

Government forces siege: Starvation fears for Aleppo as bomb kills dozens in north Syria

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Hundreds of thousands face running out of food in besieged city, while Isis launches bloody attack in border town of Qamishli.

An Islamic State truck bomb has killed nearly 50 people in north Syria, and aid groups have warned that hundreds of thousands of civilians face starvation in Aleppo as government forces tighten a siege on the city.

Roads into Aleppo, Syria's biggest city before the war, had already been virtually impassible since early July when troops loyal to the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, moved within firing range of the last supply corridor.

Those forces are now in full control of the road, the state Sana news agency reported, the day after texts were sent asking residents of rebel-held areas to leave and urging fighters to lay down their weapons.

"Today there is no way at all to bring anything into Aleppo," Rami Abdulrahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told Reuters.

Government troops have repeatedly used sieges to help starve rebel-held cities into submission. Human rights groups fear the tactic will be deployed in Aleppo, where up to 300,000 people are living in areas under rebel control.

Food will run out within weeks, a group of 24 aid agencies working on the ground warned [1], and regime bombing raids have targeted several of the few remaining working hospitals in those parts of the city.

"Supplies are quickly running out and women, children and men will begin to starve unless the armed parties on the ground are made to open the way for humanitarian aid," said Save the Children's Syria director, Sonya Khush.

"The parties responsible for this are in the meantime feeling bolder in committing their violations," she added, warning that bombing raids had targeted civilian infrastructure and supplies.

A food warehouse with almost 10,000 parcels was destroyed, and fuel needed to power medical facilities and water pumps was running dangerously low, the charities warned, and Unicef said medical facilities were also targeted [2].

"Four hospitals in eastern Aleppo city ... and a blood bank were reportedly hit several times on 23 and 24 July disrupting key life-saving health," the UN agency said. "Health facilities in Syria are being attacked with alarming ferocity."

There were two bombing raids in under 12 hours on the only working paediatric hospital in the city. A two-day-old baby was among the casualties.

Earlier this week, the United Nations called for regular 48-hour ceasefires in the city to allow food and other assistance in [3], amid rising concern about the plight of civilians.

On Wednesday, the US military announced that it was launching a formal investigation into an airstrike on 19 July in which scores of people are thought to have been killed. The death toll in an attack near the besieged city of Manbij remains disputed but the UK-based monitoring group Airwars has concluded that at least 74 people died.

The UN's top Syria envoy also said this week that it hoped to restart soon intermittent peace talks aimed at ending the five-year war. They collapsed in April, partly because of intensifying violence around Aleppo.

The scale and intensity of the fighting have proved a huge challenge for aid groups, often forced to work through intermediaries in areas that are extremely dangerous to operate in even for experienced organisations

Fears of a looming humanitarian disaster in Aleppo come as the US revealed it had suspended more \$200m (£150m) of aid projects, providing food, shelter and medical support to Syrians, because of corruption fears [4].

The Isis truck bomb launched a few hundred miles east of Aleppo, in the strategic border town of Qamishli, was the bloodiest attack yet on a town that has been a frequent target for Isis militants.

Wednesday's explosion was so powerful it shattered windows and caused minor injuries inside Turkey. Video footage showed people fleeing blazing rubble before a second explosion, reportedly from a fuel tank that caught fire, sent them diving for cover.

Qamishli is under joint control of Syrian government forces and Kurdish fighters, and Isis said the truck bomb targeted Kurdish military offices. Kurdish forces are leading the ground campaign against Isis further west, currently focused on a push for the city of Manbij.

Suleiman Youssef, a writer and Qamishli resident, said that he heard the first explosion from a few miles away. He told AP the blasts levelled several buildings to the ground, and that many people were trapped under the rubble.

The predominantly Kurdish, US-backed Syria Democratic Forces has been the main force fighting Isis in northern Syria. It has captured significant territory from the extremists in the past two years.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/27/dozens-dead-in-syria-bomb-blast-qamishli>

Bombarded Aleppo lives in fear of siege and starvation

As airstrikes rage on, aid workers on the ground expect blockades at any moment and have tried to prepare, but know they can't meet everyone's needs and have lost faith in the support promised by international agencies.

The bombs are falling so fast in Aleppo now that often rescuers don't have time to reach victims between blasts. If the deadly explosions that struck on just one day last week had been evenly spaced, they would have struck every other minute around the clock.

"Sometimes there are so many airstrikes, we are just waiting and waiting at our headquarters, and the jets don't leave the skies," says Abdulrahman Alhassan, a 29-year-old former bank engineer from the city who coordinates "white helmet" rescue teams in the city.

"When at last we can't see any more, we have to rush to all the sites to rescue people and evacuate them at once," he said. On Friday, the group counted 900 airstrikes by government forces and their Russian backers, apparently throwing every weapon they have at the already devastated city.

Aid groups and people still inside the city believe the barrage is preparing the way for a blockade. The main supply line north of Aleppo has already been cut, and it will not take long before shortages bite in a ruined, desperate city.

"The Russian airstrikes are trying to completely destroy the area before they get on the ground and start the siege," said Saad, a 35-year-old aid worker who chose to stay on and is now trapped inside the city. He says the bombing campaign was hitting both morale and food supplies.

"In the last three days, they attacked public markets," he told the Observer by phone. "Let's say the psychological state is worsening because of the possibility of a siege; people are really terrified. People are too poor to prepare. They live on bread we were distributing to them. Now there is no way to supply this bread and to help them."

Food prices are already going up, he said, and people are afraid that a siege could even cut off water. "When the roads are cut, we won't have fuel, which means no generators, no electricity and no water, because we are using wells that need generators to pump it up."

As many as 100,000 people have fled north towards the Turkish border, to escape the bombs and impending siege, but hundreds of thousands of others are still in rebel-held parts of the city and its immediate suburbs. Some of them are trapped because they are too poor, while others have simply given up trying to outrun a war that has raged back and forth across their country for years.

"People have lost hope because they don't have money to get out, or a safe place to go to if they do leave. Other areas in Syria are also under bombardment and, if they try to go to Turkey, the border is closed," said Munier Mustafa, head of the White Helmets in Aleppo. "So they think, 'we can die in our own homes, we don't need to go to other places to die'."

His teams are using their rescue vehicles to evacuate civilians where they can, but the military advance is so rapid they, too, are worried the effort might be pointless. "These places where we move people are safe today compared to Aleppo, but we don't know about tomorrow." Like many rescue and aid workers who have chosen to stay in the city, he has shrugged off pleas to escape while he can. "I myself face pressure from my family to leave because of the bombing, everything they are hearing every hour. But we are still here because we can still help, and only God can help us."

The Syrian Civil Defence, as the White Helmets are formally known, began stockpiling for a possible siege when troops loyal to Bashar al-Assad made rapid advances towards areas that have been opposition strongholds for years.

Regime forces have often used blockades in the war and, while taking Aleppo now would be a highly symbolic victory for the regime, it would also require street-by-street fighting, which effectively neutralises the advantage of Russian air support. A blockade would aim to starve rebel forces and their civilian supporters into submission.

“Psychologically, we are prepared, we saw it coming, but we still need more help from the world; we cannot meet everyone’s needs,” Mustafa said, adding that their supplies are only enough for the rescue teams to keep working.

“We have specific amounts of fuel, equipment, but it is still limited, we can only carry on like this for a few weeks,” he said. “We can’t secure the lives of those people under siege for a long time, this is beyond our abilities.”

The work they can do, digging people from rubble after attacks and administering basic first aid, has got far deadlier in recent weeks as the pace and nature of airstrikes escalated.

“The type of weapons is different in recent days. Russian airstrikes are launching rockets that destroy a complete area, not just a building. So many people died under the debris,” said Ahmed, an NGO worker north of Aleppo who didn’t want to give his family name. There are also far more planes, pounding tiny areas. “I witnessed up to nine planes at once in a raid,” he said. “I am trying to move my family because of the airstrikes, as the place where they live was bombarded more than 35 times in one hour.”

His sister and two children were injured and their house badly damaged, but they survived because the bombs targeted the house next door. They are now living in a car near the border, hoping to cross, although guards turned down a \$1,000 bribe he offered.

In his home village, where just a week ago things were almost normal – food and bread for sale – the situation is even more grim. “In my area, many families are living under the trees, and in the streets, under the rain. Last night and today [it has rained heavily], so they are outdoors and have no money to get any transportation.”

To get to the border from his town costs around £25, but that is an impossible sum for most residents, many of whom have already fled two or three times. “These people have nothing.”

“The Syrian people are just victims of the hypocrisy and lies of the international community. They always say we are supporting Syrians and help, but nothing happens. We are killed in massive numbers, but no one cares,” Ahmed said.

They feel abandoned by the international community, which had promised peace talks in a week that has brought devastation instead.

Many in the city no longer even want to talk about their desperate situation, convinced the world no longer reads or cares, said Alhassan, the rescue worker. “We spoke so many times and don’t see any benefits – it just doesn’t make sense, none of them are helping us. They are just watching and writing articles but, in the end, no one stands up with us.”

Aleppo was Syria’s largest city before the civil war, an industrial and cultural hub with a rich history. It has been an opposition stronghold since the early months of the conflict. Its capture would be a

strategic and symbolic victory for the Syrian government, and would deprive the opposition of one of its major bargaining chips in any peace talks.

Has Syrian president Bashar al-Assad effectively won the war?

No. Russia's decision to intervene more aggressively in the war has played a critical role in turning the tide of fighting in favour of the government's forces. They have taken swaths of territory, and the loss of areas round Aleppo is a big blow to opposition morale.

But thousands of opposition fighters have flooded into the city promising to defend it to the death. Many other areas are still under opposition control and, even if Assad continues to advance, he will one day have to take on Isis.

Does this mean the end of the peace process?

Peace talks were suspended earlier this month, just days after they officially began. Although UN envoy Staffan de Mistura insists they will restart, it is hard to see how they can make headway.

Military gains by government troops mean they have little incentive to come to the table, while many opposition figures think the government was acting in bad faith, using talks to play for time while pushing its military advantage.

What impact will this have on the refugee crisis in Europe?

Around 100,000 people are believed to be gathered near the Turkish border, seeking to cross. At present, Ankara has ruled that out, but if already dire conditions deteriorate, or there are attacks on camps inside the border, political pressure might force Turkey to open the border.

If that happens, some will probably attempt to travel to Europe, although after years inside Syria, few are likely to have the funds to pay for the trip.

What about Isis?

Russia has said its attacks target 'terrorists', but in practice its bombing campaigns have focused far more closely on Assad's diverse enemies than on Isis, which in some areas is fighting the regime's enemies.

Assad is unlikely to take on the group in any serious way until he has consolidated power in many other parts of the country, but he will not be able to put it off indefinitely.

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* The Guardian. Saturday 6 February 2016 20.52 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/06/aleppo-under-bombardment-fears-siege-and-starvation>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2016-07-26/nearly-400000-civilians-cut-aid-syrian-cities-aleppo-and-manbij>

[2] http://www.unicef.org/media/media_92027.html

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/25/un-calls-for-ceasefires-to-ease-civilians-despair-in-aleppo>

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/suspecting-fraud-us-suspends-some-syrian-aid-programs/2016/07/26/9ad4c600-5285-11e6-88eb-7dda4e2f2aec_story.html