



# Airdrops to Deir Ezzor City Syria 2017

## Background

Located in north eastern Syria, Deir Ezzor city has been cut off from humanitarian assistance since May 2014 following the take-over of large swaths of land in eastern Syria by ISIL. Access restrictions further tightened in early 2015, when ISIL imposed a strict siege on the government-held part of the city, leaving 93,500 people at grave risk of starvation as restrictions to commercial and humanitarian access led to widespread food shortages.

The airdrop operation was subsequently formulated in light of the grave concerns and increased humanitarian needs of people living in the city, underlined by the statement of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in February 2016 which called for immediate humanitarian access to the most urgent areas under siege, including the delivery of humanitarian aid by air to the besieged city of Deir Ezzor.

Recognizing the urgent needs of some 93,500 people inside the city and having agreed with relevant stakeholders that airdrops were the only viable option, WFP launched the airdrop operation in February 2016 to create capacity for the humanitarian community to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance through high-altitude parachute airdrops into Deir Ezzor city.

Although WFP had extensive experience in conducting air operations, this air operation in Deir Ezzor was the first high-altitude airdrop operation WFP ever conducted. WFP therefore faced substantial difficulties at the beginning of the operation and conducted another trial in the Jordanian desert before the first successful airdrop to Deir Ezzor city took place on 10 April 2016.

## Process

The airdrop operation is conducted from Marka Airport in Jordan. Food commodities are directly delivered to a hangar at the airport, from where they are repacked into large bags, protected by honeycomb packaging material, before being placed on top of pallets and outfitted with parachutes. The plane carries 26 pallets with an average weight of 21 mt. It should be noted that air operations have a limited cargo capacity when compared to land deliveries via truck, which can carry up to 30 mt per truckload.

The pallets are dropped into a small drop zone (1km x 1.8km) from an altitude of more than five kilometre in order to avoid the risk of ground to air attacks. The food commodities are received in the drop zone by WFP's implementing partner on the ground, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). SARC collects the pallets in the drop zone on the ground after each airdrop and they are subsequently transferred to the storage facility in the city, after which they are distributed to the people.



## Major Achievements

By early June 2017, WFP had conducted 257 airdrop rotations, delivering approximately 5,000 mt of WFP mixed food commodities and supplies on behalf of other humanitarian actors.

This includes food assistance sufficient to provide six monthly rounds of food assistance for all 93,500 people in need in Deir Ezzor city. These people receive a food basket of 43 kg, which includes rice, bulgur, lentils, sugar, salt and vegetable oil. The food basket has been slightly modified compared to the food basket distributed via regular deliveries in order to be able to withstand high altitude airdrops. Recognizing the importance of bread in the Syrian diet, in September 2016, WFP also started to drop yeast and salt to be used by local bakeries in order to produce bread.

Furthermore, about 150 mt of humanitarian supplies on behalf of other humanitarian actors, including UNICEF and WHO, have been airdropped since June 2016; these include High Energy Biscuits, medical supplies, and a wide range of non-food items.

Despite all security and logistics challenges on the ground, the airdrop operation continues to be a success. Accuracy of the airdrops is now almost 100 percent and damages per month are below 10 percent. Since December 2016, not a single airdrop landed outside the designated drop zone.

Percentage of damaged cargo



Percentage of cargo landed outside the drop zone



## Accountability to Affected Population

All 93,500 people residing in the government-held part of Deir Ezzor city are considered to be food insecure, and therefore receive WFP food assistance that has been delivered through the high-altitude airdrop operation. Food distributions are conducted by SARC, shortly after the commodities have been retrieved from the drop zone. Due to the complexity of the operation, food rations are delivered to the people in different batches, and it takes approximately two months for people to receive the full ration of 43 kg. This distribution mechanism has been adopted in order to avoid that people have to wait too long to receive their assistance.

## Impact on Food Security

Data collected by WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) suggests a clear correlation between the downward trend in the cost of the Syrian standard food basket in the city and the start of the airdrops operation. Food prices have significantly decreased since the start of the airdrops in April 2016, when the cost of a standard food basket was estimated at SYP 210,000 (US\$ 491). By April 2017, the cost of a standard food basket has halved compared to pre-assistance levels, reaching SYP 108,000 (US\$ 210).

Although food assistance provided by WFP has helped to control prices to a certain extent, the cost of a standard food basket in Deir Ezzor city continues to be the highest in the country. Furthermore, due to the absence of work opportunities for people inside the city, most families have adopted negative coping strategies, such as accumulating debt, buying food on credit and selling assets in order to deal with the situation. However, due to the prolonged duration of the siege, most families have now exhausted these coping strategies and they do not have any access to income anymore. As they have already sold all their assets, they are relying exclusively on the food assistance WFP provides them through the airdrop operation in order to meet their basic food needs.

## Challenges

Since the onset of the airdrop operation, security has been the paramount concern, given the operation takes place in areas besieged by ISIL. Security risks have exposed SARC for example in the setup of the drop zone as well as in the retrieval of cargo. Furthermore, drop zones had to be changed on several occasions due to the volatile security situation on the ground.

Dropping heavy cargo from high altitudes also poses additional security risks for SARC on the ground and for persons in and around the drop zone. WFP and SARC therefore try to ensure as much as possible that the drop zone is sufficiently marked and cleared before the dropping takes place.

The operation is also exposed to natural hazards, such as strong winds and dust storms. This has led to the suspension of the airdrop rotations on a number of occasions.