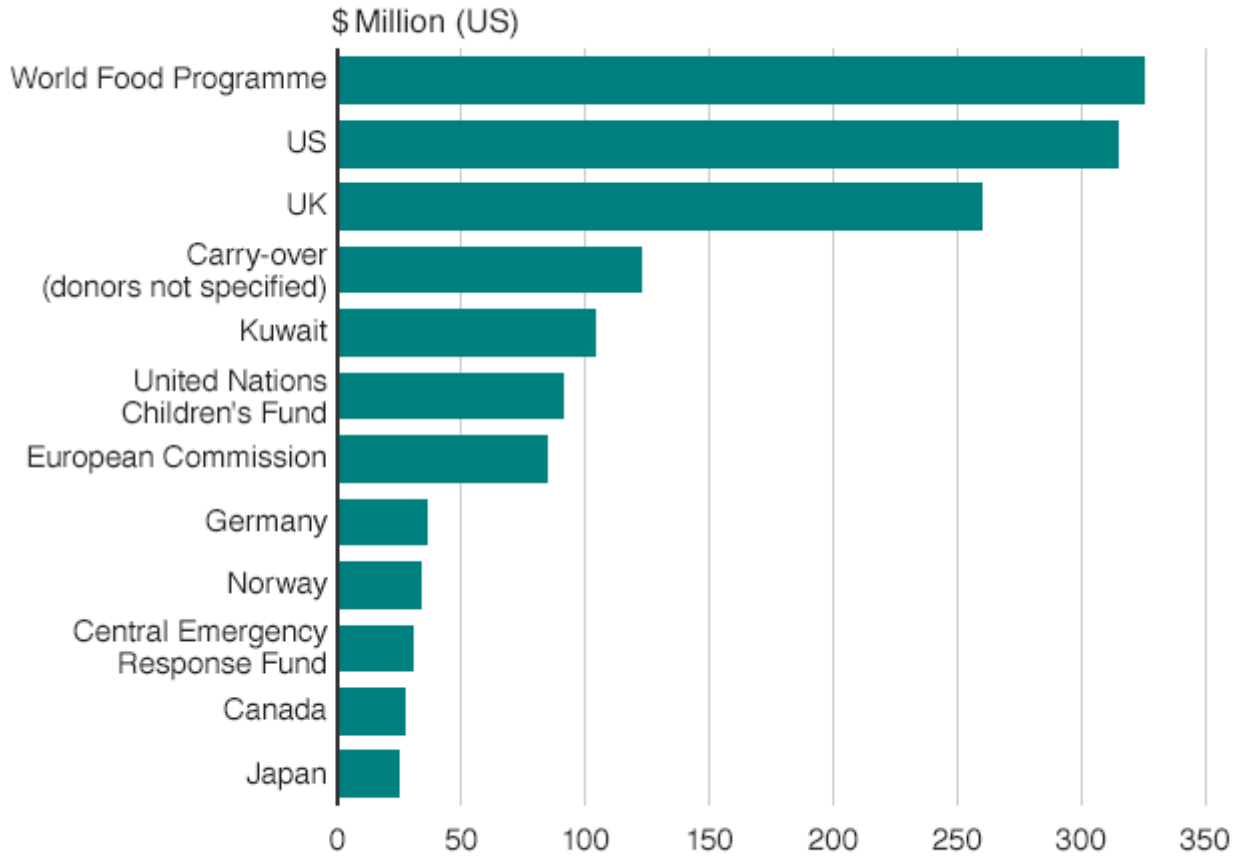
The United Nations-brokered talks, which opened just two days ago, are expected to resume on 25 February. Staffan de Mistura, the UN’s special envoy at the talks, admitted there had been a lack of progress but said that the negotiations had not failed.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon said the talks were “undermined by the continuous lack of sufficient humanitarian access, and by a sudden increase of aerial bombings and military activities within Syria”.

He urged the warring sides to “get back to the table, not to secure more gains on the battlefields”.

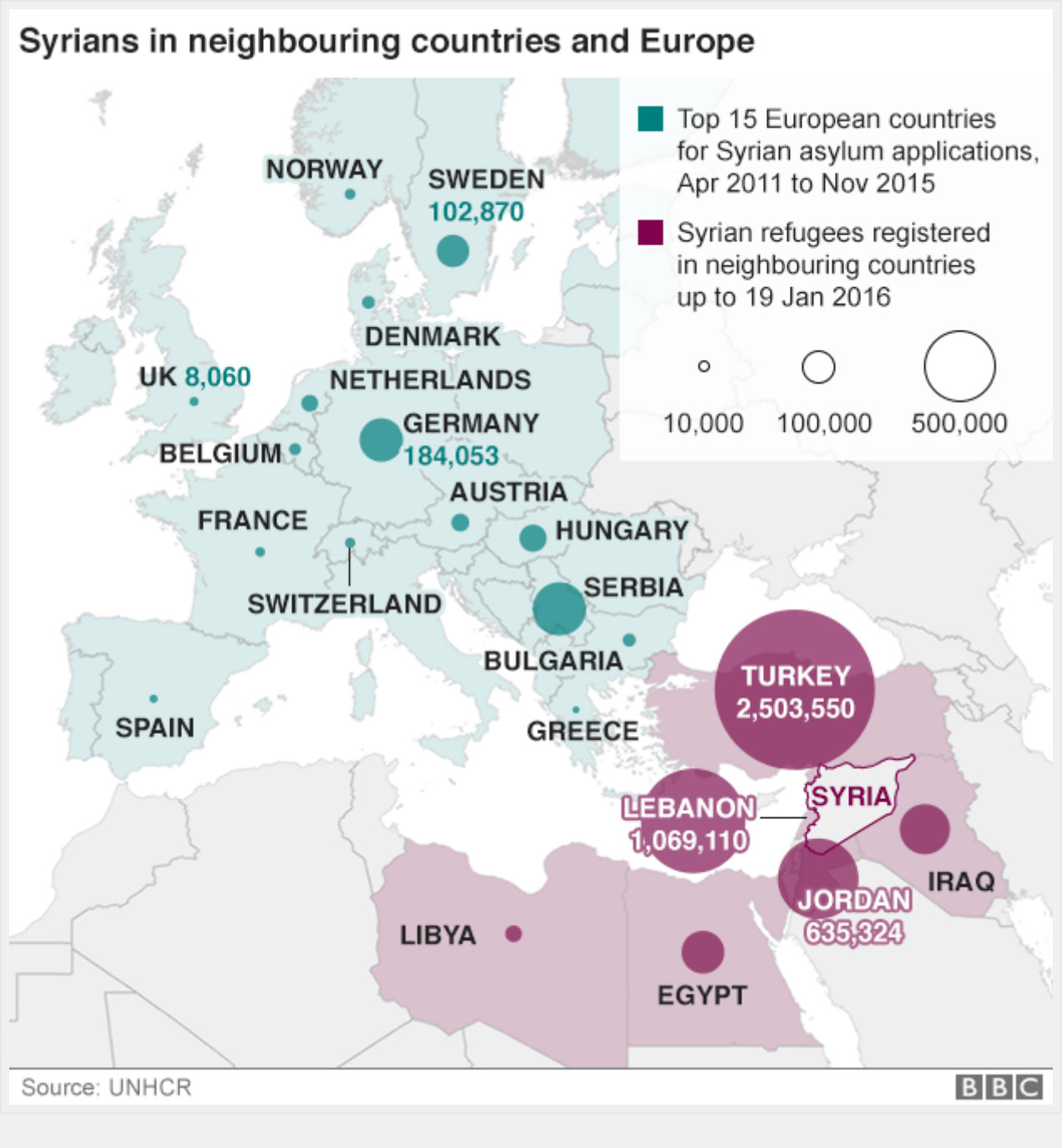
The $9bn being sought on Thursday is made up of a UN appeal for $7.7bn and approximately $1.3bn requested by regional host governments.

Largest Syria Response Plan donors in 2015



Source: UNOCHA FTS

BBC



Part of the reason for the record request is the underfunding of previous appeals. Only 43% of the $2.9bn pledged to the UN's 2015 appeal has so far been funded.

Delegates from Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon said their societies would need long-term support in order to adapt to the influx from Syria, BBC diplomatic correspondent James Robbins reports.

On Monday, officials said the European Union would promise $2.2bn (€2bn) in aid at the conference.

A coalition of more than 90 humanitarian and human rights groups meeting in London on Wednesday – including Amnesty International, Oxfam and the Malala Foundation – called for better access to education and jobs for refugees in Syria and neighbouring states.

The latest round of peace talks broke up amid rebel anger over the continuing Russian bombing around Aleppo.

The air strikes were also criticised by the US, France and Turkey.

- A Russian officer helping Syrian government troops with a new weapons system was killed when

so-called Islamic State (IS) militants fired mortars at a Syrian army garrison on Monday, the Russian Defence Ministry said
- Four Russian Sukhoi Su-35S fighters – a new model delivered to the Russian air force just a few months ago – are now flying combat missions in Syria
- Syrian state TV has shown civilians greeting government troops in a Shia Muslim town north of Aleppo, after the troops pushed rebels back from a key supply route.

Blame game over collapse of Syria talks

Middle East newspapers apportion blame to a variety of sources for the suspension of the third round of peace talks in Geneva.

Ali Ibrahim Mattar in Iran's Arabic-language newspaper al-Vefagh takes aims at Saudi Arabia: "Saudi Arabia wants to make political solutions fail and sabotages any talks, in addition to its support for terrorist groups to destabilise Syria".

In Syria's state-run al-Thawrah daily, Ahmad Hamadah says: "The US Secretary of State [John Kerry] and his aides flock to the Swiss capital… and behind closed doors impede all options for a solution."

Qatar's pro-government al-Rayah newspaper says: "Damascus, Moscow and pro-Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's sectarian militias made the Geneva talks fail from day one. These talks were stillborn."

Nasri al-Sayigh in the pan-Arab leftist Al-Safir daily bemoans the absence of the Syrians themselves – the refugees, displaced and missing – whilst the Saudi pro-government paper al-Watan says "Russian air strikes suspend Geneva 3 until 25 February".

Jordan is hosting 635,000 of the 4.6 million Syrians registered as refugees with the UN. Speaking to the BBC ahead of Thursday's conference, Jordan's King Abdullah said his country was at "boiling point".

More than 250,000 people have died in almost five years of war in Syria.

Eleven million others have fled their homes as forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and those opposed to his rule battle each other, as well as IS jihadists.