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Jurd el Qaitea Union of Municipalities First Responders Tackle Growing Wildfires

USAID-Provided Equipment Enhances Volunteer Firefighters' Safety and Effectiveness



USAID/CSP training on the use of air pressure tanks - September 15, 2022

“The protective equipment provided by USAID has really improved our team’s efficiency and safety: so far this year, we have managed to successfully put out 14 fires, without a single injury!”

**Yaacoub Ahmad,
Volunteer at the Jurd el Qaitea Union of Municipalities First Responders’ Team**

The Jurd el Qaitea Union of Municipalities (UoM) is comprised of 15 towns and villages located in the mountainous forested area of Akkar, North Lebanon, which is home to about 130,000 Lebanese residents and 4,000 Syrian refugees. The area experiences recurring wildfires which have been exacerbated by weak municipal response mechanisms. In addition to destroying the local forest and putting residents’ lives at risk, the fires have reduced the number of tourists visiting the area which has severely impacted local economic opportunities and increased tensions among residents over limited livelihoods.

“In the summer of 2020, one the of the worst wildfires we had ever witnessed broke out in the area,” stated Muhammad Zacaria, Head of the Jurd el Qaitea first responders’ team, “400 people from the community spontaneously volunteered to fight it, with neither training nor strategy.” Although they were able to mitigate the damage from the fire, eleven people were severely injured and hospitalized. Following this event, Muhammad created the UoM’s first responders’ team to tackle future fires without jeopardizing people’s safety. The UoM purchased its own truck to facilitate the team’s access to remote locations, but they were unable to equip it with the necessary equipment to make it fully effective. In response, USAID’s Community Support Program (CSP) stepped in to equip the truck with a water pump and thrusters, a fire-resistant water hose and tank, as well as fire hammers. “The USAID-equipped truck can access all the villages in the area and the 400m fire hose enables the team to reach places no one else can,” stated Muhammad.

To ensure the safety of the volunteer firefighters, CSP also provided two hand-held fire extinguishers, fire-resistant protective suits, gloves and facemasks, air pressure tanks to enable the team to tackle house fires, and handheld transceivers to facilitate communication and coordination within the team during response operations. “In the beginning, the team had to operate with no equipment, armed with just our courage, and many would suffer regular burns and injuries whilst facing the fires” stated Yaacoub Ahmad, who has been a volunteer in the UoM’s first responders’ team since its inception over two years ago. “The equipment and trainings provided by USAID is making me feel much safer in my job and is enabling the team to be more effective in tackling wildfires and saving victims from house fires,” he continued.

In September and October 2022, CSP organized a fire drill training on the use of the donated air pressure tanks for 17 members of the first responders’ team (including ten women) to help them tackle house fires and save victims whilst ensuring their own safety. “Not only is the training enabling us to safely handle housefires, but it is also contributing to us challenging long-standing gender biases by gaining people’s trust and becoming effective members of the team,” stated Shadia Mohammed, a female volunteer in the first responders’ team.

Finally, to improve the coordination between the firefighting stakeholders in the area – which include the Civil Defence, the First Responders’ team and local NGO, Darb Akkar – CSP and UoM created a space for the three entities to coordinate their firefighting interventions, which has contributed to a 97% decrease in burnt areas when compared to the previous year.