

Russian-led assault in Syria leaves over 500 civilians dead, say rights groups

Author:

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AMMAN: At least 544 civilians have been killed and over 2,000 people injured since a Russian-led assault on the last rebel bastion in northwestern Syria began two months ago, rights groups and rescuers said on Saturday.

Russian jets joined the Syrian army on April 26 in the biggest offensive against parts of rebel-held Idlib province and adjoining northern Hama provinces in the biggest escalation in the war between Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his enemies since last summer.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights, (SNHR), which monitors casualties and briefs various UN agencies, said the 544 civilians killed in the hundreds of attacks carried out by Russian jets and the Syrian army include 130 children. Another 2,117 people have been injured.

"The Russian military and its Syrian ally are deliberately targeting civilians with a record number of medical facilities bombed," Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, told Reuters.

Russia and its Syrian army ally deny their jets hit indiscriminately civilian areas with cluster munitions and incendiary weapons, which residents in opposition areas say are meant to paralyse every-day life.

Moscow says its forces and the Syrian army are fending off terror attacks by al Qaeda militants whom they say hit populated, government-held areas, and it accuses rebels of wrecking a ceasefire deal agreed last year between Turkey and Russia.

Last month U.S.-based Human Rights Watch said the Russian-Syrian joint military operation had used cluster munitions and incendiary weapons in the attacks along with large air-dropped explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated civilian areas, based on reports by first responders and witnesses.

Residents and rescuers say the two-month-old campaign has left dozens of villages and towns in ruins. According to the United Nations, at least 300,000 people have been forced to leave their homes for the safety of areas closer to the border with Turkey.

"Whole villages and towns have been emptied," said Idlib-based Civil Defence spokesman Ahmad al Sheikho, saying it was the most destructive campaign against Idlib province since it completely fell to the opposition in the middle of 2015.

On Friday, 15 people, including children, were killed in the village of Mhambil in western Idlib province after Syrian army helicopters dropped barrel bombs on a civilian quarter, the civil defence group and witnesses said.

The heads of 11 major global humanitarian organizations warned at the end of last month that Idlib stood at the brink of disaster, with 3 million civilian lives at risk, including 1 million children.

“Too many have died already” and “even wars have laws” they declared, in the face of multiple attacks by government forces and their allies on hospitals, schools and markets,” the U.N.-endorsed statement said.

Last Thursday an aerial strike on Kafr Nabl hospital made it the 30th facility to be bombed during the campaign, leaving hundreds of thousands with no medical access, according to aid groups.

“To have these medical facilities bombed and put out of service in less than two months is no accident. Let’s call this by what it is, a war crime,” Dr. Khaula Sawah, vice president of the U.S.-based Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations, which provides aid in the northwest, said in a statement.



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Regime bombings kill 14 civilians in northwest Syria

Syrians, facing orders to demolish homes, fear fate in Lebanon

Author:

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ARSAL, LEBANON: Dima Al-Kanj's house is now a pile of rubble and twisted metal.

It was just a concrete hut near the Lebanese border, but she had spent five years trying to make it cosy for her children after fleeing the war in Syria. Then, under army orders, she had to smash it.

"Every year, we fixed up one thing after another so that we could live in what you'd call a home," she said, standing in the room levelled to the ground in the remote Lebanese town of Arsal. "Now, there's nothing left."

Kanj is among thousands of Syrian refugees who will be left stranded by a government decision to dismantle "semi-permanent structures" in eastern Lebanon, aid agencies say.

At least 15,000 children could become homeless.

Lebanon is toughening enforcement of work and housing rules – some of which were ignored for years – on its more than 1 million Syrian refugees. Lebanese politicians have also ramped up their calls for the Syrians to leave.

The army demolished at least 20 refugee homes on Monday, seven global aid agencies said.

In the makeshift Arsal camp where Kanj lives, home to 450 people, refugees said the army arrived at dawn with a small bulldozer taking down a few shelters.

Soldiers came again two days later as a reminder that people must remove their concrete walls and metal roofs.

Kanj, 30, has since paid men from a nearby camp to knock down her hut with jackhammers. She preferred to do it herself than face a forcible demolition. She and her four small children are now crammed into their neighbour's hut across the dirt road with a dozen people.

"We're all sitting inside the same room on top of each other with our stuff," she said. "We can't rent a place or leave or do anything at all."

People at the camp said they would follow the rules but have found it hard to meet deadlines and find money for equipment. They must also get rid of the rubble.

Some worry they will not manage to cobble together the permitted tents from wood and plastic sheeting, which would barely shield them from Arsal's harsh winter.

The military first told them of the order some two months ago and has since allowed grace periods. The army has not commented on the demolitions, but a military source said the forces were executing a legal regulation.

"Of course, we're scared of the future," Kanj said. "God knows what more decisions (authorities) will come up with next."

'START FROM SCRATCH'

Human Rights Watch described the shelter order as "one of many recent actions to crank up pressure on Syrian refugees to go back." These include more arrests, deportations, shop closures, curfews, evictions and other measures

in the past months, it said on Friday.

Some Lebanese officials have called the mainly Sunni refugees a threat to Lebanon, warning the concrete huts would lead to their lasting settlement. It is a thorny topic in a country with a fragile sectarian political system where informal settlements of Palestinians have expanded after they came decades ago.

Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, the president's son-in-law, has pushed hard for Syrians to go home, insisting they should not wait for an elusive peace deal to end the war.

Last month, he said town councils could get refugees to leave by "implementing the law and protecting public order".

But activists accuse his party and other politicians of fueling hostility towards refugees and blaming them for Lebanon's long-existing problems.

Abou Firas, a Syrian refugee who oversees the same Arsal camp, said they would leave if they could.

As fighting died down and Damascus reclaimed much of Syria, tens of thousands of refugees have returned, Lebanese authorities say. Still, aid agencies say many have fears about going home, including reprisals, military conscription, loss of property, or fresh waves of violence.

"There's a lot of uncertainty about our fate," said Abou Firas, who must demolish his family's hut too. "We don't intend on permanently settling here."

"This room becomes a part of you," he added. "You put effort into fixing it up ... and suddenly you find yourself having to start from scratch."



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Syrians return to their home city by Lebanese border in state-organized tripHRW condemns 'pressure' on Syrians to leave Lebanon

[Airport in Tripoli closes air space after missile attack](#)

Sun, 2019-07-07 21:36

TRIPOLI: The Libyan capital Tripoli's Mitiga airport halted air traffic on Sunday after the facility was struck by missiles, according to a post on the airport authorities' Facebook page.

Mitiga is the only working airport in Tripoli, which has been under attack for three months by the eastern-based Libyan National Army commanded by Khalifa Haftar.

Speaking during a press conference in Benghazi, Libyan National Army Spokesperson, Ahmed Al-Mismari, said the rival government in Tripoli has lost their air force and are relying on drone aircraft.

He also said that any buildings that have erected antennas would be considered a legitimate target for the Libyan army.

During the conference, Al-Mismari showed a video showing that Daesh's presence in the country is fading.



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Airstrike on Libyan migrant center kills 44 sparking international condemnation

[Algeria to probe video of police beating protesters](#)

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Sun, 2019-07-07 16:44

ALGIERS: Algerian police said Sunday they had opened an investigation after a video circulated online appeared to show protesters being beaten by security forces.

Thousands of people took to the streets of the capital Algiers on Friday, the latest in weeks of rallies against the ruling class amid an ongoing political crisis in the country.

In a video widely circulated on social media, two men are seen on the ground being beaten by police officers with batons.

Police chief Abdelkader Kara Bouhadba ordered a probe into the footage "showing clashes with police forces probably during the protest on Friday," the Directorate General for National Security (DGSN) said in a statement.

The DGSN stressed "the need to investigate... to determine liability and take the measures required by law," in a message on its Facebook page.

Scuffles broke out at the end of the Algiers rally when police officers grabbed the Berber flag – banned from protests – from demonstrators' hands and removed it from streetlights.

There was a major police presence at Friday's rally as demonstrators continued their push for a political overhaul following ailing leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika quitting in April in the face of mass demonstrations. Interim president Abdelkader Bensalah has called for a national dialogue to pave the way for elections, but demonstrators want top figures from Bouteflika's era to step aside before polls are held.



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[Turkey's Erdogan meets head of weakening Tripoli government Sarraj](#)

Author:

By ZEYNEP BILGINSOY and SAM MAGDY | AP

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ISTANBUL: Turkey's president has met with the head of Libya's "recognized" government, following heightened tensions between Turkey and forces loyal to a rival Libyan authority.

In a statement from his office late Friday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated his support for Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj's forces.

Libya is split between two warring governments. Sarraj leads the weakened

Tripoli government in the west, supported by an array of militias. The Libyan National Army of Khalifa Haftar rules much of the rest of the country. His ongoing offensive to seize the capital has threatened to plunge Libya into another bout of violence on the scale of the conflict that ousted Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

Erdogan called on Haftar's forces to cease their attacks. The military commander's forces has said that Turkish vessels and interests would be considered targets, after accusing Turkey of helping militias allied with the Tripoli government. Six Turkish nationals were freed this week after Turkey threatened action.

The LNA also said it deployed more troops to join the Tripoli fighting. On Friday, its media center posted footage it says shows "military battalions" that would be sent to the front for the first time. The footage showed dozens of armored vehicles moving in the desert under air cover. The reinforcements came less than two weeks after Haftar's forces were driven out of the strategic town of Gharyan, in a surprise attack by militiamen aligned with the Tripoli government.

The UN health agency said the death toll from the fighting around the capital had reached nearly 1000, including 53 who were killed in the airstrike on the Tajoura detention center for migrants.

The World Health Organization said the fighting has wounded over 5,000 others since Haftar launched his offensive on April 4.

Fighters aligned with the government in Tripoli received Turkish-made armored vehicles in May. The LNA said it destroyed Turkish-made drones during the fighting.

In a telephone call Saturday, Erdogan spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin about the Libyan crisis, among other topics. Haftar is backed by Russia, along with his Arab allies of the UAE and Egypt.

Haftar's campaign against Islamic militants across Libya since 2014 won him growing support from world leaders concerned that Libya had become a haven for armed groups and a major conduit for migrants. But critics view him as an aspiring autocrat and fear a return to one-man rule.



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