

SACD Briefing

April 2019

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

The current deterioration of the humanitarian situation at the Rukban camp, housing some 40 000 Syrians, started earlier this year. On January 9, the Jordanian government started building a barbed wire fence around the camp.

This action was followed a month later by the entry of the last humanitarian aid convoy to the camp on the 6th of February (the previous one was on the 4th of November 2018). The convoy stayed in the camp for nine days, but the humanitarian situation by then was so dire that the WFP announced on the 9th of February that the situation is "deteriorating sharply." On February 17, the Russian government announced that they would be implementing "humanitarian corridors" out of Rukban to Assad-held territory. On February 19, these opened. Smuggling routes in and out of the camp were restricted the night before. The hasty move was taken to pre-empt the release of a UNHCR intentions survey conducted by SARC in the camp the week prior, when the first UN convoy since late 2018 had reached the area with desperately needed humanitarian aid. The full results of the survey have not been released, but they suggested that more than 80% of Rukban residents wished to return home (a figure in line with similar surveys everywhere) but all of those respondents expressed significant concerns about their security at place of return and wanted guarantees for safe and dignified return, the likes of which have not been secured to those who have returned to regime-held areas to date.

On March 24, the first group of 361 residents returnees from Rukban reached the so-called 'IDP shelters' in Homs, according to the UN. According to the UN, as of April 11 1,726 people had left Rukban area and reached Homs in three groups. On the same date, 760 of them were currently in three shelters in Homs city, 966 women, children and elderly had left the shelters. The main destination of those who left the shelters, were the areas of Hassya, Maskane and Qaryatein.

Local sources suggested to SACD that the total number of refugees that left the camp over the last two months (March and April) is approximately 4,000, including the most recent wave of evacuated people that got out few days ago (including around 800-1000 in the last evacuation).

SACD Briefing

April 2019

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

All refugees that agreed to evacuate the Rukban camp so far have done so due to two main factors:

- Unbearable living conditions due to the original harsh situation of the camp, but mainly as a direct effect of the Russia/Regime siege over the last 3 months approximately.
- Direct threats from the regime and the Russians to the people of the camp asserting that the camp will be “liquidated” in the next couple of weeks.

On the 3rd of April another meeting between representatives of the Rukban camp from one side, and the regime and the Russians from the other side took place near Al-Tanaf.

The camp representatives asked for an evacuation towards the north of Syria or to lift the siege imposed on the camp, but the regime and the Russians refused both.

The UN has been suggesting that guarantees for safe return have been secured. On April 11, the UN's senior humanitarian advisor stated that: “We are provided with some guarantees, of course from the co-chair here, mainly the Russian Federation, that people are treated very well, and that people are getting humanitarian assistance provided by the Government of Syria. We got also some guarantees, without being able to verify anything, that there won't be any persecutions or any security issues for them to return there.” SACD refutes this statement. According to those in Rukban camp and those who have been returned to Homs, no guarantees of any form or shape have been given to the forced returnees from Rukban, not from the regime or the Russians.

According to the UN, before returning, Rukban residents must:

- Submit requests to leave the area to the government of Syria. Security services check names which takes 10-20 days.
- Men need to undergo “reconciliation” and supposedly receive six months of amnesty from military service.

The evacuated refugees are not (to their knowledge) targeted by the regime and don't have any pending security issues and had their names for evacuating the camp long time ago but were always scared of moving to regime-held areas, but the dire living circumstances forced them to take a risk. The lists of

SACD Briefing

April 2019

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

people wanting to go back to their homes is written through the "reconciliation" committees (a while ago) and then reviewed individually by the regime to decide who is allowed to go back.

Evacuated refugees have been distributed in shelters over the following locations:

- School in Deir Balba
- School in Baba Amr
- Der Balba and Bayada shelters (north-east Homs neighbourhoods) and Hasya.

Humanitarian aid access during the entire return process from Rukban is severely limited. The UN has no access at any stage of the process. SARC have a small presence at the point where people leave the camp. In the so-called shelters, the Ministry of Health and SACR have a small amount of access for specific medical interventions. This work is supported by the WHO but the WHO have no access.

All evacuated refugees went through a very thorough a process of search and interrogation.

Interrogation with evacuated refugees is carried out by Russian officials and Assad regime security officers. Interrogated returnees are forced to call their relatives and friends that remained in the camp and tell them that "things are fine, treatment is good, and you should all come back."

Women and children are separated from men/young people for no apparent reason, a practice which has been seen in other areas of Syria. Those released from the shelters so far are mainly women and children. In most cases women are released of 24 hours of being kept in the shelter and interrogated.

Shelters suffer random raids by regime security forces and "shabiha" looking for specific people (mainly male).

Significant physical security threats are being reported from those in the shelters. Reports of people being shot at and injured by regime forces have been reported, specifically in the Baba Amr school where there are was a confirmed incident of a boy 12 years old being shot and wounded in his arm (later taken for treatment).

SACD Briefing

April 2019

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

Other reports indicate that two young people were shot at and killed by regime forces in the school (shelter) in Deir Balba but no confirmation of their names. Both victims presumed killed are from the "Aboura" family.

There are further reports of the killing of three young men in the shelter in Bab Amr on Wednesday last week. SACD have been trying to confirm veracity of these incidents, but there is significant information and access restrictions faced by those leaving the shelters. The reports from Bab Amr suggest the men were killed for defending a woman being attacked by guards in the shelter and that all witnesses were threatened into silence.

Evacuated refugees are originally from Tudmor (Palmyra) city (most of them), the rural area of Palmyra, Qariatein Jabal Amour, and Maheen.

Evacuated refugees from Maheen and Qariatein were allowed to go back to their original areas only if a "guarantor" close to the regime "vouched" for them or took "responsibility". In the case of Maheen, a man from the family "Harb" and with ties to the regime is playing the role of the "guarantor".

Evacuated refugees from other areas (mainly Tudmor) were not allowed back into their original locations. Instead, they have been distributed amongst schools in Baba Amr and Deir Balba, and other locations.

Although the regime is using the excuse of "re-establishing services" in Tudmor for not allowing people to go back to their homes, but in reality the city of Tudomr and some of its surroundings is a "military zone" under the control of pro-Iranian militias (mainly Afghanis) that are living in the city and looting private properties.

Plight of Rukban returnees confirms SACD's earlier warnings Ever since Russia issued the statement in February in which it declared its intention to dismantle Rukban camp and force the people trapped there to return to Assad-held areas, Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity warned of the scenario we see unfolding these days. In direct response, on the 27th February, we warned that Syrians displaced to Rukban camp are facing unbearable living conditions since 19 February, when Russia and Assad's regime closed all access routes to the camp and stopped the most basic supplies, even those that were smuggled in, from reaching the camp. We warned that this was done in order to pressure the displaced people to use their so-called "humanitarian corridors" to return

SACD Briefing

April 2019

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

to the regime-controlled areas of Syria. And we warned that what awaits them there has been illustrated by the fate of people who trusted Russian guarantees in the past and returned from camps in Lebanon and elsewhere or decided to stay in their areas under the so called "reconciliation" agreements.

We repeated these warnings in a direct meeting with the EU officials on the 4th of March in Brussels, when our delegation informed the EU Mashreq/Maghreb Working Party that there is ample evidence of hundreds of people being detained upon return, of mass arrests and forced conscriptions, of people being disappeared after inquiring about their properties being illegally seized. Under such circumstances, our delegation warned, no displaced Syrian should be forced to return in the way we are witnessing these days with the attempts at forced return of our brothers and sisters in the Rukban camp.

We issued numerous subsequent warnings to amplify the voices of the displaced from the camp, whose representatives in March wrote directly to the EU, the United States and the Secretary General of the United Nations, warning of the terrible conditions resulting from the siege imposed by Russia and the Assad regime and demanding safe passage to the north Syria. Their calls went unanswered.

On March 21, the Russian MFA issued a statement calling for the "liquidation" of the Rukban camp situation, and described the camp in a tweet as a "source of violence, crime and infections".

Such tweet was called out by the SACD and the Russian MFA had to delete and replace it with a more PR savvy statement, but it really reflected the true nature of Russia's vision towards the Rukban camp in particular and the refugees' issue in general.

It is now clear that the inhumane siege of the Rukban camp by the Assad regime and Russia - which resulted in deaths of Syrians trapped there, including children - had the sole goal of subjecting the displaced people of the Rukban camp to a forced return to regime-held areas.

We have repeatedly warned that for many, especially men and boys, this amounts to being sentenced to interrogation, forced recruitment, torture and death. And now the world is witnessing what we warned against: the displaced people from Rukban forced to move to Assad-held areas facing separation

SACD Briefing

April 2019

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

of men and boys from women and children, so that men and boys can be “interrogated”. Do we need to remind that the last time such separation of the displaced people happened under the UN watch was in the case of Srebrenica, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a terrifying parallel, the displaced from Rukban who have been remanded in Assad’s “IDP shelters” are facing harassment, arbitrary arrest, torture and forced conscription into the Assad regime army where Syrians are forced to kill other Syrians against their will, and in some cases they are facing death, as it has been reported from Bab Amr and Deir Balba.

This is the reality in all the areas that have entered the so-called “reconciliation agreements” under supposed Russian guarantees, and this is the fate of large number of displaced people who went back to regime-held areas.

We believe that the real motive of Russia and the regime is to make Rukban a successful model of the forced return policy. This would in turn establish a dangerous precedent that would be applied in other countries such as Lebanon, where refugees are already under extreme pressure to be forced to return to regime-held. This precedent must not be set.

We call on the UNHCR to act immediately to stop the forced return from Rukban and respect the demands of the displaced not to be returned to Assad-held areas if conditions for their safety and dignity do not exist, which they have clearly communicated to the United Nations in the recent survey with some 3,000 residents of the camp. Instead, the UNHCR must act to secure safe passage and repatriate displaced people from Rukban camp to areas of their choice.

Any participation by the United Nations or any international actor in implementing the Assad regime plans regarding Rukban camp situation (even under Russian “guarantees”) is the equivalent of directly taking part in killing and imprisoning Syrian civilians and sending them into forced recruitment to become cannon fodder in the ongoing war.

There is not a shred of doubt at this point in time, and after having carefully examined the Assad regime and his Russian allies’ track record on dealing with the displaced and refugees who were misled or forced to return to their areas or remained in them under the so-call “reconciliation” agreements, that there

SACD Briefing

April 2019

Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death

cannot be any talk about a safe return for the displaced and refugees to Assad-held areas.

A truly voluntary, safe and dignified return has to be preceded by the release of all prisoners, the establishment of a true political solution with the relevant international guarantees and the necessary monitoring mechanisms to ensure its implementation.

Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity is a movement established by the people of Syria for the people of Syria. It has no political affiliation. Through policy advice, advocacy and dialogue, it works to promote and secure the rights of refugees and IDPs from Syria, representing their views and concerns to get their voices heard. It embodies the diversity of the country's population, regardless of social class, gender or religious confession. It fights against premature or forced return. It considers that a movement for dignified return, based on recognition of the rights of the displaced citizens of Syria, is central to any efforts to end the conflict and assist in Syria's recovery.