

Assad regime forces gain ground in deadly Idlib push

Author:

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BEIRUT: Syrian regime forces seized a town on the edge of Idlib province on Sunday, a monitor said, their first ground advance since resuming an offensive on the opposition-dominated enclave more than three months ago.

The region of northwestern Syria, which is home to an estimated 3 million civilians, has come under almost daily Syrian and Russian bombardment since late April.

The most recent fighting focused on an area straddling Idlib and Hama provinces, a war monitor said, and claimed dozens of lives on both sides.

“Regime forces seized the town of Al-Habeet, in Idlib’s southern countryside, at dawn,” said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor.

The regime’s latest gains were in the north of Hama province, which lies to the south of Idlib.

The area has escaped the control of Bashar Assad’s regime since 2015 and is the last major bastion of opposition to his regime and its allies.

The capture of Al-Habeet, one of several strategic targets for advancing pro-regime forces, came after another night of deadly fighting, the Observatory said.

According to the Britain-based monitor’s tally, 70 combatants were killed on Saturday alone, 32 of them pro-regime forces. The remaining 38 were from the opposing ranks of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and allied opposition fighters.

Abdel Rahman said another 27 combatants, nine of them regime fighters, were killed in early fighting on Sunday.

He described Al-Habeet as “the first town in southern Idlib to be taken by the regime since the start of the escalation” in April.

The town is seen as a stepping stone toward Khan Sheikhun, one of the main towns in Idlib and the target of some of the eight-year-old conflict’s deadliest air strikes.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced in recent weeks and aid groups have warned that an all-out assault on Idlib could turn the current humanitarian emergency into a catastrophe of proportions previously unseen.

The fighting is a violation of a deal which was reached by the battle’s two main foreign brokers – Russia and Turkey – but was never implemented.

Russia is Damascus' main backer while Turkey holds sway over some opposition and militant forces along its border. The deal's terms were never realistic but the agreement sealed in the Russian resort of Sochi in September 2018 staved off a fully fledged offensive that risks triggering the Syrian civil war's bloodiest phase yet.



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Syria army to resume military operations in Idlib Long-awaited truce gives wary Syrians in Idlib respite from airstrikes

[Jordanians enjoy digital Hajj](#)

Sun, 2019-08-11 21:53

AMMAN: For three years, Dr. Emad Abu Safieh has been filling out online Hajj applications. Every year he fills out two: One for his father Ahmad and his mother Shukrieh, and another for his 71-year old uncle Yousef.

Safieh, 44, a university professor and dean of the business department at the Arab Open University in Amman, told Arab News that he was happy to help with

the posting of Hajj request for his older relatives.

“The site is easy to use; after filling out the details, including contacts and a secondary phone number, a confirmation message is sent to both the basic phone number and the alternative one. Hajj digitalization is happening now and it works well.”

Safieh’s hope to accompany his father did not materialize this year, as only his uncle’s application was accepted. “But at least my dad will go as his companion, and he will also be accompanied by my mother,” Safieh said.

Hajj application digitalization covers both Saudi Arabia’s internal applications and the massive number of visa applications under the title “electronic visa path.” But while the electronic visa path is mostly connected to those wishing to travel by air, companies in countries like Jordan, where the majority of pilgrims prefer the land route, say that the digitization of the Hajj has helped them a lot.

Majdi Batoush, the lead technology officer at Jordan’s Islamic Waqf Department, told Arab News that the electronic path for the Hajj set up by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj has made life much easier for many. “In one site we have all the details and we no longer have to file through loads of paperwork as we used to do in the past.”

Batoush says that nearly 90 percent of all pilgrims today get a visa using the electronic path created by the Saudi authorities. “Once online, the data can be shared to the benefit of all relevant bodies each as is necessary for their work,” he said.

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Ali Daebess has been working at the Teeba Al-Bawadi Hajj and Umrah Tourist Co. for 19 years. Speaking to Arab News, Daebess explained that the digitalization of the Hajj has made life much easier also for tour companies. “We used to photograph and scan passports five or six times, and we had a ton of paperwork. Now everything is online and much easier.” Daebess concedes that most pilgrims are older and are not computer or internet literate.

“They come to our office and we upload the information for them, we do it for free and it takes a few minutes to post.” The IT specialist, whose company’s Facebook page boasts over 27,000 followers, says that social media has been helpful. “We get a lot of feedback on social media mostly from relatives of pilgrims.”

Although the digital process appears smooth these days, Hajj companies and government officials admit that things were not easy at first. “It was hard at first to adjust and the site was difficult to navigate,” Majdi told Arab News, “but now things are much easier and we are able to process many more applications in a shorter period of time.”



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Egyptian tradition of painting Hajj pilgrims' homes lives on
Meet the parents taking their children to Hajj

Moroccans struggle with skin disorder

Sun, 2019-08-11 21:47

CASABLANCA: Determined for her 7-year-old son to attend school despite a life-threatening sensitivity to sunlight, Nadia El-Rami struck a deal with the school's director: Mustapha would be allowed in the classroom, but only if he studies inside a cardboard box.

Mustapha Redouane happily accepted the arrangement. He knew his mother's idea would silence the school's worries about his condition, a rare genetic disorder called xeroderma pigmentosum, or XP, which can make sun rays and other sources of ultraviolet light extremely damaging to the skin and eyes. The disorder is more common in North Africa than much of the world.

"I hate the sun anyways. It gives me blisters," he said, sitting on his mother's lap, his face covered with the dark brown freckles that the school director considered a distraction to other students.

Now 8, Mustapha has already had 11 operations to remove cancerous growths on his skin.

His family is among thousands around the world struggling with XP, and increasingly sharing advice and seeking new treatments. In Morocco, families are also fighting for recognition, government help – and the simple right to go to school.

The disorder affects about 1 in 10,000 people in North Africa – more than 10 times the rate in Europe and about 100 times the rate in the US, according to Dr. Kenneth Kraemer, who researches XP at the US National Institutes of Health.

Because the disorder is inherited, XP is more common in populations where marriage between relatives is high, Kraemer said. Affected children inherit two copies of a mutated gene, one from each parent. A 2016 Moroccan government study estimates about 15 percent of marriages are between family members.

Living in a country where the sun shines year-round makes them more susceptible to skin cancers that can be caused by the disorder, said Fatima El-Fatouikai, pediatric dermatology specialist at the Ibn Rochd University Hospital in Casablanca.

Without protection, few XP patients in Morocco live beyond their teenage years, El-Fatouikai said. It is particularly challenging in developing countries, where an awareness of the disorder and access to treatments are scarce, and in poor, rural communities where people spend more time outside.

Outside of El-Fatouikai's office, families coming from all around Morocco sit

in a waiting room eager for their names to be called. There is a rumor about a new XP treatment.

The truth is, she says, "We only have prevention as a possible treatment. These children ... have to avoid even minimum sun exposure." The main prevention measures: Avoiding the sun and wearing protective clothing, face shields and sunscreen.

Fatimazehra Belloucy, 25, has dealt with skin cancer and other problems because of XP.

"If only people made it easier. Their words hurt. I feel entirely alienated," she said, describing how she faces scared looks and hateful comments as she passes by. Her family limits interactions with her, fearful that the disease is contagious.

"No one would take care of me, so I had to do it myself," said Belloucy, who received her high school diploma and is now enrolled in university. She hopes to land work helping with the disease.

Most Moroccan children with XP do not continue their education. While US schools install window filters for XP pupils and otherwise adapt to their needs, such accommodations are rare in Morocco.

"It hurts me that I have to see little kids suffer because of lack of awareness," says Habib El-Ghazaoui, who quit his veterinary job and made it his life's mission to raise awareness and help children with XP after learning that his daughter Fatimazehra had the disorder.

His daughter, now a young adult raising awareness on social media, has had 50 operations for cancerous growths on her tongue, eyelids and elsewhere. She stays indoors and mostly sleeps during the day but, as the sun sets, she goes to parks and cafes, determined to lead a normal life.

Ghazaoui leads the Association for Solidarity with Children of the Moon from his house in the town of Mohammedia. He juggles his time between visiting families, distributing donations of creams and masks, providing the Casablanca hospital with data and pressuring the government to take action.

XP support groups are increasingly sharing advice online. They held an exceptional meeting in London last year to share "hundreds of practical hints" about hoods, window protections or meters to measure light – and even a French-designed face shield with a fan in it, said NIH researcher Deborah Tamura.

The donations from Ghazaoui's group reach families like those of Said El-Mohamadi, a tailor in the city of Sale, whose 6-year-old daughter has the condition. His family is still debating the topic of school.

"She's sad, but I can't risk taking her to school where there isn't any kind of protection," he said.

"But she needs an education," her mother Maria El-Maroufi pleads.



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Natural products secret to great skin in desert climate
In north Syria, skin disease ravages young and old

[Egyptian tradition of painting Hajj pilgrims' homes lives on](#)

Sun, 2019-08-11 21:51

CAIRO: An Egyptian tradition of painting the homes of Hajj pilgrims with religious verses and images continues to withstand the passage of time.

The pilgrimage season sees calligraphers and painters busy sketching the journeys of worshippers on the front walls of houses in villages, towns and cities throughout the country.

Each artist uses their own unique style to portray modes of transport such as camels, planes and ships, holy sites like the Grand Mosque in Makkah, and passages from the Qur'an.

Ahmed Sayed Ahmed, 30, is one of the most well-known calligraphers in the Ghouria area of central Cairo, where he has worked for more than 15 years.

He told Arab News that the decoration process began with painting walls white to create a clean canvas for the artwork which usually included the name, gender and age of the person performing the pilgrimage.

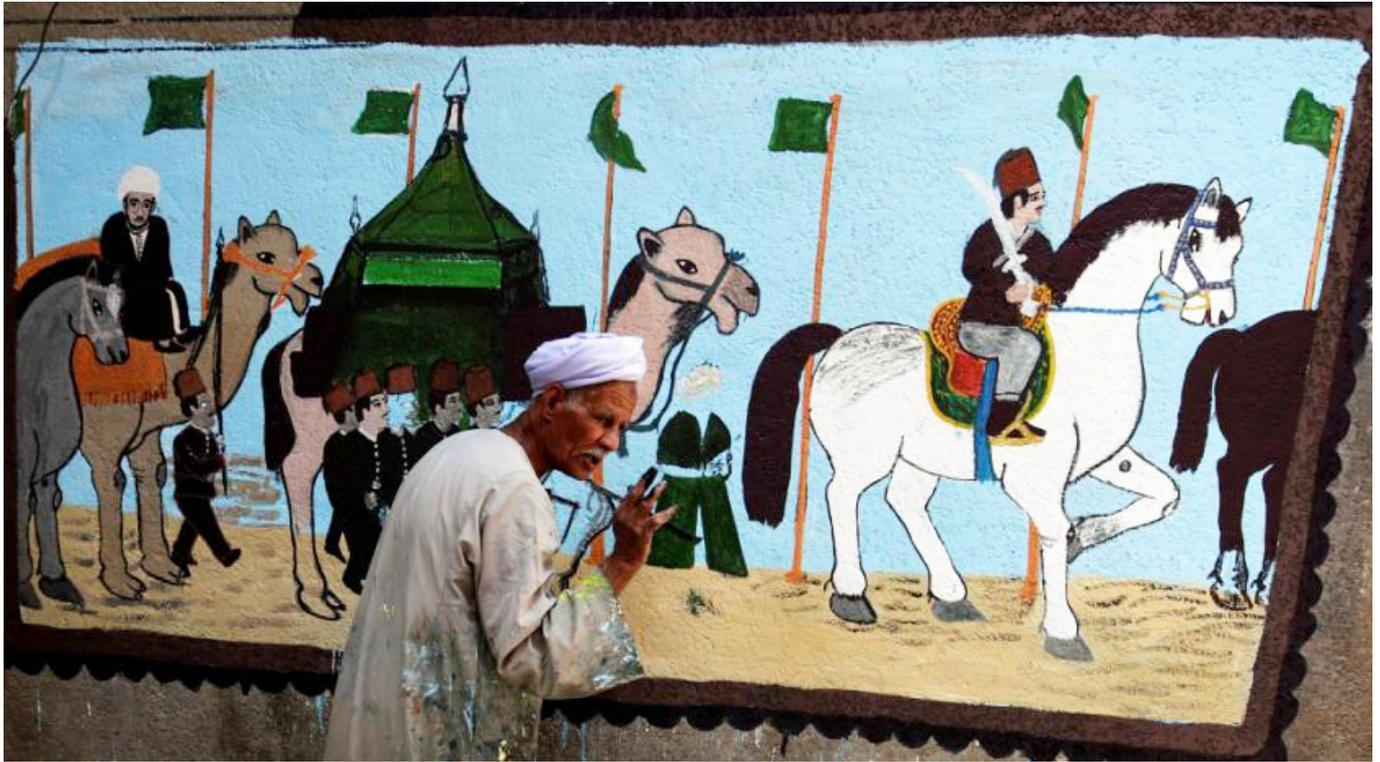
Gamal Al-Arabi, another calligrapher and painter from Cairo, said that the tradition was still popular among Egyptian Muslims. Raised in Abnoub in Assiut governorate, he studied Arabic calligraphy for two years in Cairo and later traveled to Saudi Arabia where he worked as a calligrapher and painter.

He said that the pilgrimage season was one of the most important occasions on a calligrapher's calendar with Hajj pilgrims hiring them to write and draw on their homes.

"In some desert villages they draw the camel, for example, and pilgrims around the Kaaba or during prayer. Recently, the majority of drawings involve ships and planes, but paintings of the Kaaba and the sacred house of God are fundamental," Al-Arabi added.

He pointed out that his favorite fonts for Islamic inscriptions were diwan and rekea because they were easy to read.





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Pilgrim reconnects spiritually with loved one as she performs Hajj Saudi ministry offers Hajj hotline and 'Fatwa Robot' service

[80 migrants rescued off Libya coast](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-08-10 23:06

ON BOARD THE OCEAN VIKING: The Ocean Viking charity ship rescued more than 80 migrants off the coast of Libya on Saturday, according to Doctors without Borders (MSF), which operates the vessel along with the French charity SOS Mediterranee.

The migrants, mainly Sudanese men and adolescents, were picked up after the Ocean Viking rescued 85 people including four children on Friday. The white rubber dinghy was spotted after a plane was seen repeatedly flying over it, MSF mission head Jay Berger said.

European forces regularly patrol the central Mediterranean looking for boats leaving the Libyan coast, particularly during mild weather.

The Ocean Viking sailed toward the area where the plane seemed to be focusing on and found the dinghy, Berger said.

"But the plane never tried to communicate with us," he added.

Some 170 migrants, all from sub-Saharan Africa, are now on board the Ocean Viking, which left Marseille on Sunday. An AFP journalist is also on board.

Political crisis

Italy's far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who has taken a hard line against migrants and this week sparked a political crisis by pulling his support from the country's governing coalition, has sent a warning to Oslo, where the rescue ship is registered.

"Italy is not legally bound, nor disposed to taken in clandestine, unidentified migrants from on board the Ocean Viking," he wrote.

HIGHLIGHT

The migrants, mainly Sudanese men and adolescents, were picked up after the Ocean Viking rescued 85 people including four children on Friday.

He has said the same about more than 100 migrants on Spanish charity Proactiva's Open Arms ship, which Hollywood star Richard Gere boarded on Friday.

Norway's minister of justice and immigration, Joran Kallmyr, said on public television that the migrants should be "transported back to Africa, either to Tunisia or Libya."

"They should not be sent to Europe because then this action will be an extension of the refugee route instead of a rescue operation," Kallmyr said. Gere, who boarded the Open Arms on Friday, said he had just arrived from the nearby Italian island of Lampedusa.

"We brought as much water and as much food as we possibly can, for everybody on board," he said.

"Everyone is doing OK now but they were on two boats on the ocean. One of the boats was turned back by the Libyan navy. We don't know what happened to them.

"The most important thing for these people here is to be able to get to a free port, to be able to get off the boat, to start a new life for themselves."

Salvini also commented on the American movie star saying he hopes Gere "gets a bit of a suntan."



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