

Voices from Eastern Ghouta:

Under siege and under fire

February 21, 2018

"What is happening today is a world war on the whole of Ghouta - where can we escape?! Where can we go?!", shouted Rahim, a resident of the town of Shafuniyeh in Eastern Ghouta, "Every single inch of Ghouta is under bombardment. We have been besieged for more than four years. How can I survive with my family and children, and I even can't escape or move in the streets? The whole area is under fire. Today alone the town of Shafuniyeh was hit with 22 airstrikes. We can't count the dead and the wounded, everything is in ruins! The Civil Defense is helpless, the organizations have disappeared, and everyone and their family is looking for a way out of this situation or trying to find a space in a basement or a shelter, because of over-crowding. "

The story of Rahim is only one story of thousands of stories of civilians that are taking place now in Eastern Ghouta. Eastern Ghouta lies to the southeast of the capital of Damascus and has a population of approximately 400 thousand people. They have been besieged by Syrian government forces for nearly four years.

Civilians besieged in Eastern Ghouta suffer from difficult humanitarian conditions because of the lack of relief and medical resources and the lack of competent personnel in general during the past years. The military campaign that began last Sunday (February 18, 2018) has worsened the situation. Witnesses have described this military campaign as the most brutal and destructive one, with the use of all types of heavy weapons, military aircraft, barrel bombs, rocket launchers and artillery ammunition. The situation warns of a humanitarian catastrophe, which will be the worst of its kind that Syria is likely to witness.

"The ground is shaken by the intensity of the shelling, the houses collapse on top of each other and close the streets. We are hiding in the corner of a house, and we don't know where to run. We have some blankets, but my children are shivering with cold and fear," L.M. said, a woman from the town of Saqbab which is under fire. She continued, "We tell them stories to ease them, and distract them from what is going on outside, my daughter is now moaning from fatigue and fear, her heart is tired, and my other child is asleep on my legs. I watch them and run away in the details of their faces. How can I explain my suffering? All the letters of the alphabet can't express my situation and describe my feelings. Me, my parents, my brothers and my sisters, each of us is in a different place. I can't even make sure they are okay or communicate with them, I tried but wasn't able to, although the distance between us is short. The situation is more than difficult, and with every air raid, I hug my children and say the death prayer. "

The intensity of the military operations increased during the 19th and 21st of February 2018, with the Syrian government and its allies focused on using military aircraft, which has led to the following situation:

- Three out of six hospitals in the area have been put out of service completely, including Arbin hospital which is considered the most important hospital in Ghouta because of the equipment it contains, and Al-Amal (Hope) hospital in Hammuriya.
- More than 150 victims have died and more than 400 have been injured, all of whom are civilians including women and children. Most of the victims were located in the middle sector of Ghouta in Arbin, Hazza, Douma, Harasta, Al-Marj and Misraba.
- The services provided by associations and organizations have been completely paralyzed, in addition to casualties among their employees. Even before the beginning of the military operation there was a severe shortage of medical and relief supplies, with the Syrian government preparing for siege by closing all humanitarian corridors and roads.
- The besieged people in Eastern Ghouta are in state of panic and fear because the situation there is different from all other areas where there has been fighting. This is due to the siege and the complete closure by the Syrian government and its militias. There are no corridors or roads for the displaced and those fleeing the

fighting. People move between neighborhoods and houses with every air raid because of the lack of shelters and basements, while the Syrian government and the Russians continue to bombard and attack the area.

Kasim Al-Arbini from besieged Eastern Ghouta said, “The thing that terrifies us the most and terrifies the rest of the besieged people in Eastern Ghouta is the statement of Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, when he said that the situation of Eastern Ghouta may be similar to the situation of the neighborhoods of Aleppo, which was under the control of the opposition factions. We see this statement means a fierce battle and destroying the area over our heads, and the heads of our children”.

The Syrian Civic Platform calls for:

- 1- An urgent meeting of the United Nations and the Security Council to pressure the Syrian government and its Russian ally to stop the military campaign.
- 2- Open corridors under the supervision of the UN to evacuate the wounded and injured and move them to safe areas.
- 3- Allow the Red Cross and Red Crescent to deliver medical and relief supplies.
- 4- Allow women and children to leave the areas where the military operations are taking place and provide guarantees for their safety.
- 5- Work on reviving a truce under international supervision.
- 6- Evacuate the civilians who want to leave the areas affected by the military operations and move them to safer areas.