

Daesh frustrates aid effort in northwest Syria

Author:

Tue, 2019-05-07 22:52

BEIRUT: Threats, interference and aid deliveries in jeopardy – relief workers say Daesh terrorists are adding to the huge challenges they face in violence-plagued northwest Syria where a fragile cease-fire is at risk.

The Idlib region, controlled by a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, is one of the last areas of the country that the Bashar Assad regime has yet to recapture.

Around 2.7 million of its roughly 3 million residents need humanitarian assistance, according to the UN.

Most rely heavily on food, medicine and other aid brought across from Turkey by the UN and charity groups.

But efforts by the “de-facto authorities” in Idlib “to tamper with, impede or frustrate the delivery of humanitarian assistance including by undermining the safety of humanitarian workers, has been an unfortunate reality,” said Rachel Sider of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

The Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) militant group and its civil wing – the so-called Salvation Government – cemented control over Idlib in the beginning of the year.

“The interference has increased since January,” said a humanitarian worker in Idlib, who wanted to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation.

“There is not a single aid organization that has been spared threats, arrests, or closure for very silly reasons,” he said, even as Idlib has come under increased bombardment by the regime and its ally Russia over the past month.

In April, Daesh militants threatened to detain him because he refused to provide them with food baskets his team was distributing at a camp for the displaced in southern Idlib, he added. “They told me I should give them aid,” said the 27-year-old.

He said HTS also detained him for four days seven months ago in Idlib city for photographing aid deliveries without their authorization.

Militants beat him, confiscated his laptop, and broke his camera, he said.

“They told me I should thank God I was being released alive.”

Paul Donohoe of the International Rescue Committee said “aid groups face interference from armed groups in Idlib, such as the restricting of access to vulnerable populations or attempting to influence beneficiary selection and

the location of aid delivery.”

He declined to provide more detail but a second humanitarian worker in Idlib, who also asked to remain anonymous, said several projects by international aid agencies have been dropped in recent months because of such meddling.

A plan to provide bakeries in Idlib with free flour was scrapped because the Salvation Government insisted on limiting beneficiaries to bakeries it is affiliated with, the 29-year-old said.

“Our activities as an organization have become very modest since this happened to us,” he added.

The governing body is also trying to ensure its affiliates are among those who secure tenders with aid agencies, which attempt to avoid this through screening, he said. “They want a cut of any project implemented in the area,” he added. The encroachment has sparked concern that relief items and aid money may fall into the wrong hands.

Sider, of the NRC, said: “In this environment, aid agencies cannot completely eliminate the risk of diversion and we’d like donors to recognize this.”

The UN has said it is taking extra measures to combat diversion.

They include “additional screening from partners, suppliers, even workers, staff, and third party monitoring, including the use of modern technology – barcoding, establishing hotlines – to be able to be sure that aid reaches the right people,” the UN regional coordinator for Syria, Panos Mourtzis, told AFP.

There has yet to be any major decrease in humanitarian assistance but some donors have cut funding, said Ahmed Mahmoud, Syria director for the Islamic Relief charity.

“So far, five major hospitals have had to close entirely and seven other medical facilities – including hospitals focusing on paediatrics and obstetrics – severely cut back their operations due to funding cuts,” he said.

Though there could also be other reasons, “some donors may have concerns regarding the shifts in control in northwestern Syria, which may have affected their funding decisions.

“As one facility after another shuts its doors, the pressure only grows on those that remain,” he said.

For its part, the Salvation Government denies jeopardizing relief efforts.



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[US secretary of state in Baghdad on unannounced visit – AFP](#)

Tue, 2019-05-07 22:54

BAGHDAD: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo landed in Baghdad late Tuesday on an unannounced visit, an Iraqi government source told AFP, after he cancelled a trip to Germany amid escalating US-Iran tensions.

The source, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the high-security nature of the visit, said Pompeo was set to meet Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi.

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[Streaming app for Ramadan TV shows launched in Egypt](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-05-07 21:50

CAIRO: The Egyptian Media Co. has launched a new TV streaming app called Watch iT, which allows users to watch Ramadan shows for monthly or yearly subscription fees. It will initially host 15 shows.

Every year, thousands of Egyptians spend fasting hours watching TV dramas, with others doing so in the evenings after breaking their fast. For many, the free video website YouTube is their host of choice.

But the new app will mean that is no longer an option for many people, however, as the company has banned the 15 shows hosted on the Watch iT app from airing on YouTube.

The move will put many in a tight spot, forced either to see the shows on satellite TV, or to pay for the app.

The service, which is downloadable through Google Play Store and iOS, has garnered a lot of criticism from Egyptians on social media.

“I think the idea is doomed to fail. It’s just an attempt to create their own Netflix and monopolize the market without studying it or understanding the nature of their audience,” Rafiq Mahfouz, a 25-year-old writer, told Arab News.

Watch iT comes at a price many Egyptians cannot afford to pay. Downloading the app is free, but actually watching the shows costs EGP 99 (\$5.77) per month, with a partial subscription costing EGP 555 per year, and a full subscription EGP 999.

“They can’t monopolize this market without studying it very well. The service was announced two days ago, the app itself is quite a mess, the pricing is unreasonably high, and their service was down on the first day of Ramadan,” Mahfouz added.

Despite the massive launch and promotional campaign, users are complaining about technical issues and being unable to create accounts.

“The majority of Egyptians are not familiar with the concept of pay-to-watch. These TV dramas are mainly targeting the middle class, who cannot afford these prices,” said Mahfouz.

Other streaming platforms in Egypt, like Shoof Drama and Shoof Max, are offering their services for this year’s Ramadan shows for free on their websites.

Ramadan in Egypt is an enormous season for TV, with new programs and shows being released every year.



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Author:

Reuters

ID:

1557173719828232700

Mon, 2019-05-06 19:50

BEIRUT: Prime Minister Saad Hariri said on Monday Lebanon was far from bankruptcy but failure to pass a "realistic" budget that brings down the state deficit would be tantamount to a "suicide operation" against the economy.

Hariri also said once the new budget is approved, financial institutions would raise Lebanon's sovereign ratings, and criticised "preemptive" strikes

by public sector workers who fear their salaries and benefits will be cut. He was speaking in televised comments after a meeting with President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. The government is debating the draft budget.



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[Syrian Kurds reshape region with books and schools](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-05-06 21:03

QAMISHLI: When Eyub Mohamad was a boy, security forces beat his father into paralysis. His offense was typing leaflets in Kurdish, banned under Syria's

ruling Baath party.

Mohamad, with his family, fed and bathed his father for years. Wary of the typewriter that landed his father in interrogation rooms, he avoided learning to read his own language.

"I never saw my dad walking," he said. "Till his last day, he believed he would get up for this cause."

Mohamad's father died in 2011, the year Syria's conflict began. He did not see Kurdish fighters carve out autonomous rule across north and east Syria. He did not see his son, now 34, become a teacher at a Kurdish school in the city of Qamishli on the border with Turkey. Kurdish leaders now hold about a quarter of Syria, the biggest chunk outside state hands. But their grip on power – in a region rich in oil, farmland and water – remains vulnerable: The Bashar Assad regime wants all of Syria, Turkey threatens to crush them and US support is wavering.

The changes reshaping swathes of Syria have alarmed neighboring states that fear separatism within their own Kurdish communities. In Qamishli, these changes were once unimaginable.

A law student who was tortured for carrying a Kurdish book now owns a bookstore. A woman who once secretly huddled with friends at night to learn Kurdish is now a de facto education minister.

Kurdish activists who could not protest without risking arrest now have printing presses, festivals and television channels.

The shift is glaring in school hallways where, for eight years, a generation has grown up not only learning Kurdish but also learning to believe that Kurds deserve the rights they were denied for decades and must hold on to them.

"We never imagined this. This was a dream," said Semira Hajj Ali, who co-chairs the education board in the northeast. "Of course, we will not go back to before 2011. We will not turn back."

Syrian Kurdish leaders say they do not seek independence but want to cement autonomy that has evolved to include security forces and what amounts to a government.

Yet the sandbags and trenches around some schools or the armed men guarding printing presses show their fate still hangs in the balance.

On one side, there is the Turkish army, which has swept across the border twice to roll back the Kurdish YPG militia in northern Syria.

On another, there is Assad, now holding most of Syria with Russia and Iran's help. Damascus has pledged to reclaim YPG territory though the two have kept channels open.

Their main ally, the US, helped Kurdish-led forces seize vast territory from

Daesh. But it opposes their autonomy plans and has promised nothing.

President Donald Trump's plan last year to withdraw all US troops from Syria threw Kurdish officials into crisis.

Washington later changed course, and intends to leave some troops, along with forces from European allies, preserving for now the security umbrella that helped Kurdish leaders deepen their autonomy.

In the early days of Syria's conflict, when Hajj Ali and other activists tried introducing a Kurdish class, the government shut down the schools.



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