

Aleppo filmmaker vows to continue showing reality of Syria

Author:

Thu, 2019-09-26 22:25

LONDON: A Syrian filmmaker whose documentary on the siege of Aleppo brought a Cannes audience to tears has said she wants to show the world the reality of her country.

Waad Al-Kateab's powerful and intimate film "For Sama" is a love letter to her infant daughter, documenting the desperate conditions she and her husband were living through, in case they didn't survive.

Charting five years of her life from student protester to wife and young mother in Syria's battle-ravaged second city, it won an emotional standing ovation at the Cannes film festival in May.

For Kateab, the film is more than the story of one family's struggle.

"It's a realistic depiction of everything that's happening now in the country," she told AFP on Wednesday in London, where the documentary is touring.

"Unfortunately, the world is deaf and blind to what is happening, but as Syrians, our goal is to continue to tell and share Syria's story."

Kateab was just 20 when pro-democracy protests broke out, triggering a bloody crackdown by loyalists of President Bashar Assad that has killed 370,000 people and displaced millions.

The northern city of Aleppo suffered some of the heaviest fighting after oppositionrebels seized its eastern sector in 2012.

The young filmmaker's goal was to document the desperate conditions of life in the city as regime forces closed in – along with the joy of falling in love and the excitement of becoming a mother.

When she and her husband Hamza, on a trip to Turkey to see his sick father, heard regime forces were poised to cut off the city's east completely, they decided to return.

Within an hour, they had packed and were on a treacherous journey, dodging shells and sneaking past regime troops into the now-besieged part of the city.

Hamza, a medic, threw himself into work at a hospital which at one point hosted 300 casualties in a single day – before itself being hit by an airstrike.

Kataeb dedicated herself to filming the situation, while wrestling with the

question of whether or not to flee the city to protect her daughter.

After six months, Aleppo was overrun and they were forced into exile, leaving the city as part of a huge civilian evacuation.

Kataeb then set about bringing her footage together into a feature-length production that would capture the imagination of audiences “tired of war films or films on Syria.”

“So our challenge was to come up with a film that was different,” she said.

The result is a brutally honest, moving portrayal of life under siege: The absurdity of laughter as missiles crash down overhead, the snowball fights, the aching grief of two boys grieving over their brother.

Kataeb said her aim was “to continue to describe in a way that is true and real what is happening in Syria.”

“It’s not a civil war, it’s a revolution, and unfortunately, we the Syrian people are the ones paying the price,” she said.



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‘For Sama’ director Waad Al-Khateab on her award-winning documentary about life during the siege of Aleppo
Cannes winner ‘For Sama’ – a moving and vital

Opposition's underground network unearthed in Syria

Author:

Thu, 2019-09-26 22:15

LATAMINAH, SYRIA: Tunnels run for hundreds of meters, connecting caves strewn with mattresses that formed what the Syrian army and its Russian allies say was a vast opposition underground network.

The road leading to the entrance of the tunnels in Lataminah in northwestern Syria is lined with the charred shells of cars and armored vehicles.

According to the Russian army, which organized a press tour of the site for dozens of journalists, the network of caves dug into a rocky outcrop could shelter up to 5,000 people.

"We think this network was dug about four years ago with sophisticated machinery, of a kind which is not available in Syria," a Syrian army colonel said as he led reporters into the tunnels, escorted by Russian demining experts.

The red-brick entrance to this underground base still bears the scars of the battle that saw Russian-backed regime forces retake the area in the province of Hama earlier this year.

"Those who fought here retreated to the north. First to Khan Sheikhun and then further into Idlib province when our forces took the city," the colonel said.

In some places, the tunnels are barely big enough to stand in but connect large rooms carved out of the rock, including a prayer room, a drone workshop, a bathroom and even a prison.

Military officials told AFP reporters that the total size of the underground network, in which crates of ammunition were found, has not yet been fully assessed.

It was used primarily by fighters from opposition groups, among them the alliance known as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham that now dominates the entire Idlib enclave.

The caves provided shelter to those fighters from the intensive air strikes Russian and Syrian aircraft usually conduct as a prelude to any ground advance.

In some of the caves, empty food cans and crumpled plastic water bottles, jerricans and decaying clothes give a glimpse of daily life in the dark hideout.

Some rooms were done up with tile panels and a coat of paint while others have fully cemented walls, over which Syrian forces have since scribbled slogans praising Syria's Bashar Assad.

One room was even equipped with an old TV, wired up with cables that run around one kilometer from the nearby town of Lataminah.

The room which officers believe was used as a prison was dug out no less than 400 meters deep into the maze of tunnels and caves.

Blood stains are still visible on the ground, as are tiny separate cells with rusting doors.

The Russian army said it has uncovered around 10 such underground networks across northwestern Syria and others in the desert region of Palmyra.

Officers said the Lataminah cave was a local hub for the manufacture of drones that jihadist fighters used against regime and Russian forces.

The massive Russian military base of Hmeimim, which lies in the neighboring province, has been repeatedly targeted by rebel drone attacks.



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'Forgotten' war: Syria conflict a footnote at UN meeting
Syria 'captures' drone near Israeli-occupied Golan Heights

All agreements off if Israel annexes territory, Palestine's Mahmoud Abbas warns at UN

Author:

AFP

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Thu, 2019-09-26 17:20

NEW YORK: Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas told the United Nations Thursday he would terminate all signed agreements with Israel if it moved forward with plans announced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex a key part of the West Bank.

Netanyahu, who is trying to form a new government following a deadlocked election, pledged before the vote to impose Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea which account for one-third of the West Bank.

The promise was widely condemned, including by UN chief Antonio Guterres who warned it would violate international law.

"Our response if any Israeli government is to proceed with this plan is that all signed agreements with the government of the occupation and any obligations therein will be terminated," said Abbas.

"And it is our right to defend our rights by all possible means, regardless of consequences, while remaining committed to international law and combating terrorism," he warned.

[#LIVE](#): [#Palestine](#) president Mahmoud Abbas at [#UNGA](#) – Our hands remain extended for peace but we will defend our rights at all cost and in line with international law [#Israel](#)
pic.twitter.com/5TidiByBYf

– Arab News (@arabnews) [September 26, 2019](#)

Abbas made a similar vow in July but did not follow through.

In the early 1990s Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, then

headed by Yasser Arafat, signed a number of peace agreements under US sponsorship.

The agreements were supposed to be for a transitional five-year period but a longer-term deal proved elusive and a second bloody Palestinian intifada, or uprising, broke out in 2000.

Abbas, 84, also renewed a pledge to hold fresh parliamentary elections, which last took place in 2006.

[#LIVE: #Palestine](#) president Mahmoud Abbas at [#UNGA](#) – Our hands remain extended for peace but we will defend our rights at all cost and in line with international law [#Israel](#)
pic.twitter.com/5TidiByBYf

– Arab News (@arabnews) [September 26, 2019](#)

Those elections, which were surprisingly won by Islamist movement Hamas, eventually led to a dramatic split, with Hamas seizing control of Gaza in 2007.

“Upon my return to the homeland, I will call for regular local elections in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, and anyone who opposes these elections will be held accountable before God and the international community,” said Abbas, likely referencing Hamas.

Abbas has made similar promises before, most recently in in December 2018 Abbas when he said he would hold parliamentary elections within six months.



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Netanyahu proposals dangerous: Abbas adviserMerkel meets Palestinians' Abbas for talks in Berlin

[Turkey doctor gets 15 months for revealing pollution cancer risk](#)

Author:

AFP

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Thu, 2019-09-26 14:08

ISTANBUL: A Turkish scientist was sentenced to 15 months in prison on Thursday for revealing the cancer risks posed by toxic pollution in western Turkey.

The court in Istanbul found Dr. Bulent Sik guilty of “disclosing classified information” – a verdict described as a “travesty of justice” by Amnesty International.

Dr. Sik last year revealed the results of a study carried out with other scientists for the Ministry of Health between 2011 and 2015 linking the toxicity in soil, water and food to high rates of cancer in several western provinces.

He wrote the articles for newspaper Cumhuriyet after realizing the government was not acting on the study’s findings.

The study “clearly revealed the extent to which water resources were contaminated by toxic materials,” Dr. Sik told reporters after the verdict. “The court ruling shows that the results of a study that directly concerns public health can be hidden. This is unacceptable,” he added.

Dr. Sik remained free on Thursday pending appeal.

Rights groups and environmentalists accuse the government of failing to enforce environmental regulations amid a rapid industrial boom in many parts of the country.

Pollution from the industrial zone of Dilovasi, around 80 kilometers from Istanbul and home to many chemical and metallurgy factories, was singled out in the report for having cancer rates well above the international average.

“The case against Bulent Sik has been, from the start, a travesty of justice,” Amnesty’s Turkey researcher Andrew Gardner told AFP.

“Instead of pursuing a whistleblower through the court, the Turkish authorities should be investigating this important public health issue.” Amnesty said it would consider Dr. Sik a prisoner of conscience if he was jailed.

Turkey has seen a wide-ranging crackdown on many aspects of free speech, especially since a failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2016.

Dr. Sik had faced up to 12 years in prison, but the court found him not guilty of “obtaining classified information.”



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Bomb explodes injuring five in southern TurkeyUS, Turkey stage joint patrols in northeast Syria

[Sudan closes borders with Libya, Central African Republic](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2019-09-26 15:25

KHARTOUM: Sudan's transitional government ordered the immediate closure of the nation's borders with Libya and Central African Republic on Thursday, citing unspecified security and economic "dangers."

A statement by the Sovereign Transitional Council said vehicles had been illegally crossing the borders with the two nations, which have both been mired in violence. The council did not give further details about what the

“dangers” were.

The announcement followed a meeting between the council and the government of South Darfur State, part of Sudan’s western Darfur region that has suffered from violence since 2003 when a conflict erupted between mainly non-Arab tribes and the Arab-led national government of ousted President Omar Hassan Al-Bashir.

Sudan has often complained about arms trafficked through its borders with Libya and Central African Republic. Conflicts in both nations have left their governments with little or no control of security over swathes of their territory.

The statement did not mention Chad, which has a long border with Sudan’s Darfur region. Chad and Sudan have security pacts in place and joint forces patrol the boundary.



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New Sudanese PM seeks cooperation with Saudi Arabia