29 February 2016 – Since January 2016, the World Health Organization has delivered medicines, medical supplies, and vaccines to a number of hard-to-reach areas in Syria, such as eastern Aleppo city, Douma, Madaya, Kafraya, Foah, Az-Zabadani, Kafr Batna, and Mouadamieh.

“WHO delivers supplies either as part of joint UN interagency convoys, or directly ourselves through national partners to opposition-controlled, ISIL-held and besieged areas,” says Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria. “Last year, WHO provided 17.2 million medical treatments to people across the country, and 27% of these went to opposition-controlled and hard-to-reach areas.”

However, many requests for delivery of medical aid are not granted the necessary approvals by the Syrian authorities. In 2015, WHO submitted a total of 102 requests to the Government of Syria; 30 were approved and 72 went unanswered.

So far in 2016, WHO has submitted 15 requests to the Government of Syria to send medicines and medical supplies to enable the treatment of 2.5 million people in 53 hard-to-reach and besieged locations in 9 governorates. The Syrian authorities recently approved requests to send medicines and medical supplies to Douma, Madayah and Mouadamieh in Rural Damascus while the other requests are still pending.

Surgical equipment

“Another obstacle we face is that some medical items are systematically not allowed to be included in shipments of medical supplies crossing the conflict lines,” says Ms Hoff.

As an example, Ms Hoff points to recent cross-line missions to Kafr Batna and Moadamieh. WHO was able to bring more than 30 tonnes of live-saving medicines and supplies to these 2 locations.

However, some life-saving items—including surgical supplies, trauma and burn kits, and

antibiotics—were rejected and were not included in the shipment to Mouadamiya and Kafr Batna.

Unfortunately this practice is not new and it stops many people in hard-to-reach areas from receiving life-saving medicines and supplies. In 2015, WHO reported 9 incidents of removal of medical supplies to Homs, Aleppo, and Rural Damascus governorates. As a result, more than 140 000 people were deprived of vital medical support.

“Last week in Moadamieh, our team visited a field hospital that has basic equipment and supplies, but there were huge unmet needs for life-saving and trauma medicines such as antibiotics and analgesics—exactly those that were removed from the convoy by government security forces,” says Hoff. “We are calling, once again, on all parties to this conflict to allow unhindered access and unconditional delivery of medical aid to all areas across Syria.”