

250,000 people could be displaced from western Mosul: UN

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Geneva: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) warned on Tuesday that up to a quarter of a million people could flee western Mosul, as the Iraqi army carries out its offensive to retake it from the Islamic State terror organization.

At a press conference on Tuesday, UNHCR spokesman Matthew Saltmarsh said that it is estimated that up to 250,000 people could flee their homes as fighting rages.

Since the military operation to recover Mosul began on Oct. 17, 2016, some 217,000 people have left the city, with 160,000 still displaced, but "Others have returned to their homes in newly-retaken areas," according to UNHCR.

The UN agency has seven operational refugee camps and one under construction.

"With the predicted exodus of up to a quarter of a million people, it will be impossible to accommodate such large numbers on existing land. We have identified other land that could be used as camps once frontlines shift," Saltmarsh said.

Furthermore, conditions on the western side of the city are getting worse every day, according to testimonies obtained by UNHCR.

"There are shortages of food, water, fuel and medicine. Half of all food shops have closed and most people can only access untreated water. Food prices are rocketing and there are reports of families burning furniture, clothing and plastic to stay warm," the spokesman pointed out.

Saltmarsh recalled that in the battle to reclaim eastern Mosul, protecting civilians "was prioritized in military planning and activities" and hoped this principle will continue to be upheld.

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