

Syrian refugees wade through their worst Lebanese winter

Author:

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DELHAMIYEH, Lebanon: Snowstorms and weeks of bad weather have turned Lebanon's lush Bekaa Valley into an unliveable swamp for tens of thousands of Syrian refugees.

The Litani River flooded many of the fields stretching across the two majestic mountain ranges flanking the Bekaa after this year's second major storm hit on Wednesday.

Some families had barely finished repairing their tents when the most severe winter they have faced yet unleashed another crushing night of snow, wind and flooding.

"We spent all night emptying the tent but the water kept coming in," said Thaer Ibrahim Mohammed, a red and white headscarf wrapped around his head.

"This is the worst winter," said the greying man.

Gaggles of children made the most of the afternoon sun and pulled rubber boots on their bare feet to romp in the camp's sludgy alleys and have snowball fights.

The shelters in "Camp 040," which lies on the edge of the village of Delhamiyeh and is one of the many informal settlements that dot the valley, are all the same.

They were erected on concrete slabs and their roofs are held down with used tires.

Their tarpaulin walls provide a flimsy protection against strong winds and freezing temperatures.

The camp looks like it could have sprung up just weeks earlier but many of its residents have lived there since 2012, when the Syrian conflict escalated.

Abu Ahmad, a native of Homs spending his seventh winter in Lebanon, said aid was inadequate.

"This year there was a lot of rain. But humanitarian organizations have reduced aid," he said, standing on a brick placed as a stepping stone in a muddy puddle.

"You just need to look: Do you think this sheeting keeps us warm or keeps the water out? They gave us nothing, no new tarps, no firewood, nothing," the young man said.

Aid organizations say they are doing their best to distribute emergency aid to the most vulnerable among the estimated 340,000 refugees living in the Bekaa Valley.

The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) said close to 24,000 people were affected by extreme weather conditions.

Some tents were destroyed by the storms that elsewhere in Lebanon have cut the main road to Syria several times, flooded the highway north of Beirut and forced schools to close.

Relief agencies have had to relocate families who were left homeless, once again, in several feet of snow.

Fatima, a 20-year-old refugee originally from the main northern Syrian city of Aleppo, had to leave her tent with her family but opted to squeeze in with neighbors.

“The tent is totally flooded, we can’t live in it. So we took our things and left, what else can we do?”



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Farmer turns ferryman as river engulfs Syrian hometown
Deadly attack on US forces leaves Syria town fearful for future

Farmer turns ferryman as river engulfs Syrian hometown

Author:

Fri, 2019-01-18 22:55

DARKUSH, Syria: The alleyways of the Syrian town of Darkush are normally thronged with pedestrians but since the swollen Orontes River burst its banks, Abu Ihab's boat has provided the main way of getting around.

The 49-year-old farmer normally takes a well-earned rest in January when winter frosts turn his fields as hard as rock.

But this year, days of torrential rain in the mountains of Lebanon has sent a deluge downstream, submerging the streets of his hometown under as much as 5 feet of water.

So instead the father of four is working long hours each day paddling his boat around the streets helping stricken residents to get their children to school, do the shopping or check on relatives.

"In winter, I don't usually leave the house much as it is cold and it rains. But this year I felt that people needed me," he says as he provides yet another ferry ride to grateful fellow townspeople.

Abu Ihab normally uses his boat for summer fishing on the Orontes to supplement his farm produce.

He is one of the few in the town to own one so he offers his services for free, delivering fresh bread from the bakery or ferrying excited children on an unaccustomed school run by boat.

"Today, people are staying at home. They can't even get to the shops to buy food," he says, wearing a woolly hat and jacket against the cold.

It is not the first year that he has provided his free boat service. "Most years there are spates but this year is a really big one because of the torrential rains," he says.

The ground floors of houses close to the river have been inundated.

The Arab town close the Turkish border lies in Idlib province which is largely under the control of militants led by Al-Qaeda's former Syria branch.

Across the province, the torrential rains have triggered flash floods that have caused widespread hardship, particularly in the vast tent cities set up for the displaced.

Civilians who have fled other parts of Syria recaptured by government forces

make up around half of the resident population of Idlib and neighboring opposition-held areas.







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Deadly attack on US forces leaves Syria town fearful for future
Explosion in north Syria targets Al-Qaeda gunmen, kills 11

Deadly attack on US forces leaves Syria town fearful for future

Author:

Fri, 2019-01-18 22:36

MANBIJ: Charred walls, shattered windows, uncooked kebabs still on the counter – the blast that hit US forces at this small restaurant in northern Syria has left residents fearful for the future.

Wednesday's suicide bombing, claimed by Daesh, was the deadliest to hit US troops since they deployed to Syria in 2014.

Nineteen people, including four Americans, were killed in the attack on the grill house in the central market of the flashpoint northern town of Manbij.

"We come to the market but we are afraid. We go to work and we are afraid... we don't know what could happen," says Jomaa Al-Qassem, eyeing the shops from his car along with his three-year-old son.

In front of the blackened storefront, armed security forces hustle curious onlookers away and are quick to prevent them from taking photos with their cellphones.

Behind its twisted metal exterior, a clump of raw red meat lies abandoned on a counter, covered with dust. Tables and cookware from the kitchen have been twisted into a tangled mess on the floor.

Run by a Washington-backed town council since the US-led coalition and its ground partners pushed out militants in 2016, Manbij has been a realm of relative quiet.

The town was considered sufficiently secure that a group of top US military commanders and lawmakers strolled through the same market place without body armor during a tour of the area last summer.

Next to the blast site, Abu Abdel Rahman lifts an armful of red teddy bears out of his storefront display, carefully avoiding the shattered glass.

Just meters away from the restaurant, his shop was also hit by the blast.

But the US military presence in the town has been thrown into question after President Donald Trump's shock announcement last month that he would pull all American troops from Syria, claiming the Daesh had been "largely defeated."

Sen. Lindsey Graham, a longtime Trump supporter who was among this summer's visitors, has been one of the most vocal critics of the president's decision and was in Ankara for talks with top officials on Friday.

"I was at the door of my shop and saw a fireball come out of the restaurant. Then, there were body parts on the ground," he told AFP, a red keffiyeh headscarf wrapped around his face to help fend off the cold winter air.

The four Americans killed in the blast were two soldiers, a civilian defense department employee and a Pentagon subcontractor.

The US Defense Department has previously reported only two American personnel killed in combat in Syria, in separate incidents.

The attack came as tensions between Washington's Syrian Kurdish ground partner and its NATO ally Turkey flare.

Ankara views the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as a "terrorist offshoot" of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a deadly insurgency for self-rule in southeastern Turkey since 1984.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened an all-out offensive to clear the group from its border.

At the town's entrance, security checkpoints manned by forces of the US-backed Manbij Military Council meticulously check vehicles and the IDs of people entering and exiting the town. Regular patrols move through the streets.

But for Malek Al-Hassan, it is not enough.

The 45-year-old was in the market that day to buy books for his children.

"When the explosion happened, I don't know how we managed to escape," he says.

"We hope the forces will be more vigilant at the roadblocks, and that they will work hard to prevent these infiltrators from committing these acts of sabotage," he says.

After sweeping across swathes of Syria and Iraq in 2014, the militants' cross-border "caliphate" has been erased by multiple offensives and is now confined to a tiny embattled enclave in eastern Syria close to the Iraqi border.

But despite the stinging defeats, Daesh has proved it is still capable of carrying out deadly attacks using hideouts in the sprawling desert or sleeper cells in the towns.

One day after the blast, Naassan Dandan's eyes well up with tears when he remembers the attack.

"I was outside when the explosion happened and was thrown to the ground," says the man in his 40s, still clearing shards of glass from his nearby photography studio.

On the walls of his shop, child portraits he has taken throughout his career

are covered in black dust.

“I saw the bodies – the dead and the wounded,” he says, as two young passers-by stop to lend a hand with the clean up.



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US names Americans killed in Manbij, Syria ‘Daesh attack’ Turkey-backed fighters await ‘zero hour’ to attack Syria’s Manbij

[Explosion in north Syria targets Al-Qaeda gunmen, kills 11](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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1547835492333047300

Fri, 2019-01-18 (All day)

BEIRUT: An explosion outside an office belonging to an Al-Qaeda-linked group in northwestern Syria on Friday killed at least 11 people and wounded several others, opposition activists said.

The blast comes a week after members of the Al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, Arabic for Levant Liberation Committee, or HTS, took over control of wide parts of Idlib province and the surrounding countryside after forcing rival insurgents to accept a deal for a civil administration run by HTS in their areas.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Smart news agency, an activist collective, said the blast occurred on the southern edge of the rebel-held city of Idlib.

The Observatory said 11 people were killed in the blast, including seven HTS members. Smart said 12 people were killed, many of them militants.

In the country's east, an airstrike in the last area held by Daesh killed at least 20 people.

State news agency SANA said 20 people were killed in the airstrike on the Daesh-held village of Baghouz, while the Observatory said 23 people were killed including 10 IS members.

They both blamed the US-led coalition that has been providing air cover to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in their monthslong offensive to capture the area from extremists near the Iraqi border.

The SDF has intensified its offensive over the past weeks on the Daesh-held area.

Meanwhile in Turkey, President Tayyip Erdogan met with US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham to discuss the situation in Syria as the United States prepares to withdraw troops.

Graham, a prominent voice on foreign affairs in the US, met with Erdogan and other Turkish officials Friday for talks that were also expected to include a proposal for the creation of a "safe zone" in northeast Syria.

The visit comes days after a suicide bombing, claimed by Daesh, killed two US service members and two American civilians in the northeastern town of Manbij.

Graham has said he is concerned that US President Donald Trump's troop withdrawal announcement had emboldened Daesh militants and created dangerous uncertainty for American allies.

The Pentagon identified three of the four Americans killed in the suicide bomb attack in Manbij – Army Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jonathan R. Farmer, 37, of Boynton Beach, Florida, who was based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Navy Chief Cryptologic Technician (Interpretive) Shannon M. Kent, 35, from upstate New York and based at Fort Meade, Maryland; and a civilian, Scott A. Wirtz, from St. Louis.

The Pentagon hasn't identified the fourth casualty, a civilian contractor.



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UK court rejects case brought by mother of Daesh 'Beatle' held in Syria New envoy stresses need for UN-backed solution to Syria war

[Trump giving 'new life' to Daesh, former envoy says](#)

Author:

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WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's decision to pull US troops from Syria was made without deliberation, left allies "bewildered" and has rejuvenated Daesh, the official formerly in charge of fighting the militants said Friday.

Brett McGurk, who quit as America's envoy to the anti-Daesh coalition after Trump declared victory over the group last month, warned a US withdrawal would shore up President Bashar Assad and lessen America's leverage with Russia and Iran.

And "the Islamic State and other extremist groups will fill the void opened by our departure, regenerating their capacity to threaten our friends in Europe – as they did throughout 2016 – and ultimately our own homeland," McGurk wrote in an opinion piece in The Washington Post, referring to another name for Daesh.

McGurk, a Barack Obama-era appointee whom Trump kept on, said he was in the US embassy in Baghdad on December 17 when he got an urgent call from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo informing him of Trump's decision.

Two days later, Trump tweeted, "We have defeated Daesh in Syria," referring to another acronym for Daesh.

"But that was not true, and we have continued to conduct airstrikes against the Islamic State," McGurk said.

The decision came just days after National Security Adviser John Bolton had suggested an indefinite US troop presence in Syria, and as McGurk and then defense secretary Jim Mattis met coalition partners to confirm commitments for at least the next year.

"My counterparts in coalition capitals were bewildered," McGurk said.

"The president's decision to leave Syria was made without deliberation, consultation with allies or Congress, assessment of risk, or appreciation of facts."

Mattis quit after Trump's decision.

McGurk said Trump had made his decision after a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had said Istanbul would lead the fight against Daesh remnants in Syria.

But Turkey has also vowed to take action against US-backed Syrian Kurds who have conducted the fight against Daesh and lost thousands of troops as they slowly wrested territory from the militants.

"The irony is that defeating the Islamic State is what the president said from the beginning was his goal," McGurk said.

"His recent choices, unfortunately, are already giving the Islamic State – and other American adversaries – new life."

Just one month after Trump declared victory over Daesh, the militants claimed responsibility for a brutal attack in Syria this week.

Four Americans, including two services personnel, were among those killed when a suicide bomber hit a restaurant in the key city of Manbij in Syria's north – the deadliest attack against US forces since they first deployed in the war-torn nation four years ago.

The Pentagon on Friday identified three of those killed.

Among them was Navy Chief Cryptologic Technician Shannon Kent of New York. Her death marked the first time a female US service member was killed in Syria.

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US names Americans killed in Manbij, Syria 'Daesh attack' New envoy stresses need for UN-backed solution to Syria war