

In north Syria, skin disease ravages young and old

Thu, 2019-04-25 21:27

AL-KARAMAH, Syria: Inside a dank clinic in the north of war-torn Syria, a girl covered in scabs wails and tries to wriggle out of her mother's arms to escape a nurse's needle.

Gently holding fluffy cotton wool over her eyes, the male health worker injects a transparent liquid into the crusty blemishes on the tip of her nose.

She is one of hundreds in the northern province of Raqqa to be suffering from leishmaniasis, a skin disease caused by a microscopic parasite spread by sandflies.

The illness is endemic to Syria, the World Health Organization (WHO) says, but has become more prevalent during the eight-year civil war.

Dozens of children and adults are seeking treatment between the damp-smelling walls of the health center in the northern town of Karama.

Among them, 15-year-old Shaza Al-Omar awaits her turn.

"I've got some on my leg, my sister's got 11 lesions on her face, and my brother has some on his eye," says the teenager, draped from head to toe in black.

Not far off, a father tries in vain to pacify his toddler daughter, who screams as the nurse injects solution into lesions on her face.

Once it is over, he carries her out of the clinic clutching a large packet of potato crisps.

A woman sits on a stretcher, an ailing leg stretched out in front on her, as a nurse injects medicine into one blemish after another.

The number of leishmaniasis cases in Syria doubled from 2010 to 2018 to more than 80,000 patients, WHO says.

Leishmaniasis is usually linked to poverty, poor sanitation, and malnutrition, WHO says, factors likely compounded by the war.

"Marshes, humidity, the house's proximity to farming land, as well as widespread rubbish" have fueled the spread of the skin condition, says Younes Al-Naemi, the manager of the Karama health center.

"He's always scratching it until it bleeds," she says of her husband's sore on his hand.

"He itches it, and I tell him not to," says Jarrad, a black and white scarf wrapped around her greying hair.

"We can't sleep at night because of all the flies," she adds.

Across Karama, insects hover over piles of rubbish between rows of modest houses, some still bearing scars of battles that resulted in Kurdish-led forces kicking IS out in 2017.

Younes Al-Naeemi, the manager of the Karama health center, says the clinic has received 4,000 cases of leishmaniasis from the town and surrounding villages since April last year.

But lack of awareness has also compounded the problem.

Some people "come immediately after discovering they have been affected, while others don't do anything until it gets worse and treatment becomes much harder," he says.

"Treatment is available, but awareness is more important," he says.

After a peak of almost 6,800 cases in Raqqa province last year, WHO says there has been a decline in cases at the start of this year.

The international organization has distributed mosquito nets, provided medicine to treat the disease, and supports six health centers in Raqqa, including in Karama.

But it warns the rates could again rise as the weather becomes warmer.

"Sandfly breeding usually peaks when the temperature starts to rise in spring and summer," WHO spokesman Yahya Bouzo said.

"Unless prevention measures are taken, the number of cases is expected to" increase.

But Karama's residents say their rural town is neglected.

They complain of a lack of services including regular trash pick-ups.

Hussein Hamoud, 50, says official measures taken to counter the spread of the disease were simply not enough.

"They once sprayed insecticide inside the houses, but then they never did again," he says.

"Nobody cares. If there was even the slightest concern, this would not have happened," he says, referring to leishmaniasis.

At a primary school in the nearby village of Jadeeda, a young boy sits upright in his seat, a blemish on his cheek.

Outside the classroom, school director Abd Zeen Al-Morei pulls up his jeans to show off leishmaniasis marks on his leg.

“I’ve got 15 lesions all over my body and I’m still receiving treatment,” says the 26-year-old. Up to 40 children at the school also have the skin disease.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

Kosovan women returned from Syria face house arrest ‘No peace without justice’ for victims of Syrian war, says Saudi envoy

[Syria negotiators reach Kazakhstan for peace talks](#)

Thu, 2019-04-25 21:19

NUR-SULTAN: Delegations from Iran, Russia and Turkey were in Kazakhstan’s capital Nur-Sultan on Thursday seeking an end to the conflict in Syria while shoring up their interests in any future political settlement.

Kazakhstan’s Foreign Ministry confirmed that teams from the three powers as well as negotiators from the Syrian regime and its armed opponents had

arrived in the capital on Thursday.

Talks will take place throughout the day in “two-way and three-way formats” ahead of an expected plenary session on Friday, the ministry said in a statement.

UN’s Syria envoy Geir Pedersen was to arrive later in the day, the ministry added.

The situation on the ground in the northwestern region of Idlib, under the administrative control of Syria’s former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), is expected to feature prominently in the talks.

Idlib has been protected from a massive regime offensive by a September deal inked by Damascus ally Russia and opposition backer Turkey. But regime bombardment has increased since HTS took full control of the region from rival fighters in January. Other items expected to be included in negotiations include prisoner swaps and the distribution of humanitarian aid.

FASTFACT

Russia, a backer of Syria's Bashar Assad, has taken a lead role in diplomatic efforts in Kazakhstan that has largely sidelined UN diplomacy.

Russia, a backer of Syria’s Bashar Assad, has taken a lead role in diplomatic efforts in Kazakhstan that has largely sidelined UN diplomacy.

Tehran, like Moscow, is an ally of Assad’s regime, while Ankara has aligned itself with the opposition but has repeatedly threatened to attack Kurdish fighters on the Syrian side of its southern border that it views as “terrorists.”

A Western diplomat told AFP that Moscow will be aware of perceptions that recent rounds of the so-called “Astana process” have made little progress and may push to speed up the creation of a long-awaited constitutional committee.

The capital of Kazakhstan was called Astana until last month, when it was renamed after the country’s outgoing president.

The committee is of particular interest to the UN which favors a Syrian-led resolution to the conflict but it may be hamstrung from the outset, the diplomat warned.

“Even if a constitutional committee is created, it will then take a long time to reach a very uncertain result,” the diplomat told AFP.

Any proposal would therefore be “low risk” for Moscow, whose military intervention in 2015 has helped Damascus assert control over two-thirds of the country’s territory. Syria’s war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Kazakhstan](#)

US-led 2017 blitz on Syria's Raqqa killed 1,600 civilians
KSRelief signs agreements for relief to Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians

[UN force says third tunnel crossed Lebanon-Israel border](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-04-25 21:12

BEIRUT: A UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon on Thursday said a tunnel discovered earlier this year by Israel had crossed the Lebanese-Israeli border, in the third such breach of a cease-fire resolution.

Israel in January accused Lebanese movement Hezbollah of having dug what it described as the deepest, "longest and most detailed" tunnel it had discovered.

The Israeli army said the tunnel from the Lebanese town of Ramyeh – just 800 meters from the border – reached a few dozen meters into Israel, and descended to 55 meters underground.

UN Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) on Thursday said the tunnel was the third to have crossed the "blue line," a demarcation line drawn by the UN to mark Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

"UNIFIL's independent assessment confirms that this tunnel crosses the blue line in violation of resolution 1701," which ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, it said.

"UNIFIL has informed the Lebanese authorities about the violation and has requested urgent follow-up actions," the UN force said in a statement.

Lebanon and Israel are still technically at war. Israel is currently building a wall along the 130 km frontier to block Hezbollah attempts to infiltrate.

Since early December, Israel has said it discovered six tunnels, destroying them either with explosives or by filling them with a cement-like material.

Five have been confirmed to exist by UNIFIL.

"Of these, three tunnels have been found to be crossing the blue line," the peacekeeping force said.

Israel alleges Hezbollah had planned to use the tunnels to kidnap or kill its civilians or soldiers, and to seize Israeli territory in the event of any hostilities.

On Jan. 26, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said it had taken Israel "years" to discover some of the tunnels, but did not specify who had constructed them.

Hezbollah is the only side not to have disarmed after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war.

In recent years, Israel has repeatedly carried out airstrikes against what it says are Hezbollah weapons convoys in war-torn Syria next door, where the group is backing regime forces.

The US has designated Hezbollah a "terrorist" group since 1997, while the EU blacklisted its military arm in 2013.

But it also functions as a political party, with posts in the current Cabinet.

The US on Monday offered a \$10 million reward for information that would disrupt the group's finances.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Israel](#)

[tunnels](#)

Lebanon's seabed yields its historic secrets
Lebanon seizes 142 kg of illicit drugs in major bust with help from Saudi authorities

[Kosovan women returned from Syria face house arrest](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-04-24 22:05

PRISTINA: Kosovo prosecutors have requested the house arrest of 16 women repatriated from Syria, saying they are suspected of joining or taking part as foreign fighters there.

The women appeared on Wednesday in court in Pristina, a day after 10 other women were put under house arrest. None have been charged with a crime.

Four alleged militants, all men, were arrested the moment they were brought to the country.

The women and children were sent to the Foreign Detention Centre in the outskirts of Pristina but were freed to go home after 72 hours.

Ten women were seen entering Pristina Basic Court in a police escort on Tuesday. The court said in a statement later that they had been placed under house arrest on charges of joining foreign armed groups and terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq from 2014 to 2019.

The state prosecution said all 32 repatriated women are under investigation and more of them are expected to appear in front of judges on Wednesday. The prosecution has yet to file charges.

After the collapse of Islamic State's self-declared caliphate in Syria and Iraq, countries around the world are wrestling with how to handle militants and their families seeking to return to their home countries.

Kosovo's population is nominally 90 percent Muslim, but the country is largely secular in outlook. More than 300 of its citizens travelled to Syria since 2012 and 70 men who fought alongside militant groups were killed.

Police said 30 Kosovan fighters, 49 women and eight children remain in the conflict zones. The government said it plans to bring back those who are still there.

International and local security agencies have previously warned of the risk posed by returning fighters. In 2015, Kosovo adopted a law making fighting in foreign conflicts punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

On Saturday, 110 Kosovar citizens – the four alleged foreign fighters, 32 women and 74 children – were returned to Kosovo with assistance from the United States, the first such move for a European country.

Authorities say there are still 87 Kosovar citizens in Syria.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Kosova](#)

[Kosovan women](#)

[Pristina](#)

Kosovo police question several women who returned from SyriaKosovo returns families of militants from Syria

[US targets two individuals, three entities in Hezbollah-related sanctions program](#)

Wed, 2019-04-24 19:47

WASHINGTON: The U.S. Treasury, moving to boost pressure on Hezbollah, imposed sanctions on Wednesday against two people and three firms that Washington accuses of being involved in schemes to help the armed Shi'ite group backed by Iran evade American sanctions.

The Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said it was targeting Belgium-based Wael Bazzi because he acted on behalf of his father Mohammad Bazzi, a Hezbollah financier.

OFAC also took action against two Belgian companies and a British-based firm controlled by Bazzi.

In addition, the US Treasury designated Lebanon-based Hassan Tabaja, who it said had acted on behalf of his brother Adham Tabajha, also a Hezbollah financier. The U.S. action freezes their assets and property and prevents U.S. citizens and businesses from dealing with them.

The two men and three businesses were targeted for sanctions under US regulations aimed at suspected terrorists or those who support them, the Treasury said in a statement. Hezbollah is considered a foreign terrorist organization by the United States.

“Treasury is relentlessly pursuing Hezbollah’s financial facilitators by dismantling two of Hezbollah’s most important financial networks,” Treasury Undersecretary Sigal Mandelker said in a statement.

“By targeting Hassan Tabaja and Wael Bazzi and their European-based companies, this administration is continuing to disrupt all avenues of financial support relied upon by Hezbollah,” he said.

The US State Department earlier this week offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information that could help disrupt Hezbollah’s financing.

The move to boost pressure on the group comes at a time of growing US concern about its role in the Lebanese government. Hezbollah’s regional clout has expanded as it has sent fighters to Middle East conflicts, including the war in Syria, where it supported President Bashar al-Assad.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[Hezbollah](#)

[Lebanon](#)

[US](#)

[US sanctions](#)

US puts up \$10m reward for Hezbollah information
Pompeo urges Lebanon to move away from Iran and Hezbollah's 'dark ambitions'