The Jordanian Government Bears Direct Responsibility for the Suffering in al Rukban Camp

Six Civilians, including Five Children, Died of Starvation and Sickness in One Month
The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

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I. Introduction

The Syrian regime’s intensive aerial bombardment remains the primary cause of waves of internal displacement due to the deaths and injuries that result from these attacks, as well as the destruction of residential buildings and shops – particularly using barrel bombs, which one could call the most idiotic weapon an army could use against its own people. Since the popular uprising for democracy began in March 2011, approximately seven million Syrian citizens have been internally displaced at the time of this writing. As well as bombardment, other factors have driven people to flee, such as arrest, torture, conscription, and sexual violence.

While a proportion of the internally displaced people (IDPs) live now in camps scattered across different areas of Syria, mostly concentrated in areas under the control of faction from the armed opposition and Kurdish Self-Management forces in north and south east Syria respectively, roughly 50,000 IDPs live in al Rukban Camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border.

This report is an attempt to shed light on the suffering of the residents of al Rukban Camp, most notably since the start of 2018, since when the Jordanian government has abstained entirely from giving the UN any permission to deliver relief aid through its borders. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime has also prevented the UN office in Damascus from delivering aid. We have been able to speak to a number of residents from the camp, with this report containing four...
accounts that we’ve collected by speaking directly with residents there, rather than citing accounts collected at second hand from any open sources. We explained the purpose of these interviews beforehand to the eyewitnesses who have given us permission to use the information they provided without being offered or given any incentives. Additionally, SNHR has attempted to spare the eyewitnesses the agony of remembering the violations perpetrated against them. Guarantees were also given to conceal the identity of any eyewitnesses who preferred to use an alias.

II. Al Rukban Camp, aNeglected Humanitarian Crisis
Al Rukban Camp is located on the Syrian-Jordanian border within the 55-kilometer demilitarized zone between the two countries, which is under the control of factions from the armed opposition, most notably Jaish al Maghawyer and Jaish Ahrar al Ashayer. The camp is located approximately 20 kilometers from the international coalition’s al Tanf Military Base, and roughly 200 kilometers from the nearest urban area.

Established in 2014, the international coalition’s military base provides aerial protection for the camp area against any potential attacks by Syrian regime forces and subsequently by Russian forces; this has made the camp a destination for residents of a number of areas who have been displaced by the regime’s bombardment and destruction.

As of early 2015, al Rukban area was a point of assembly for thousands of families who were seeking refuge in Jordan through the crossing point there, after the Jordanian government shut down the official crossing to deter asylum seekers.

In March 2015, however, the Jordanian government began to restrict and crack down even on unofficial crossing points, leaving tens of thousands of IDPs and asylum seekers trapped in al Rukban area.

With the rates of military activist rising in the eastern suburbs of Homs and the eastern governorates, Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa, the number of IDPs rose to roughly 85,000 individuals by the end of 2016. Most of those have been living in rudimentary tents or houses made of clay.
The residents of the camp have been suffering from almost non-existent healthcare and a complete cessation of the education process for the children there. In addition, sexual harassment has been a widespread concern for female residents of the camp. The situation has resulted in rampant poverty in light of the vast increases in the prices of food and medical supplies, leaving some families with no choice but to force their young daughters into early marriages, which, in turn, resulted in a rise in divorce cases.

III. The Syrian Regime and the Jordanian Government Bear Responsibility for the Suffering of al Rukban Camp

A. The Syrian regime’s responsibility

It is indisputable that the Syrian regime bears the foremost and primary responsibility for the situation of the displaced IDPs in al Rukban Camp due particularly to the following reasons: The Syrian regime is the party primarily responsible for the killing and indiscriminate bombardment of all the areas that rose up against the continuing dynastic dictatorship of the ruling family and subsequently broke away from it. As the ruling power, additionally, the Syrian regime is expected to protect the civilians under its control, rather than killing them for rejecting its rule.

The current Syrian regime is the party which besieged and starved hundreds of thousands of Syrians in the past, in both Eastern and Western Ghoutas of Damascus suburbs governorate, as well as the northern suburbs of Homs and a wide range of other areas according to SNHR’s reports and reports by the Siege Watch group.
The Syrian regime has prevented the UN’s OCHA from delivering relief aids on dozens of occasions under ludicrous false pretexts. In addition, the Syrian regime has ensured the appointment of individuals loyal to the regime in the OCHA offices in Syria. This can be easily proven by a cursory examination of the names of the families and fathers of a number of employees who are connected to the regime, with SNHR shedding light on the corruption, administrative malpractice, and blackmail carried out by the Syrian regime against the OCHA in a previous extensive report.

The Syrian regime has rejected a number of requests to deliver relief aid to al Rukban Camp. Whilst it’s true that the Syrian regime complied subsequently under pressure from external bodies, allowing Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) teams to bring limited amounts of aid into the camp, the amounts provided were extremely inadequate and didn’t last for more than a few days.

B. The Jordanian government’s responsibility
To liaise with the Syrian regime is surely not a step that demonstrates concern for human lives, given the regime’s extremely well documented record of brutality and barbaric abuses against the people; this is the same regime that has killed and displaced millions of Syrians. Asking the regime directly responsible for the displaced people’s suffering and for thousands of additional crimes against humanity against Syrian citizens for permission to aid the camp residents whom it has displaced and persecuted in the first place and is pressuring to either comply or perish, helps to legitimize the regime’s crimes and allows it to control and exploit the delivery of UN-sponsored aid which it uses as a tool of blackmail against its victims. Therefore, consulting the Syrian regime on delivery of aid is a wholly worthless exercise, and, instead, reasonable individuals who can be expected to comply with international law and norms should be the ones consulted about this critical issue. In this matter, some responsibility rests on the shoulders of the Jordanian government which has only to ensure that the OCHA is allowed to deliver relief aid across its border. Despite this, the Jordanian government has shut down all border crossings with Syria since June 2016, even in the face of desperate humanitarian crises and an urgent need for medical treatment for injuries, as we indicated in a statement issued in September 2016, a few days after an attack carried out by the terrorist group ISIS on al Rukban crossing, in which Jordanian soldiers were killed. In addition, the Jordanian authorities have largely restricted the process of bringing aid across the border, forcing relief workers to drop food supplies from the Jordanian side of the border using cranes. This has, obviously, greatly hindered and limited the delivery of relief aid, which has also been irregular and inadequate. The residents we spoke to at the camp told us that the monthly aid they used to receive didn’t last any longer than 15 days.
The Jordanian government shouldn’t punish the families who were displaced through no fault of their own, with thousands of families suffering as a result of the aforementioned ISIS terrorist attack which might have been carried out in the service of certain agendas.

Al Rukban Camp is only one kilometer from the Jordanian borders. Security Council Resolution 2165, adopted in July 2014, allows for delivering cross-borders aid. The OCHA has also stated that it is prepared to deliver aid, but the Jordanian government remains adamant in its refusal. As such, the Jordanian government is responsible for the resultant deaths and illness in light of the resulting dire food shortages.

Since January 2018, approximately 10 months ago, the Jordanian government has given no permission to deliver any aid to al Rukban Camp. A UN statement issued in January talked about delivering a consignment of aid that should be sufficient for 10,000 families, but which might last for no more than a month. This means that no regular relief aid delivery has entered al Rukban Camp via the Jordanian border in nearly 10 months, and the primary reason for this is the Jordanian government’s refusal to give permission.
IV. The Syrian Regime is Blackmailing the Residents of the Camp to Agree to a Degrading Settlement

With the Jordanian government refusing to give permission to the UN office to deliver aid since January 2018, the residents of the camp have had to rely completely on the food supplies that are being smuggled from Syrian regime-held areas, which comes at a hefty cost, resulting in a sharp increase of the prices of all supplies in light of the prevalent unemployment in the camp, leaving residents consequently unable to secure the most basic needs. The medical situation has been worst affected, with severe shortages of medical aid resulting in a scarcity of medications and medical supplies, leading to a worsening situation for the sick, particularly people with chronic diseases and critical cases, most notably women and children. In addition, the only medical facility in the camp is vastly unequipped to deal with the medical needs of the residents.

The deteriorating situation with respect to meeting the residents’ most basic humanitarian needs in recent years, which has become even worse over the past 10 months, has forced thousands of residents to flee the camp. SNHR has learned that a proportion of those people have found themselves forced to go back to areas under the control of the Syrian regime. SNHR estimates that approximately 50,000 still live in al Rukban Camp as of the end of October 2018.

On October 19, 2018, a map of al Rukban Camp was published on the OCHA website which showed an analysis of satellite imagery between October 4 and October 7 of 2018, with the imagery showing a seven percent decrease in the number of tents compared to satellite imagery detected in June 2018.

On September 29, 2018, we learned that a number of prominent figures from the camp had met with officers from Syrian regime forces. An agreement was reached that allowed for the delivery of humanitarian aid to the camp, and the transfer of medical cases to hospitals in Damascus city. In addition, the agreement provided for settling the situation of the males within the military conscription age group or those who are wanted by Syrian regime forces. However, some of the residents we were able to contact have told us that they don’t trust the Syrian regime’s promises and can’t protect their lives from any potential retaliatory acts or from detention should they agree to such a settlement. As such, they refused this proposal. The massive pressure being practiced against those people simply to allow them to secure food and medication for their children might force some of them to agree to these terms.
The Damascus-Baghdad road, which is the only road leading to the camp, was cut off following these residents' refusal, which means that even the supply of smuggled food and medical supplies has been severed. This horrifying siege has resulted in a dire scarcity of food supplies and a further spike in food prices that reached 100%. As such, malnutrition symptoms began appearing in residents of the camp, in addition to the already deteriorating health situation.

Some of the ill people informed us that the UNICEF medical point stopped receiving patients between September 1 and September 22. Additionally, the camp had to endure harsh weather conditions, such as strong wind and storms that uprooted tens of tents.

A table showing the price spike for basic supplies in al Rukban Camp after the Syrian regime shut down the road leading to the camp in October 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Pre–Siege, October 1, 2018</th>
<th>Post–Siege</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bread (one kilogram)</td>
<td>200 Syrian Pounds</td>
<td>350 Syrian Pounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar (one kilogram)</td>
<td>400 Syrian Pounds</td>
<td>1000 Syrian Pounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour (one kilogram)</td>
<td>140 Syrian Pounds</td>
<td>400 Syrian Pounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel (one liter)</td>
<td>500 Syrian Pounds</td>
<td>1300 Syrian Pounds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SNHR documented the death of six individuals, including five children, due to shortages of food and medication in al Rukban Camp between the start of October 2018 and November 3, 2018. In addition, the number of critical cases requiring urgent medical attention, which is impossible without immediate evacuation or delivery of medical aid, is estimated at 50 individuals.

On October 3, 2018, a UN aid envoy of about 78 trucks entered the camp in collaboration with SARC. The envoy carried food and medical supplies, clothes, and medical vaccines for children. Judging from the amounts revealed, the food supplies that entered the camp could last one family for approximately 20 days.
SNHR spoke to Emad Ghali, a resident of al Rukban Camp. Emad told us of the poor living situation in the camp, adding that the aid delivered to the camp monthly didn’t last the residents for more than 15 days. “The situation started to worsen progressively with the start of the year. Everything was scarce - food and medications. The Syrian regime imposed a siege with the start of October, and enforced taxes on food supplies, and prices are now alarming. There are about 12,000 families living here in utterly dire conditions. We are in a prison in the desert with no food or medications. Diseases are starting to spread. We are living with no drainage, and we cannot properly dispose of the waste. The elders and children are suffering from frequent asthma attacks because of the weather conditions in the desert.”

Alaa was displaced from al Qaryatein city in the eastern suburbs of Homs in December 2016 with his wife, being settled in al Rukban camp since then. He told SNHR, “There are no work opportunities in the camp because we live in a big prison. I work every day from the sunrise until the sunset as a shepherd, something I know nothing about, and come back with money that can’t buy even two bags of bread.”

“My wife gave birth to my first-born here, and the burden became heavier, as I need children’s milk and diapers on a daily basis. I am living in a constant fear of my son getting sick because there are no doctors, hospitals, or even hospitals in this place.”

“I am trapped here. All of the areas around the camp are under the control of the Syrian regime which I fled. I can’t leave the camp because I am afraid that I might get arrested, and I can’t cross the borders because they are shut down.”

Shukri Shehab, a nurse who works at the medical facility at the camp, said that they haven’t received any medical aid in nine months which made the task of treating the cases very complicated. He added that they are buying medicines from dealers who smuggle food and medical goods into the camp, but at very steep prices, “Faintness due to malnutrition has become a common thing. We receive cases of fatigue and dizziness from food deficiency every day. Thousands will die of starvation and sickness if the siege goes on for a few more weeks.”

A number of civil assemblies were established in the camp in order to manage it and manage aid distribution before the recent siege. Abu Nashwan, president of the municipality of the camp, told SNHR, “We haven’t seen a good day in the camp. Since the first day people started gathering in the desert, we have been suffering from shortages of everything. We don’t have a complete medical facility. We don’t have a doctor to supervise the cases here. We have no schools in the camp. The children have been without education for years.”

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1 We contacted him via WhatsApp on October 12, 2018
2 We contacted him via WhatsApp on October 12, 2018
3 We contacted him via WhatsApp on October 13, 2018
4 We contacted him via WhatsApp on October 13, 2018
“For a month now, when the siege was imposed and fuel and gas started to run out, people were forced to burn waste for cooking. Most of the burning is done near the tents which spreads contaminated smoke, not to mention the diseases caused by the piles of waste and the lack of drainage. The camp has become a swarm of diseases.”

V. The Residents of the Camp being Coerced into Returning to Areas of Danger Constitutes a War Crime

The residents of al Rukban camp are people who were forcibly displaced in attacks by Syrian regime forces and their allies. There are currently attempts to displace them once again and force them to return to areas controlled by Syrian regime forces, according to statements made by the Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman al Safadi.

“There is a viable road to al Rukban from inside Syria now. The aid can be delivered from inside Syria. Securing the needs of the population is a Syrian-UN responsibility, and not a Jordanian one. He proceeded to add that the Kingdom continues to provide medical aid for anyone from among al Rukban’s residents who can prove their need for medical care and medical assistance, where those are being treated in a Jordanian clinic in collaboration with the UN. Jordan also supplies water from the Jordanian territories for the population. Safadi also revealed that there are Jordanian-American-Russian talks underway to find a drastic solution to al Rukban situation by establishing voluntary conditions for the residents of the camp to return to their cities and towns that have been liberated from the terrorist group ISIS.”

As we stressed earlier, and according to the statements of the UN, the Syrian regime is deliberately impeding the delivery of aids from Damascus to the camp, while the Jordanian government is preventing the UN from delivering aids from Amman to the camp. In addition, most of the families living in the camp have fled in fear of the brutalities of the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies. Pressuring them into returning through starvation and deprivation of medical care in order to force them to go back to areas where their lives will be in danger, whether in the form of arrest, torture, or conscription, constitutes involvement in a war crime given that this pressure leads to the crime of forced displacement. We have documented previously the residents’ rejection of a settlement proposed by the Syrian regime.
VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

• The Syrian regime has impeded the delivery of relief aid sent by the UN from Damascus to al Rukban Camp, leading to a deliberate siege and starvation of civilian residents as a party to a non-international armed conflict. This has taken the form of collective punishment. According to the international humanitarian law, these acts constitute a war crime.

• The Syrian regime has, beyond any doubt, violated all the Security Council Resolutions on siege – Resolution 2139, adopted on February 22, 2014; Resolution 2165, adopted on July 14, 2014; Resolution 2191; adopted on December 17, 2014; and Resolution 2268, adopted on February 26, 2016.

• Syrian regime forces have practiced the crime of displacement in a systematic, widespread, and organized manner against civilian residents in blatant violation of the Geneva Conventions. These acts constitute a crime against humanity according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. We have recorded no measures taken by those forces to secure shelter, medical care, or food for the displaced civilians.

• The Jordanian government has repeatedly refused the many requests made by the UN to deliver aid to 50,000 individuals in al Rukban Camp which qualifies as contributing to the process of starving and punishing those individuals, and represents the imposition of massive pressure on them to surrender to the Syrian regime and involuntarily return to the areas under its control, putting their lives in serious danger.

Recommendations

**Jordanian government**

• Allow the UN to deliver aids to 50,000 individuals in al Rukban Camp in a continued and ongoing manner.

• Facilitate passage through the Jordanian borders for roughly 50 seriously sick individuals whose lives might end at any moment.

• Bear the moral and legal responsibility of the people displaced on the Jordanian borders and refrain from contributing to force them to return to areas where their lives will be in danger.

**Friends of Syria Group**

• Call on the Jordanian government to allow the UN to deliver relief aid through its borders.

• Work on thwarting the Russian plans to disassemble the camp and force its residents to return to the Syrian regime in order to subject the displaced men to conscription.
Security Council
• Act to save the lives of 50,000 Syrian citizens.

OHCHR
• Release a report that documents the violations against the residents of al Rukban Camp, and hold the parties responsible for the lives of the Syrian people in that area.

United Nations General Assembly
• Work to establish a special international tribunal similar to the establishment of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism in order to hold all the criminals involved in committing crimes against the Syrian people to account.

Donor states and the OCHA
• Apply pressure on the Syrian regime and the Jordanian government in the media and in a political context in order to ensure they agree to a continued delivery of relief aid, and use the platform of the Security Council to achieve this objective.

UN special envoy to Syria
• Shed light on this catastrophe in his next briefing before the Security Council, and explicitly and specifically name the people responsible.

Acknowledgment and Condolences
We wish to express our most heartfelt and gratitude to the local residents and activists who effectively contributed to this report.