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SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



BESIEGED CIVILIANS LACK MEDICAL CARE AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SPEAKS WITH MEDICAL WORKERS IN GOVERNMENT-BESIEGED DAMASCUS SUBURBS

Tens of thousands of civilians across Syria, including children, have been forced to endure a life of hardship under siege. Most of the sieges are imposed and maintained by forces loyal to the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Others have been mounted by opposition and other non-state armed groups. Both government and non-state actors have committed war crimes and other serious human rights abuses in besieged areas.

Three medical workers told Amnesty International about the harsh effects of the sieges on the people of

Moadamiya, Eastern Ghouta and Daraya, neighbourhoods which surround Damascus.

Government forces are maintaining their siege of **Moadamiya**, an area with some 20,000 civilian inhabitants some 16km south-west of Damascus. They imposed the siege in April 2012 and tightened it in November 2012. Although a “local truce” was said to have come into effect on 25 December 2013, government forces continued to subject Moadamiya to attacks from the air, including strikes on civilian infrastructure, notably the water supply.

A pharmacy in Yarmouk, another area besieged by the Syrian authorities, destroyed as a result of government bombardment. May 2014.
© Rame Alsayed

On 1 July 2014, a senior medical worker in Moadamiya told Amnesty International: “We do not have oxygen. Medicines are very limited, and many are expiring. We are able now and again to get vials of anaesthetic, no more than five and for 10 times their usual price. We have not had electricity for 18 months and we depend on a generator that works on diesel oil for surgeries, but the diesel price is astronomical. As for water, it is currently cut and the town is suffering from a problem of drinking water contaminated by sewage due to shelling. We have 25 cases of poisoning in the hospital due to this. The main health issue is the lack of vaccines for 6,000 children. There have not been any vaccines for a year and a half. The effects of lack of vaccines is long-term and will destroy a whole generation.

“We also have more than 6,000 cases of diabetes and high blood pressure; they suffer from lack of medication, especially insulin. Some older people have died due to blockage of heart muscles, pressure on their arteries and diabetes.

“Chest lesions and respiratory problems have more than doubled after the use of chemical weapons on the town on 21 August 2013. As a result, anaesthetics are not as effective during surgery and have to be increased by threefold for those who were exposed to chemical gases. Also their bodies do not respond to painkillers, sleeping tablets or muscle relaxants. We also have to use anaesthetics beyond their expiry dates. Recently we have noticed an increase in suspected cases of meningitis, which we cannot confirm straight away because of the lack of lab facilities. X-ray is important for the diagnosis of tuberculosis, but is not always available. A whole generation will require psychological support from the effects of war and repeated massacres.”

Government forces continue to besiege towns and villages in **Eastern Ghouta**, east of Damascus, where an estimated 150,000 people, mostly civilians, remain. Most of Eastern Ghouta has been under siege continuously since November 2012.

On 10 July 2014, a medical worker in Duma, Eastern



A destroyed building in Zamalka, Eastern Ghouta © Mohammed Abdullah

Ghouta, told Amnesty International: “We have to change the locations of the medical points from time to time to avoid shelling and air strikes. The doctors asked the UN to send in medical supplies but they said the Syrian government would not allow them to bring in any surgical materials or medication. The doctors initially stored a lot of medication and supplies when the routes to Eastern Ghouta were still open, but now they have almost run out. All medical aid was forbidden until the third UN aid distribution on 27 March 2014 and it was very small amounts. They had included some items to address the malnutrition problem including a special peanut butter and high calorie biscuits. The problem is that the items were old and nearing expiry – the peanut butter was three days away from expiry.

“One of the main problems, other than the lack of food, is the lack of clean water and electricity. Lack of electricity prevents medical points from helping people at certain times. It also means people have nowhere to store any food they do get. The contaminated water that people are drinking is also contributing to a decline in general immunity. A WHO report quotes that 30 per cent of people in the Middle East are carriers of tuberculosis, but only those with a low ability to resist infections will get the disease and its symptoms. This is why it is becoming so prevalent in Syria – lack of food, variety of food and water is contributing to a low ability to resist infections. The doctors find it difficult to diagnose tuberculosis at an early stage because of the lack of medical equipment and supplies needed to work the machinery or to conduct the medical tests necessary.

This means that diagnosis has only been happening at a late stage when the symptoms are already visible and it's very difficult to treat.

It also means that the patient would have spread the bacteria causing the infection before they were diagnosed and isolated. Doctors tend to prioritize patients who have a high chance of surviving, as they do not want to waste resources on patients who are likely to die anyway.

“There are high levels of psychological distress and depression among children but there is only one psychologist in the whole of Eastern Ghouta and generally this problem is not being treated. Dialysis is one of the main medical problems now. It costs \$20,000 a month to operate the dialysis machine for the 30 patients who need it. They rely on private donors but donations are decreasing and it's becoming unsustainable.”



One of two graveyards in Daraya used to bury those who died since the beginning of the crisis in March 2011. © Local Council of Daraya City

Daraya, a town about 10km south-west of Damascus, has been under siege by government forces since November 2012. No aid has been allowed into the town since then. There are estimated to be up to 7,000 people in Daraya. Of these, around 1,500 are said to be fighters affiliated to the Free Syrian Army. Government forces have repeatedly attacked Daraya with barrel bombs.

On 16 June 2014, a medical worker in the field hospital in Daraya told Amnesty International that the hospital had been targeted by government forces three times in two months and missiles and barrel bombs had landed in the vicinity.



A field hospital in Daraya © Local Council of Daraya City

He described how, on the night of 16-17 May, the field hospital was very badly damaged when three barrel bombs landed nearby. No-one was killed but three medical workers suffered burns. He went on to say:

“Frankly we are suffering from shortages of all medicines and medical equipment because of the siege. All the equipment has either become obsolete due to over-use or has broken due to repeated shelling. We don't have the means to diagnose conditions in many cases, and we don't have the correct treatments for particular conditions. People cannot seek treatment outside due to the siege. We have a 50-day-old infant with a life-threatening inguinal hernia whom we cannot treat due to the lack of anaesthetics. New-born babies have died due to the lack of incubators.”

The medical worker later told Amnesty International that three children died after an artillery shell landed in the garden where they were playing on 8 July. Mus'ab Wehbe, aged seven, died immediately. Aye Wehbe, aged five, and four-year-old Qusai Wehbe died later in the field hospital.



A Daraya resident climbs out of a crater left by a barrel bomb in May 2014 © Local Council of Daraya City

CASE FOCUS – PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

MAZEN DARWISH, HANI AL-ZITANI AND HUSSEIN GHARIR FROM THE SYRIAN CENTRE FOR MEDIA AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION



Mazen Darwish © Private

Mazen Darwish (pictured) is the head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), a Damascus-based organization that documents and publishes studies on the human rights situation in Syria. Hani al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir also work at SCM.

All three were arrested on 16 February 2012 by Syrian Air Force Intelligence, along with a number of others. They spent months subjected to enforced disappearance and Amnesty International understands that Mazen Darwish and Hussein Gharir were tortured in detention.

They were indicted on 27 February 2013 and, after numerous delays by the court, are currently standing trial before the Anti-Terrorism Court in Damascus where they are accused of "publicizing terrorist acts" under Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law in connection with their work to promote and protect human rights in Syria. Other charges against the three men relate to the documentation of cases of people detained, subjected to enforced disappearance and killed in Syria.

Although charges under Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law were among those subjected to the presidential amnesty of 9 June 2014, Mazen Darwish, his colleagues and numerous other civil society activists, human rights defenders and media and humanitarian workers remain detained. Amnesty International considers the three men to be prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Their latest trial session took place on 21 July, when the judge decided to once again postpone the trial, this time until 24 September. Mansour al-Omari, a colleague who is on trial with them but fled the country after he was conditionally released in February 2013, told Amnesty International: "This trial is just another way for the Syrian authorities to punish Mazen and the others for their courageous human rights work. For us as their friends and colleagues, their detention for almost two and a half years now and the ongoing trial delays are a painful injustice and we just want them to come home."

CAMPAIGNING

To campaign for their release, please visit:
<http://free-syrian-voices.org/take-action/>

MORE
INFORMATION

For more information on the case, please visit:
amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/014/2014/en