

Update on the Situation in Eastern Ghouta

May 7, 2019

The Government of Syria (GoS) retook control of Eastern Ghouta in early 2018. During this, the GoS and its allies launched a military campaign against the area and imposed a so-called reconciliation agreement on the opposition armed groups located there. Those who did not accept the reconciliation agreements were transferred to the north of Syria. This report sheds light on the situation of civilians in Eastern Ghouta after GoS took control in 2018.

There are no accurate statistics on the population in Eastern Ghouta or the number of those who have returned to the area, due to restrictions imposed by the GoS security services preventing the collection of accurate statistics.

I. Humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta

The humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta is poor as authorities have allowed residents to enter the area without ensuring their safety while they return.

Civilians were allowed to return to their areas, in particular to Duma, Harasta, Saqba, Kafr Batna, and Zamalka, provided that the returnees did not have family members who had evaded military service; were affiliated with the opposition armed groups or detained by the GoS. Returnees must also have proof of real estate in the area to which they wish to return. Residents who returned to Eastern Ghouta have begun to renovate their houses if they had the financial capacity, while others live in partially destroyed houses. However, the residents whose houses were completely destroyed live in shelters they have made themselves of tents and tin, with drinking water provided by the Syrian Red Crescent.

"I have now only two daughters, after the death of my husband and two of my children. The older girl got married, while my little daughter and I moved from place to place, and ended up living in a cellar with several families. I suffer from a lack of food and the food provided by the organization is inadequate. My daughter's health condition is deteriorating and I am unable to help her," said Umm Yasser from the town of Harasta.

Electricity is generally available only for 6 hours per day, while it is available for 12 hours a day in areas that have never been out of GoS control. At night, areas of Eastern Ghouta are almost completely deserted because there is no transportation. There is also a lack of security, with many cases of abduction and assault with sharp instruments at night.

Red Crescent workers tell tragic stories about the situation in these areas. Neither the rubble nor the dead bodies have been removed. There is an elderly woman in the village of Otaya who refuses to stay away from the rubble of her house. She hears the voices of her son and grandchildren in the night and waits for the government to get them out of the rubble.

The GoS has only gave permission to the Red Crescent to enter the villages of Otaya, Malihah, Balaliyya, Nashabiyah, Hatiat al-Turkman, Hosh al-Sultan, and Hamouri Farms. The Red Crescent enters these villages through mobile clinics every day, providing basic medical services and medicine, such as heat-insulators, vitamins and anti-inflammatory drugs.

II. Living conditions

Eastern Ghouta suffers from a severe shortage of basic necessities. While the price of the bread bundle in Damascus is 50 SYP, it is 200 SYP in Eastern Ghouta, because of the lack of bakeries. In addition, many NGOs are not allowed to undertake civil initiatives, and landmines explosions are also widespread, particularly after many people returned to work on their farmlands.

III. Health situation

The residents of Eastern Ghouta suffer from the spread of scabies, in addition to a significant proportion of people with specific health needs and disabilities as a result of the war. There is also a significant shortage of drugs for chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. The population, especially children, was also exposed to rat bites, as a result the spread of plague is feared, especially at the onset of summer and high temperatures.

A woman and her daughter, aged six months, were infected with scabies. The mother explained that she had not been able to shower since birth because of the lack of water.

IV. Education

The number of children dropping out of school is increasing. The GoS allowed the Norwegian Refugee Council to enter the town of Harasta in order to launch an educational program for school dropouts, and allowed the Danish Council to enter Douma as well.

In Douma, two schools to accommodate out-of-school children has been opened under the supervision of UNICEF and the Danish Refugee Council. At the beginning of the second semester in January, only 170 out of the 500 out-of-school children were attending classes, while the rest were working.

The social workers working in these schools explained that there is a lack of psychological support for most students, as some of them suffer from introversion, aggression, speech difficulties or fear. After communicating with students' parents, it was noted that most families suffer from instability, as many families had lost one parent, often the father. There are also families practicing polygamy, where the brother has been

A female social worker speaks of the case of an 11-year-old girl who joined an informal education center is illiterate and was unable to speak well because of psychological issues: When she was 6 her sister died and her health and psychological condition deteriorated. Her education was suspended after the incident, and she didn't receive the necessary treatment due to shelling and poor living conditions.

obliged to marry his deceased brother's wife in order to protect the children. As mentioned earlier, a large proportion of families suffer from physical and psychological disabilities within their families. Many cases of rape have also been recorded when the army and other militias entered the town of Duma, despite the difficulty of documenting such cases.



V. Recommendations

- i. Provide all forms of humanitarian support and pressure authorities to allow organizations to enter and provide services, especially during the month of Ramadan.
- ii. Efforts need to be intensified to clear landmines in Eastern Ghouta; to remove remnants of war, to retrieve corpses for burial and to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and epidemics before the heat of summer arrives.
- iii. Pharmacies need to be reopened and increased availability of medicines, especially those related to chronic and infectious diseases such as scabies.
- iv. A service center for people with special needs should be opened. There also is a need for wheelchairs, crutches and artificial limbs.
- v. Schools need to be re-opened and rehabilitated to reduce school dropout rates.
- vi. There needs to be funding to secure psychosocial support services to address the effects of war on children.