

DARAA UNDER SIEGE

Second update on developments in the field and its impact on civilians July 30th to August 12th, 2021

A grim milestone, 50 days under siege. This reporting period witnessed the tragic impact of the continuation of the siege on Daraa al-Balad and the surrounding areas. As military forces try to advance, from time to time, and spread out beyond the vicinity of the besieged areas this has led to the outbreak of clashes and the continuation of shelling with mortars and tanks. This poses a grave danger to the besieged civilians inside Daraa al-Balad and worsens the humanitarian situation at all levels. The provision of flour was completely cut off on August 6th, 2021 due to the complete prohibition of the entry of food and medical supplies into the besieged areas. Activists announced a general strike on August 7th, 2021, in which all regions of Daraa participated, closing all businesses, shops and roads in an effort to raise the alarm of the necessity of lifting the siege on Daraa al-Balad and denounce the deteriorating humanitarian reality.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION:

After food supplies were cut off and bakeries closed, families resorted to making bread at home using what remaining flour they had or from the very small quantities they could get from the Daraa al-Mahatta neighborhood. The military checkpoint on the outskirts of Daraa prevents vehicles from entering or leaving the area and the entry of food or medical supplies. People now have no access to food supplies. Only women are allowed to leave Daraa al-Balad, and then only under specific conditions. At the checkpoints, they are forced to pay bribes, up to 400 dollars for a family that wants to leave.

In addition to the lack of food, power is completely cut in all the besieged areas. Also there is a great shortage of drinking water. Civilians have resorted to using wells to access drinking water.

HEALTH SITUATION:

Since the beginning of the military escalation on Daraa al-Balad, after the regime forces bombed the only operational medical point in Daraa al-Balad area resulting in it being out of service, health services are almost non-existent.

One of the doctors of the city of Daraa said: "This is a message in which I appeal to humanitarian and international organizations to intervene to stop the tragedy experienced by the besieged families in Daraa al-Balad and the surrounding areas. Anyone who needs surgical work is a dead person; all roads are closed and we cannot help patients access the central hospital nor private hospitals."

This very dire humanitarian reality negatively impacts civilians in general, and women in particular as their burdens increase in conflict and crises. Special attention needs to be given to women's health and nutritional requirements.

Two women reported being infected with COVID-19 when they sought refuge in a mosque to escape the indiscriminate bombing. With respect to the spread of COVID-19, it is not possible to take the necessary precautions to limit the spread or mitigate its effects; there is no medical support for people who become seriously ill from it.

One of the activists in Daraa said: "We are besieged. There are a large group of families, in addition to children and the elderly, within mosques and schools that have not been spared from hostilities. These shelters do not have minimum supplies to continue supporting everyone, there is a shortage of medical and relief supplies, and the special needs of women... The suffering is very great here."

CIVIC SPACE:

Activists played an important role in the recent events in Daraa. A group of activists launched a stand of solidarity to protest the bombing and 50 days siege of Daraa. A full strike was carried out in all cities of Daraa; It denounced the violations committed by the Syrian regime on the areas of Daraa al-Balad.

The Daraa al-Balad Committee played an important role in conveying the reality for civilians to decision-makers, including the office of the Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen. The committee communicated with the Envoy's office, and provided a briefing on the current situation and the most important recommendations. The official committee spokesperson focused on the need to lift the siege and bring in humanitarian aid. He said: "The United Nations and the guarantor states of the 2018 Russian agreement must stand to save us from a vengeful war waged by sectarian militias, as the basic materials for the people of Daraa have already run out."

One of the activists said: "I suffer from injuries as a result of the bombing. I will stop treating myself and start a hunger strike with a group of activists until the siege is lifted from our people in Daraa who are suffering from the scourge of the revenge campaign on Daraa al-Balad."

FIELD SITUATION:

There were 46 bombings from July 30th, 2021 to August 12th, 2021. These impacted several areas, including: Al-Yadoudeh, all areas of Daraa Al-Balad and Al-Sad Road, where the house of a member of the Central Committee was also bombed.

Clashes continue in several areas, such as the Nawa checkpoint and Sheikh Miskin, in a continuous attempt to advance. There is a constant fear of reprisals and massacres that may

occur due to the presence of forces and elements of the militias affiliated with the regime, which began to flock to the outskirts of Daraa al-Balad.

The bombing targeted a house in the Al-Sad Road neighborhood, which is the home of a member of the negotiating committee in Daraa al-Balad. The number of civilian casualties as a result of the recent military campaign on Daraa al-Balad during the reporting period reached 6 victims.

PENDING NEGOTIATIONS:

Negotiations remain suspended since the last meeting at Daraa Al-Balad stadium on Thursday, August 6th, 2021 when clan dignitaries from all over Houran and the Central Committee in Houran met with the Russian side in the city of Daraa. This was after the clan's statement that the Russian guarantor should stand by their responsibilities.

In the meeting, the clan dignitaries (aka the notables) received promises of an immediate cease-fire, and the lifting of the siege from the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sad and the Camp, as well as the besieged families on the outskirts of Daraa al-Balad. They received promises to reopen the Saraya checkpoint, which is the only crossing from Daraa al-Balad to the city center.

A meeting was arranged between the central committees and the Security Committee, in the presence of a Russian delegate, but it has not yet taken place. This makes the situation worse, as there are daily developments, and events have accelerated dramatically.

Crowds of the militias affiliated with the Syrian regime continue to arrive on the outskirts of Daraa al-Balad. A meeting was held on several levels with the dignitaries of Daraa (i.e., community leaders, influencers such as the sheikhs and the notables) as well as with the negotiating committee and international actors who focused on the terrible unfolding humanitarian reality, and the fear of massacres that might occur in the event of the continuation of hostilities.

The United Nations stated that the escalation of hostilities in Daraa al-Balad has forced at least 18,000 civilians to flee from it since July 28th, many of whom fled to the city of Daraa and to its neighboring areas. Hundreds of people have taken refuge in schools in Daraa al-Mahatta as the fighting intensified. Civilians can only leave these neighborhoods via a single road that is tightly controlled by the Syrian government.

The United Nations High Commissioner, Ms. Michelle Bachelet, said: "The bleak picture that we are receiving from Daraa al-Balad and other neighborhoods confirms the grave dangers faced by civilians in these areas, where they repeatedly face clashes and violence while under siege.

250 families are still besieged in the Chiyah area and they have lost contact with the outside world due to their telephone communications being cut. *Ms. Iman Harbat* says, "There is a great fear of a massacre against the families in this area. The Fourth Division, of the Syrian

regime forces, holds them as human shields, there is also information about the killing of two young men from the families."

So, the most urgent needs remain:

The most important needs are the supply of medicine and food as well as basic services like access to water and power, that are still missing since the beginning of the military campaign on Daraa Al-Balad. It is essential to open supply routes and allow the entry of humanitarian aid. Each day the militias imposed siege continues to exacerbate the situation. There is a state of anticipation in the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad as they await their fate, and fear of the continuation of the military campaign, and consequently more suffering at the humanitarian level.

THE MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS ARE:

- Regarding the humanitarian situation, committing to the international treaties and agreements, and allowing organizations to enter to carry out their responsibilities towards civilians.
- Stopping the bombing and hostilities that directly affect the lives of 10,000 people within an area not exceeding 5 km².
- Protecting women in accordance with Resolution 1325, which stipulates the protection and security of women during armed conflict.
- Securing the medical and essential needs of women in light of their displacement to public places, their lack of privacy and their loss of their most basic needs.
- Allowing the entry of basic supplies and opening the roads monitored by snipers to ensure movement, and the entry of food and emergency medical supplies.
- The Russian side stands before its responsibilities stipulated in the 2018 agreement as a guarantor between the regime and the dignitaries of Daraa.
- Removing the militias from the outskirts of Daraa al-Balad, which is expected to carry out massive massacres and reprisals.
- Humanitarian organizations in Syria stand up on their humanitarian responsibilities to meet basic needs, and for humanitarian aid to arrive through the United Nations, international humanitarian agencies, and the International Red Cross, to secure food, water and medicine.
- A negotiated political solution based on international resolutions, and Security Council Resolution No. 2254 is the guarantee for a better future for Syrians, the protection of civilians, and the provision of lasting stability and peace.
- Protecting the civilians in Daraa and southern Syria is the responsibility of the international community and the Security Council to maintain international peace and security.