

Families flee bombardment and hunger in last Syria Daesh pocket

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As US-backed forces advanced, 22-year-old Dima Qatran buried one of her twin babies, then picked up the other and fled the Daesh group's crumbling pocket in eastern Syria.

Clutching her remaining 11-month-old daughter, she joined hundreds escaping the last shreds of the extremist group's "caliphate" near the Iraqi border. She fled through the cold desert on foot toward territory held by US-backed fighters, where she boarded a truck to take her to a camp for displaced Daesh families further north.

"I had twins," Qatran told AFP on Friday, tears streaming down her face, at a pit stop along the way.

"I buried one, and the second is dying. She has diarrhea and keeps vomiting. I can't bear it. My daughter died of cold and hunger."

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces are fighting to expel the last Daesh fighters from a few hamlets in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor.

"We slept in the street for 11 days after my home was bombed" in Baghouz, a village on the front line, she said.

Qatran said she arrived in Baghouz with her husband's family a year ago after fleeing the town of Albukamal to the west, which was retaken from Daesh by Russia-backed regime forces in late 2017.

The young mother said all she wanted was to be reunited with her husband who works as a cook in Turkey, and claimed to have no affiliation with Daesh.

"I'm scared of them," she said.

Ravaged by Rashes

Near the Omar oil field, women and children – some of whom had faces ravaged by rashes – descended from the back of a dozen small trucks, caked in dust and visibly exhausted as the SDF allowed a quick break.

A mother dashed down from a vehicle, rushing her two children out of sight to relieve their bladders, while others pleaded for food and drink, saying that with the bombardment and siege, they had not eaten for days.

Infants screamed while their mothers did their best to soothe them.

For days, hundreds have been fleeing what remains of the so-called "Hajjin pocket" east of the Euphrates River, SDF officials said.

According to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor more than 8,000 people have fled since Monday, including around 1,000 jihadists.

Since early December, some 29,000 people have escaped the fighting, the Observatory said.

Sara Al-Sahar, 32, paced around with her baby trying in vain to pacify him.

He's "hungry and sick," said the mother of two.

"There's no food over there, just hunger," she said of areas under Daesh control.

"Nothing – not even nappies."

Sahar also insisted she had nothing to do with Daesh, a claim that AFP could not immediately verify.

"We walked for six hours" in the desert before reaching SDF-controlled territory, she said.

Suspicion

Around 750 people reached SDF-held territory from Daesh-held territory on Friday, Mohammed Suleiman Othman, an official with the Syria Democratic Council said.

They included 600 civilians, mostly Iraqis related to Daesh fighters, he said.

But 150 men were detained on suspicion of belonging to Daesh, after screening near the frontline.

Fourteen women and their children of various nationalities including from Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Turkey were ferried off to a special center for questioning.

Inside that center, women sat with their children in a large room. One was changing her baby, with a nappy improvised from fabric and plastic bags.

In a corner, 20-year-old Mariam from Ukraine fed her baby before she wiped her face with her hands.

"I need to rest before I can remember what happened to me," she said, speaking in classical Arabic, reluctant to answer any questions.

Near the Omar oil field, women asked how much longer before they reach the Al-Hol camp in the northeastern province of Hasakah.

"Is it still far? We're so tired," one of them said.

Tayyeba, 54, said she escaped with her husband, but the SDF detained him for questioning.

"We fled as the frontlines started getting closer," she said, wrinkles visible under her black face veil.

Umm Baraa, 20, said: "The streets are full of people who can't find anywhere to sleep. We were running from one neighborhood to another."

She said her husband – an Daesh fighter – died recently in an air strike.

"We were all doing so well... If the frontline hadn't got closer, we wouldn't have left at all," she said of life under Daesh.

"Now we don't know what awaits us."



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Turkey 'will go it alone' with Syria security zone

[El-Sisi's order to paint Egypt's 'uncivilized' buildings puzzles residents](#)

Fri, 2019-01-25 20:40

CAIRO: A decree from Egypt's president to paint all the country's red brick buildings in an effort to make the country more beautiful has been criticised by residents.

President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has ordered buildings in cities must be painted "dusty colors," while coastal buildings will take on shades of blue, according to the decree.

Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly said the buildings will be colored based on a scheme reflective of the area.

“The plan is to have unified colors for the buildings instead of this uncivilized scene,” Madbouly told a cabinet meeting last week.

Provincial leaders have been told how crucial it is to improve the appearance of urban and rural settlements.

According to Madbouly, each governorate will have a certain color scheme.

Governors will be given deadlines and those who don't comply with the decree will be fined.

The decree comes as a part of a move to improve and restore the overall appearance of Egypt's different governorates.

But many Egyptians have questioned whether cosmetic improvements to buildings should be a top priority for a government of a country facing a massive housing crisis.

“Enforcing monetary penalties on people to have more dusty-colored buildings sounds problematic to me,” Ahmed Mostafa, a Cairo resident, told Arab News. “Painting buildings will not help solve Egypt's housing problem. There are millions of homeless people who can't even find a red brick building to live in.”

The changes already have started in Khedival Cairo are, with painters and workers on-call to paint the buildings.

Red-brick buildings are common in the Egyptian capital, accommodating up to 11 million people – nearly two thirds of the vast city's population.

Urban planning expert David Sims, author of “Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City Out of Control,” said there are an estimated 10 red-brick buildings in Egypt.

Last year, the Egyptian government vowed to eliminate slum neighborhoods from Egypt and to put an end to informal housing by the end of 2019. The slum areas house up to 40 percent of the Egyptian population. Approximately 14 billion Egyptian pounds (\$782 million) was allocated to complete the project.



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[Israeli troops kill 2 Palestinians](#)

Fri, 2019-01-25 20:05

GAZA: Israeli troops on Friday fatally shot a Palestinian and wounded another as they threw stones at Israeli motorists in the occupied West Bank, the army said.

Soldiers "responded by firing at the suspects, who received medical treatment. One of the suspects later died of his wounds and another was injured," a statement said.

Residents of the dead youth's village of Silwad, near Ramallah, named him as Ayman Hamed, 17.

Earlier, a Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli fire during fresh clashes along the Gaza border Friday, the health ministry said.

Ehab Abed, 25, was “killed by Israeli occupation fire east of Rafah,” in southern Gaza, health ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra said in a statement. An AFP journalist at the hospital said he had been shot in the heart. Thousands of people gathered at multiple sites along the border, with Israeli forces using tear gas and live fire to force protesters back from the border. Friday’s protests were the first since the seeming breakdown of an informal truce agreement between Israel and Gaza’s rulers Hamas. That deal had seen Qatar provide \$15 million in funds monthly to Gaza via Israeli territory. On Thursday Hamas said it would no longer accept the money, saying Israel was not respecting the agreement.







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Gaza teen dies of wounds from Israeli fire during protest

[Turkey 'will go it alone' with Syria security zone](#)

Fri, 2019-01-25 15:22

JEDDAH: Turkey may establish its own 32km security zone in northern Syria to keep Kurdish militias away from its border, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday.

The threat by Ankara to “go it alone” with a buffer zone follows silence from Washington on US involvement in the plan.

President Donald Trump proposed the border zone, but has not specified who would create, enforce or pay for it, or where exactly it would be.

“We expect the promise of a security zone, a buffer zone aimed at protecting

our country from terrorists, to be fulfilled in few months," Erdogan said on Friday. "Otherwise we will establish it ourselves.

"Our only expectation from our allies is that they provide logistical support to Turkey's effort. Our patience has a limit. We will not wait for ever for the fulfilment of the promises given to us."

Erdogan said neither the UN nor the international coalition formed to protect the Syrian people were capable of creating a safe zone or maintaining security in the region.

"The only power that can in a true sense establish the safety and functioning of this region on our Syrian border is Turkey," he said. "We are closed to all proposed solutions besides this."

He said Turkey had the right to enter Syrian territory when it was threatened under a 1998 agreement with Damascus after Syria expelled the Kurdish militant leader Abdullah Ocalan, now jailed in Turkey.

Ankara regards the Syrian Kurdish YPG as an extension of Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has fought a decades-long insurgency in southeast Turkey.

The YPG has played a key role in the US-led coalition against Daesh. Trump had previously warned Ankara not to attack Kurdish fighters in Syria, and threatened retaliation against Turkey's economy.

US special Syria envoy James Jeffrey held talks in Ankara on Friday with Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and armed forces chief Gen. Yasar Guler. Akar told him Turkey expected the US to end its support for the YPG and complete the road map which the two countries agreed upon for the Syrian town of Manbij to the west of the Euphrates.

Military operations against Daesh in Syria are wrapping up and the last pockets of the self-proclaimed "caliphate" will be flushed out within a month, a top commander said.

"The operation of our forces against Daesh in its last pocket has reached its end and Daesh fighters are now surrounded in one area," said Mazloun Kobani, head of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

With backing from the US-led coalition, the SDF are in the last phase of an operation started on Sept. 10 to defeat the jihadists in their Euphrates Valley bastions in eastern Syria.



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[France tells Iran new sanctions loom if missile talks fail](#)

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Fri, 2019-01-25 12:03

PARIS: France is ready to impose further sanctions against Iran if no progress is made in talks over its ballistic missile program, the French foreign minister said on Friday.

"We are ready, if the talks don't yield results, to apply sanctions firmly, and they know it," Jean-Yves Le Drian told reporters.

Diplomats previously told Reuters in private that France, Britain and other EU countries were considering new economic sanctions against Tehran.

Those could include asset freezes and travel bans on Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iranians developing the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile program, three diplomats said.



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