

# Escalation in Syria's Idlib displaces nearly 140,000: UN

Author:

Wed, 2019-05-01 22:24

BEIRUT: Fighting in northwestern Syria has displaced nearly 140,000 people since February, the UN said on Wednesday, as the regime and its ally Russia have stepped up their bombardment.

"Since February, over 138,500 women, children and men have been displaced from northern Hama and southern Idlib," said David Swanson of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA.

"Between 1 and 28 April, it is estimated more than 32,500 individuals have moved to different communities in Aleppo, Idlib and Hama governorates," he told AFP.

Idlib has been protected from a massive regime offensive by a September deal inked by Damascus ally Russia and opposition backer Turkey.

But the region of some 3 million people has come under increasing bombardment since the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham group took full control of it in January.

The escalation has killed more than 200 civilians since February, the UN said last week.

A new wave of shelling and airstrikes this week targeted schools and medical centers, according to Swanson.

"The UN is deeply concerned over the recent escalation," he said.

The attacks targeted parts of Hama and southern Idlib, including the village of Al-Qasabiyah.

"The majority of the Al-Qasabiyah village residents reportedly displaced to safer villages due to hostilities in the area," Swanson said.

AFP correspondents saw intense bombardment of Al-Qasabiyah Wednesday, with bombs dropped by warplanes sending huge plumes of grey smoke billowing into the sky.

Vehicles loaded with mattresses, carpets and even household appliances like refrigerators and washing machines could be seen leaving villages in southern Idlib.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on Wednesday said that regime shelling over the past two days has been the most intense since the agreement between Moscow and Ankara.

The US on Tuesday urged Russia to abide by its commitments and stop an

“escalation” in Idlib.

“The violence must end,” State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said in a statement.

An estimated 3 million people live in Idlib and adjacent opposition-held territory, 1.7 million of whom were already displaced from other parts of Syria since the conflict erupted in 2011.

The figure for those displaced there since February is more than double the number of people forced to move during battles against Daesh in eastern Syria between December and March.

OCHA on Wednesday said more than 63,000 people were displaced from territory held by Daesh in southeastern Deir Ezzor between December and March as a US-backed force snuffed out its self-declared proto-state.

The civil war in Syria has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it began.



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US urges Russia to end ‘escalation’ in Syria’s Idlib  
Idlib assault ‘not now,’ says Russia

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# Despite full reservoirs, Iraq water crisis far from over

Author:

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AL-MASHAHADA, IRAQ: After plentiful winter rains, Iraq is heading into summer with overflowing reservoirs and lush marshes. But don't be fooled, observers warn: Its water woes and related protests are not over.

Far from last year's shortages, "the land between the two rivers" is expected to hold 42 billion cubic meters in its reservoirs at the start of summer, more than twice the 2018 amount.

But that has not washed away longstanding challenges: Poor infrastructure, few funds, sharing disputes with neighbors, climate change and population booms.

Nestled between palms and tall reeds north of Baghdad, the Al-Mashahada pumping station is punched through with bullet holes, its metal pipes and cisterns rusted.

Broken plastic pipes litter the dirt road leading up to it.

At another overgrown station nearby, a main tank leaks a steady stream, day and night.

These stations are par for the course in Iraq, whose water infrastructure dates back decades and has been worn by consecutive wars, sanctions blocking spare part imports, the US-led invasion and finally, Daesh.

Parts of the network were installed over 60 years ago in soil that can be corrosive when wet, said Iraqi environmental expert Azzam Alwash.

"So you have a network with corroded pipes full of holes," he said, that could leak out as much as 60-70 percent of pumped water before it reaches households or farmlands.

Once there, it is hardly used responsibly, with farmers relying on wasteful flood irrigation and families leaving taps running unnecessarily.

The UN estimates Iraq's daily per capita water consumption is nearly double the world standard of 200 liters (52 gallons).

In 2014, Iraq prepared a 20-year, \$180-billion plan to manage its water crisis. But it was stillborn, as Daesh seized a third of the country the same year and money was diverted to fight it.

"We've needed a new station for years, but the funding totally froze in 2014

for military purposes,” said Ahmad Mahmud, who heads Al-Mashahada’s water resources.

Despite Daesh’s defeat in 2017, promised funds never came, he told AFP, and a new station is now being built by UN children’s agency UNICEF.

“I couldn’t afford pipes without them,” Mahmud admitted.

Mehdi Rasheed, who heads Iraq’s dam projects, said the ministry’s budget was “almost zero” as Iraq fought Daesh.

Last summer, massive protests over water shortages put the spotlight squarely on services, and Iraq’s government appeared to take notice.

It allocated nearly \$760 million to the Water Ministry for this year – about 60 percent higher than for 2018.

“It’s reassuring, but it’s just a good start,” Mehdi said.

It remains one of the smallest ministerial budgets, around 15 times less than the Electricity Ministry.

Even Iraq’s premier has admitted the water systems are not ready for summer, when temperatures in Iraq can reach a blistering 55 degrees Celsius.

“I would not be faithful if I said infrastructure is ready to receive all this,” Adel Abdel Mahdi said, speaking in English.

Iraq’s shortages can also be sourced beyond its borders.

Roughly 70 percent of its water originates from its neighbors, according to the International Energy Agency, with the Euphrates winding from Turkey through Syria, while the Tigris – also from Turkey – is fed by rivers from Iran.

As Turkey and Iran have developed their own dams and reservoirs, flows to Iraq have dropped.

“We used to get about 15 billion cubic meters of water a year from Iran, we no longer get that,” due to dams and rerouted rivers, said Alwash, the expert.

And when Turkey fills its massive Ilisu dam, levels in the Tigris are expected to sink even further.

Iraq is negotiating with both neighbors to reach water-sharing agreements, but its position as a receiving country gives it little leverage.

Grinding on slowly behind the man-made disasters is climate change, with the World Bank predicting more severe droughts for Iraq starting in 2020.

“One year we have to deal with a drought, the next year we have floods. This is the climate extremism we see worldwide,” said Kareem Hassan, manager of the massive Tharthar barrage north of Baghdad.

Despite Hassan's nod to climate change, his answer to how Iraq should respond was less reassuring: "It was God's will to bless us with rain this year, so we'll see what next year brings."

The apparent lack of planning is stark, considering Iraq's population of 40 million is projected to grow by another 10 million before 2030.

That will leave the country with a 37 percent deficit in its water supply, according to the Iraq Energy Institute.

That gap was already on Mahmud's mind as he looked at the fresh paint on Al-Mashhada's UN-funded station.

"It's great now, for the 300 families here. But in three years, there will be double that number here," he said.



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Water crisis salts the earth in Iraq's long-neglected south  
Iraq bans farming summer crops as water crisis grows dire

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# Algeria army chief calls for 'dialogue' with protesters

Author:

AFP

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ALGIERS: Algeria's army chief called Wednesday for dialogue between protesters and state institutions, a day after pushing back against demonstrators' demands for top politicians to quit.

"I remain entirely convinced that adopting constructive dialogue with the institutions of the state, is the only way to exit from the crisis," General Ahmed Gaid Salah said in a statement published by the defense ministry.

This is "the wisest way to present constructive proposals, bring points of view closer and reach a consensus around the available solutions," he added.

Salah was for years an ardent supporter of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, until demanding on April 2 that impeachment proceedings be launched against the ailing leader – who stepped down the same day.

An interim president has been put in place and elections set for July 4, but protests which pushed Bouteflika from power have not abated.

On Wednesday hundreds of people rallied outside the General Workers' Union in the capital Algiers, marking May Day, where they clutched Algerians flags and shouted slogans against the "system."

Police prevented them from joining other protesters gathered outside the city's iconic post office, the focal point of demonstrations which began in February and have regularly drawn vast crowds.

Salah on Tuesday rebuffed calls by demonstrators for interim leader Abdelkader Bensalah, the former upper house speaker, and Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui to step down.

In a speech, the army chief said the upcoming polls – which fall within the timeframe allowed by the constitution – amount to "the ideal solution to end the crisis."





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Algeria's ruling party names relatively young new leader amid protests  
King Salman receives Algerian foreign minister

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## [Attacks on Syrian health facilities condemned](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-04-30 22:57

HBEIT: Shelling of areas in northwestern Syria in the past three days has damaged a medical center and put two hospitals out of service, the United Nations said on Tuesday.

"The UN is deeply disturbed by three separate reported attacks on hospitals and health facilities in northwestern Syria, depriving thousands of people of their basic right of health," said David Swanson of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

"Such violence is completely unacceptable," he told AFP.

The UN did not specify who was behind the attacks but the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights blamed the Syrian regime and its ally Russia.

On Tuesday, a medical center in the town of Hbeit in the south of opposition-held Idlib province was "severely damaged" in artillery shelling, Swanson said.

Regime shelling blew a crater into the walls of the center, said an AFP correspondent who visited the facility. Its interior was littered with rubble, he said.

Earlier on Monday, an airstrike hit a hospital in the town of Latamna in neighboring Hama province, putting it out of service, Swanson said.

The hospital used to carry out 1,300 outpatient consultations and more than 300 operations a month before it was attacked, he said. A third facility – The Madiq Castle hospital in Hama – was also put out of service when it was hit by an air strike two days ago, causing heavy damage to its outpatient clinic, pharmacy and laboratory, Swanson said.

The hospital had served about 8,000 people a month, he added.

"All three incidents further limit civilians' access to basic health care in northwest Syria," he said.

“The UN continues to call on all the parties to the conflict to end the destruction of hospitals and other civilian infrastructure that is essential for the civilian population.”

Russia and Turkey in September inked a buffer zone deal to prevent a massive regime offensive on the Idlib region, near the Turkish border. But the region of some 3 million people has come under increasing bombardment since former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham took full control of it in January.

The escalation has killed more than 200 civilians since February, the UN said last week.

The Observatory said two civilians were killed in Tuesday’s shelling on Idlib and neighboring Hama.



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US urges Russia to end ‘escalation’ in Syria’s Idlib  
Extremist attacks kill 17 Syria pro-regime fighters: monitor

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# Italy's top leaders in Tunisia to shore up ties, security

Author:

Tue, 2019-04-30 22:43

TUNIS: Italy's prime minister and an array of top ministers on Tuesday were visiting Tunisia, a strategic and economic partner whose shared concerns include migration and the North African country's unstable neighbor, Libya.

Present for the intergovernmental summit were Premier Giuseppe Conte, Deputy Premier Luigi Di Maio and anti-migrant Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, plus the defense and foreign ministers, reflecting the importance Italy places on its ties with Tunisia.

After taking office last May, Conte made Tunisia his first stop south of the Mediterranean in November. Accords were reached on help in controlling the more than 400-km Libyan-Tunisian border and development of Tunisia's interior, where jobless youths become candidates for migration.

Conte was meeting with Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi and Prime Minister Youssef Chahed.

A delegation of about 100 Italian business leaders was participating in a bilateral economic forum.

The 2011 Tunisian revolution triggered the Arab Spring, but the budding democracy is plagued with economic and security problems.

Italian and Tunisian authorities share concerns about the current situation in Libya. In recent days, airstrikes have hit the Libyan capital as forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar pursue a campaign to take Tripoli.

Under Salvini, Italy has essentially closed its ports to migrants fleeing Libya aboard smugglers' boats. According to Interior Ministry data, 722 migrants arrived in Italy in 2019 as of Monday, compared with 9,419 during the same period last year and 37,034 in 2017.

Whereas Nigerian, Eritrean and other sub-Saharan Africans often made up the majority of migrants coming to Italy in previous years, Tunisians now take the top spot.

As of Monday, 226 of the migrants arriving this year were Tunisians, according to the Interior Ministry.



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