



Our Lives Under Russian Attack A Special Report on The Northern Countryside of Aleppo

The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC)

March 2016

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Introduction:

With a population of about one million people, the northern countryside of Aleppo accounts for around 5,000 sq km of the governorate's total area and consists of several major cities, towns and villages, the largest of which are Azaz, Tell Rifaat, Marea and Afrin.

The area has a strategic significance due to its proximity to the international highway, a logistical supply route connecting Aleppo and Turkey. However, it later became of key importance while acting as the sole road leading out from opposition-controlled areas in Aleppo.

On 19 July 2012, armed factions opposed to the Assad regime seized the strategic city of Azaz, consequently becoming the first city to be liberated from Syrian government control. Following its capture, the armed opposition continued its push for control of other cities and towns in Aleppo's northern districts, the last offensive resulted in the capture of the checkpoint at Anadan city on 1 August 2012, enabling opposition forces to establish full control over the area, in exception for the towns of Nubul and Zahraa.

By November 2015, Syrian government forces and allied militias initiated – under Russian air cover – several widespread, indiscriminate and deliberate attacks on the northern countryside of Aleppo. These attacks mainly targeted civilians and their property in the local cities and towns forcing them to flee the area. Hundreds of civilians were killed or injured in the assaults, and a state of panic ensued as emergency response units struggled to cope with limited medical supplies and manpower, and with the risks of accessing the areas under shelling. This was worsened by the fact that emergency personnel, as well as hospitals, were also targeted with missiles, barrel bombs, as well as cluster and vacuum munitions. Amnesty International has commented on the shelling of hospitals in the northern countryside of Aleppo, and Medecins Sans Frontier (MSF) issued a report on the bombing of one of the field hospitals they support in the area.

Among the many violations which were included in previous [reports](#) on Russian attacks inside Syria, The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) has monitored grave violations regarding Russia's targeting of vital facilities.

One major crisis which resulted from these attacks was the mass displacement of the local population in the targeted areas. Internal displacement is one of the greatest threats faced by Syrians as the destinations they escape to are often no less dangerous than where they left. Moreover, Turkish authorities continue to close their borders to Syrian refugees fleeing the areas controlled by the Islamic State group (ISIS) fearing the atrocities of the group's members and institutions. Regime-controlled areas similarly pose a significant threat to residents as government forces, along with the militias that support them, feel antipathy towards locals in areas that witnessed massive anti-Assad protests. Furthermore, males in these areas are often detained or forced to fight on battlefields alongside the government forces.

Methodology and Challenges

The findings of this report are based on testimonies and statements of eyewitnesses and people in direct contact with the victims. The report adhered to the objectivity principles required when monitoring violations committed by any party regardless of their political, national, religious, sectarian or ideological affiliation.

It covers the military strikes and attacks launched by Syrian government forces and the Russian air force on civilian locations and property in the northern countryside of Aleppo from 1 November 2015 until 15 February 2016.

The methodology employed by VDC to record the military operations enabled it to document 19 strikes and attacks along with verified lists of the civilian victims.

This report excludes all targets that were confirmed to be of a military nature.

VDC's field researchers could neither confirm or deny dozens of attacks that reportedly claimed the lives of many civilians due to the difficulty in contacting multiple sources to confirm the claims. However, many of these attacks have been reported by local media offices, mentioned in news reports and posted on social media websites.

A number of challenges faced while preparing this report resulted from a lack of information in the targeted areas. This was due to a number of factors, including the safety risks to researchers while moving from one area to another and a complete lack of power and internet connection. In addition, the ongoing attacks also prompted many of VDC's sources to regularly relocate to avoid being targeted.

The Attacks

The majority of the attacks described herein were carried out by the Russian air force with support from Syrian government ground forces and allied militias. In other areas, the attacks were launched by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

On 7 October 2015, Russian warplanes launched an airstrike on Darat Izza city in the northern countryside of Aleppo with several long-range missiles. This assault was the beginning of series of almost daily attacks on public infrastructure and facilities in the area, [which killed 632 people including 613 civilians](#).

The severity of Russian attacks escalated until 1 November 2015, when Kurdish armed groups controlling the towns of Maryamin, Anab and Afrin began to advance towards Ayn Daqna village, 2 km north of the Menagh Military Airbase. The capture of Ayn Daqna paved the way for Kurdish forces to take the town of Kaljibrin, and then to encircle and blockade the village of Marea from all directions.

On 27 January 2016, a Russian airstrike on the hospital of Anadan city rendered the facility out of service. On 1 February 2016, Syrian government forces located in Dweir Zeitoun village initiated an attack on the area in an attempt to advance towards the towns of Tell Jabin, Hardatnin, Ratyan, Marasta al-Khan, Masqaan, Ihras, Tamoura and Matale' al-Tamoura. The attack was supported by intense aerial bombardment from Russian warplanes on the towns of Anadan, Haritan, Kafr Hamra and Menagh.

Majed Abdul Nour, a resident of Ratyan city, who became stranded on the front lines between the armed opposition and Syrian government forces revealed:

“During a four-day period, while the clashes continued with the government forces, the Russian warplanes launched more than 200 airstrikes with guided missiles and cluster bombs, 100 of which were on Ratyan. The Russians were paving the way for the government forces as they began their attacks on the city two months prior to the regime’s military operation.

Then Abu Nour added

“The Russian warplanes greatly destroyed the northern countryside of Aleppo. For example, Anadan town was leveled to the ground. They also committed massacres against civilians. They first targeted the fronts, and when the ground attack began, they targeted the back lines where the civilians are in an attempt to facilitate the access of the government forces and militias without resistance.”

On 2 February 2016, Russian fighter jets shelled Anadan Charity Hospital and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent team that was there to attend to the injured. Two team members were killed in the attack: Abdul Kareem Kheir Allal and Mouhammad Saleh Barnaba

Yaseen Abu Raed, a resident of Anadan city, said of the attack:

“Anadan Charity Hospital is an important medical facility in the northern countryside of Aleppo and doctors of all specializations worked there. But it was targeted several times by the Russian warplanes, the first of which was on 27 January 2016, when a vacuum missile struck it, inflicting great damage to the facility and to the medical equipment inside. It also killed one of the doctors. The hospital (continued to function but) was partially out of service.

“Following these attacks, Russian warplanes launched another airstrike on the same facility on 2 February, injuring many medical team members and destroying the remaining parts of the hospital. Meanwhile, clashes between government forces and the armed opposition groups continued and the shelling on the northern countryside of Aleppo intensified.”



Removing the Russian cluster bombs in Anadan city, 31 January 2016. Source: Ahmad al-Reej

The Russian air force launched more than 30 airstrikes between 1-4 February 2016, claiming the lives of 43 civilians. On 4 February, Syrian government forces established full control over the villages of Tall Jabin, Ratyan, Marasta al-Khan, Masqaan, Ihras, Tamoura and Matalé' Tamoura, thereby blocking all the roads connecting the northern, eastern and western countryside of Aleppo.

Since 7 October 2015, Russian warplanes have consistently targeted northern Aleppo's infrastructure and vital facilities, including three factories, several hospitals, a bakery, two convoys of trucks loaded with food supplies, several main roads for transportation and trade, a relief office, a center for special needs, as well as several mosques and residential buildings.

Ahmad al-Khateeb, a resident of Masqaan city and member of the Aleppo Media Center, said:

"The Russian airstrikes focused on the vital institutions as three hospitals in the northern countryside of Aleppo were shelled, including facilities in Anadan, Haritan and Azaz. Furthermore, Atarib bakery, the textile factory, the pharmaceutical factory and the cotton factory in Haritan were also targeted. The Russian warplanes did not spare the civilian neighborhoods either, as they destroyed entire districts and villages like Masqaan, Mayer and Ratyan."

13 November 2015: Attack on ASIA Pharmaceutical Industries Factory, Haritan City

At 5:00 am on Friday, 13 November, Russian fighter jets launched airstrikes on the ASIA Pharmaceutical Industries factory in the northern countryside of Aleppo, targeting it with five vacuum missiles and destroying much of the building along with the machinery inside. Luckily, no casualties were reported. This factory is one of the biggest factories in the governorate of Aleppo, and produces medicine which is difficult to find in opposition-controlled areas, such as hormonal and the neural drugs



Fires in ASIA Pharmaceutical factory following Russian airstrikes, 13 November 2015. Source: Civil Defense in Haritan City.

According to [Civil Defense teams in Haritan city](#), three airstrikes were launched by the Russian warplanes on the ASIA Pharmaceutical factory, destroying most of the facility and all the equipment and raw materials inside. The extent of the destruction placed the factory out of service.

Abdullah al-Halabi, a resident of Haritan city, told VDC interviewers:

“The factory was targeted with five highly explosive missiles that led to a massive explosion and heavy damage,”

adding that the

“shelling was not the first of its kind as the Russian fighter jets have targeted several facilities in the area before.”

The witness stressed that he believed the attacks were carried out by Russian warplanes because they usually fly in groups and launch several attacks in a single sortie, while Syrian government warplanes fly individually, launch one attack then fly away.

17 November 2015: Attack on Atlas Cotton Factory, Hayyan

On Tuesday, 17 November, Russian warplanes targeted the Atlas Cotton Factory with a long-range surface-to-surface ballistic missile killing one of the workers, [Khaled Hawa, 35](#), and another [unidentified civilian](#). The attack caused fires to break out in the nearby cotton storehouses while also destroying several neighboring houses.



Atlas Cotton Factory, 17 November 2015

20 November 2015: Attack on the Textile Factory, Hayyan

Later that week, the northern suburb of Hayyan was shelled with several long-range missiles which struck the town's western neighborhoods. The Kalas Factory for Textile Industries was hit in the attack, with fire destroying much of the factory's storehouses. Luckily, no casualties were reported. Local activists posted [a video](#) showing the extent of the damage shortly after the attack.



Kalas Factory for Textile Industries, 20 November 2015. Source: Haritan Media Office.

25 November 2015: Attack on Relief Office, Azaz City

In the afternoon of Wednesday, 25 November, Russian warplanes targeted a relief office housing humanitarian aid for displaced people. According to eyewitness Mouhammad Hanzal, the shelling targeted the relief office located at Azaz Roundabout near the city's grand mosque, which is purely a civilian area with no military presence.

The Russian shelling destroyed the office and killed four civilians. VDC was able to confirm the victims' names: Mouhammad Abdul Ghani Darweesh, Hussein Hasan al-Khalaf, Shadi Khaled Sulaiman and Ammar al-Mousa.

26 November 2015: Attack on Road Between Azaz City and Bab al-Salama

At approximately 11:30 am on Thursday, 26 November, Russian warplanes targeted the road to Bab al-Salama Crossing with a vacuum missile. According to Mouhammad Hanzal (who also witnessed the previous day's attack) the bombing struck about one kilometer from the gate of the crossing.

The shelling targeted ten trucks loaded with food supplies travelling from Turkey, setting fire to the convoy and severely injuring about fifteen people. Local activists posted [a video](#) showing the aftermath of the shelling and [another](#) of the moments shortly after the attack.

Activist Abdul Kader Abu Yousef said of the assault:

“Three Russian fighter jets launched intense airstrikes on Azaz and Anadan in Syria's north on Wednesday, 26 November 2015. The airstrikes targeted a main garage for trucks in the northern suburbs of Aleppo in addition to a relief office.”

He added that:

“At this garage, there is the office which supervises the trucks that load the relief aid and supplies coming from Turkey to Syria, as well as food supplies and merchandise that reach the opposition-held areas. There is no military post, munition storehouse or military vehicles were located in the garage or nearby



Truck convoy targeted by Russian warplanes, 26 November 2015.

29 November 2015: Attack on the Road Between Azaz City and Bab al-Salama

On Sunday, 29 November, Russian fighter jets launched several airstrikes on Azaz city, specifically on the road connecting the city with the border crossing of Bab al-Salama. Three highly explosive vacuum rockets struck a garage for cargo cars and trucks as well as a gas station, causing the station and its fuel tanks to explode.



Extinguishing the fires at Bab al-Salama Crossing. Source: Azaz Local Council.

The attack killed five civilians, three names of whom were confirmed by the VDC: Ahmad Matar al-Zaghir, Eleiwi Mouhammad al-Sanad, Bilal al-Daqqa, in addition to two other victims (unidentifiable due to severe charring). Furthermore, ten people were also injured in the attack and several trucks carrying goods were set alight in the blaze.

Civil Defense workers responding to the Bab al-Salama Crossing attack reported that several victims were moved to nearby field hospitals, while those with critical injuries were treated in Turkish hospitals over the border.

A source in the Azaz Local Council stated that the warplanes targeted the garage office and a mill belonging to the Transitional Government causing fires and damage to property.

VDC has described the Russian attacks and their characteristics by which they are distinguished in detail in a [previous report](#).



Moments after the garage office and the mill in Azaz city were targeted by Russian warplanes. Source: Azaz Local Council

Mouhammad Hanzal, a resident of Azaz city, told VDC interviewers about the attacks which took place on that day:

“The Russian fighter jets launched two airstrikes on Azaz city; the first of which was at 6:30 pm and targeted the freight office at the entrance of the city, while the second, which took place few minutes later, targeted the truck garage. We can identify the Russian warplanes because they linger for longer over the target area compared to the Syrian planes.

Hanzal added

“The two targets are about three kilometers away from each other. The first air strike killed a worker at the freight office while the second, which was the fiercest, led to dozens of injuries and set fire to many trucks. This place has never been targeted before by Syrian warplanes because of its close proximity to Turkey.”

Elaborating on how residents were able to identify the Russian jets from those of the Syrian armed forces, Hanzal said:

“What distinguishes the Russian warplanes the most is that their attacks occur suddenly and without any sound warning of the jet fighter. Furthermore, the sound of the missiles are louder and the intensity of the explosions are greater than those of the Syrian warplanes.”



Trucks targeted by Russian airstrikes on 29 November 2015. Source: Mouhammad Hanzal.

2 December 2015: Attacks on Hrabal-Ihras Road

On Wednesday, 2 December, Russian warplanes targeted Harbal-Ihras Road, a main route used for the transport of food and other goods. Fighter jets targeted the road with five vacuum missiles, four of which were launched at around 12:00 pm. The fifth missile fell a short time after and targeted Civil Defense members as they evacuated the wounded from the area.

Member of the Aleppo Media Center, Ahmad al-Khatib, 23, said of the attack:

“The fighter jet that initiated the assault was among a six-plane group that launched several successive airstrikes; it is this that distinguishes the Russian warplanes from the Syrian ones.

He added

“While Civil Defense members were removing victims and the wounded, Russian warplanes shelled the area again, targeting the members of Civil Defense with two vacuum missiles but no casualties were reported (in the second strike)

The attacks killed two civilians and injured 14 others, in addition to setting six trucks and two cars ablaze. VDC documented the deaths of Ahmad Mouhamad Kanjo and Ali Ismail Junaid (both adult males).



Ihras-Kafer Nasih Road, 2 December 2015. Source: Shahba Press.

4 December 2015: Attacks on Masqaan-Kafar Nasih Road

At 11:30 am on 4 December, two airstrikes targeted Masqaan-Kafar Nasih Road with vacuum missiles. Journalist Ahmad al-Khatib told VDC the following:

“A three-plane group targeted Masqaan-Kafar Nasih Road with two airstrikes – in each of the attacks, they launched four vacuum missiles. The first airstrike targeted three trucks transporting goods and two cars used to transport gas. The shelling killed two civilians and injured seven others, in addition to setting fire to the five targeted vehicles. The second airstrike, however, targeted Civil Defense members with four other vacuum missiles as they were attempting to extinguish the fire, wounding several of the members.

Ahmad Khatib added

“The shelling rendered the road out of service and it is the only road between the Bab al-Salam Border Crossing and the city of Aleppo,”

VDC’s team verified the identity of the two civilians who were killed in the attack; they are Khalil Haj Khalil Kassar and Ayman Mouhamad al-Abso (both adult males).



Ihras-Kafer Nasih Road, 4 December 2015. Source: Ahmad al-Khatib.

19 December 2015: Attacks on Baraem Center, Tell Rifaat City

On the afternoon of 19 December, around 3:30 pm, Russian warplanes dropped several cluster bombs on the city of Tell Rifaat, targeting a special needs center (Baraem Center). According to the center’s administrators, one person was killed and four rooms were severely damaged in the explosion, while shrapnel penetrated two other rooms, destroying physiotherapy equipment.

Sarmad Abu Ali, a medical officer at Baraem, said:

“the center specializes in rehabilitating children with special needs through psychological support, educational habilitation and physiotherapy. As the only institution of its kind in the area, Baraem Center cares for 152 children with special needs from the districts of Aleppo’s northern suburbs.”

Due to the damage, the center is no longer in operation and several houses nearby were also destroyed. VDC investigators documented the death of Ahmad Mouhamad Hamdo, 46, in the attack.



The aftermath of the Russian attack on Baraem Center. Source: Baraem Center.

25 December 2015: Attacks on Maternity Hospital and National Hospital, Azaz City

On Friday, 25 December, Russian warplanes targeted the Maternity Hospital and Eye Hospital in the city of Azaz with five airstrikes, also shelling the city’s main square which lies inside a residential district. The extent of the damage caused to the the two hospitals was so large that they could no longer continue their services. The shelling also set fire to several cars and caused heavy damage to nearby residential buildings.

VDC documented the deaths of 12 civilians in attack, including an entire family: Abdulla Himidi and his wife (name unconfirmed), as well as their children (Mouhamad Himidi and Adala Himidi) and Abdulla's mother (Maryam Haj Suleiman). Seven adult males were killed in the strike, including: Ali Mahmoud Naaso, Ahmad al-Sheikh, Oqba Hajola, Anas Najjar, Ibrahim Moustafa Aqqash, Awash Dahilik and Mouhanad Rina..

31 December 2015: Attack on a Displaced Building in Azaz City

At 6:00 am on New Years' Eve, Russian warplanes targeted the Bizar Building which shelters mainly displaced families from the area. Resident Mouhamad Hanzal explained that the building, which is located on the city's outskirts, houses 20 displaced families totaling about 70 people. VDC documented six children who were severely injured in the attack.

8 January 2016: Attack on Residential Neighborhoods, Tell Rifaat City

In the morning of 8 January, Russian warplanes targeted a residential area in the center of Tell Rifaat city, injuring eight civilians as well as completely destroying eight houses and damaging 10 others.

Ahmad al-Khatib (an aforementioned witness) told VDC the following about the attack:

"At 9:00 am on Friday, 8 January 2016, two Russian warplanes launched four airstrikes on the city of Tell Rifaat in Aleppo's suburbs. In addition to targeting several areas in the city, the shelling mainly stuck civilians' houses in the city center."

The shelling injured eight civilians that Civil Defense teams later retrieved from under the rubble. In addition to completely destroying eight houses, the shelling caused damage to ten houses and six cars.

12 January 2016: Attack on Maarsta Khan

On 12 January, Russian warplanes targeted a civilian bus on the outskirts of Maarsta Khan, wounding ten people. The strikes also targeted the road connecting the city of Aleppo and the city of Azaz near the Turkish border. VDC was able to document the death of two civilians from the attack: Ali Mouhamad Ouso (adult male) and Wafaa Mouhamad Misto (adult female).

24 January 2016: Attack on Residential Neighborhoods, Tell Rifaat City

At 3:00 pm in the afternoon of 24 January, two Russian warplanes launched two consecutive airstrikes on the city of Tell Rifaat with only a few minutes between them. The first strike targeted the outskirts of the city, while the second struck a residential area in the city center with no military presence. The shelling killed one civilian (Omer Taleb Sakran, 22) and injured four others, in addition to destroying a house and three shops.

27 January 2016: Shelling of Anadan Charity Hospital

On Wednesday, 27 January, Russian warplanes targeted Anadan Charity Hospital with several vacuum missiles, killing one doctor. A nurse and several patients were injured in the attack which also destroyed an ambulance. The hospital's administration later announced the facility would be closed due to the severity of the damage caused by the shelling ([video](#)).



The destruction at Anadan Charity Hospital. Source: Adnan Madlaj.

Anadan Charity Hospital, which was constructed in 2014, provides services not only to the town of Anadan but also to cities like Haritan, Kafr Hamrah, Lairamon Hayan Baya-noun and other nearby villages. Hospital worker Adnan Madlaj told VDC the following:

“Anadan Charity Hospital provides medical services (surgery and medicine) to most of the towns and villages around the city of Anadan – around 15,000 people – as it has vital departments dedicated to surgery, bone disease, urology, gynecology, ENT (ear, nose, throat) as well as a cardiology department. The hospital has been targeted several times by Syrian government forces.”



Cluster bombs collected from Anadan Charity Hospital after it was targeted by Russian warplanes.

29 January 2016: Attack on Trucks Loaded with Food Supplies, Azaz City

Two days after the attack on the Anadan hospital, Russian warplanes targeted a convoy of trucks transporting food and humanitarian aid from Turkey to Azaz city. The warplanes targeted the convoy with cluster munitions near the city of Azaz, killing Mohamad Amin (adult male), injuring 12 civilians and setting fire to one truck.

30 January 2016: Attack on Residential Neighborhoods, Tell Rifaat City

At around 3:00 am on morning of Saturday, 30 January, Russian warplanes targeted a residential neighborhood in the city of Tell Rifaat using vacuum missiles, completely destroying 10 civilian homes and causing partial destruction to several nearby houses. VDC can verify that Zakaria Abdul Hajar, 45, was killed in the attack, while a total of 20 others, mostly women and children, were also wounded.



The aftermath of Russian vacuum bombing on residential neighborhoods of Tell Rifaat. Source: Facebook page of Tell Rifaat

2 February 2016: Attack on Anadan Charity Hospital, Anadan City

For the second time in six days, Russian warplanes targeted the Anadan Charity Hospital, “destroying what was left of the hospital that was already out of service due to the attack on January 27,” according to Anadan resident Yasin Abu Raed.

Russian jets also shelled a residential neighborhood in Anadan, leading to the deaths of five civilians and wounding ten others. After Civil Defense members responded to the targeted area, Russian warplanes returned and retargeted those who were in the vicinity.

Abu Raed added that

“as Civil Defense members were heading to the targeted location, Russian warplanes re-targeted the area, killing two emergency respondents.”

VDC confirmed the deaths of two Red Crescent workers, Abdulkarim Khiralla and Mouhamad Salih Birnaba.

15 February 2016: Attack on Maternity Hospital, Azaz City

The Maternity Hospital in Azaz city was targeted with a long-range ballistic missile on Monday, 15 February, killing one civilian. According to Dr. Diaa Abdulla, who was present during the attack, the shelling targeted the facility as it was operating at minimum capacity due to a previous Russian attack on the same location about month and a half prior, on December 25.

VDC was able to confirm the death of one civilian; an internally displaced male from Tell Rifaat. The hospital's administration decided to close the clinic following the second Russian shelling. Dr. Abdulla confirmed that the targeted area was entirely civilian and is adjacent to a garage for small trucks ([video](#)).

According to eyewitness Munther Sallal, a resident from Azaz city:

"the attack involved two missiles (one of which failed to explode), while the shelling destroyed all the hospital's doors, windows and equipment."

Head of Civil Defense in Azaz and director of the hospital, Zakaria Ibrahim, reported to VDC that "five minutes after targeting of the hospital, Russian warplanes were seen in the area." However, Mr. Ibrahim added that there is no definitive evidence suggesting whether the attacks were launched by Russian warplanes or by Syrian government forces.



The aftermath of the targeting of Azaz Hospital with a long-range missile. Source: Azaz Media Center.



Cluster bombs collected from Anadan Charity Hospital after it was targeted by Russian warplanes.

Enforced Displacement

Attacks by the Russian air force helped pave the way for Syrian government and pro-regime ground forces to invade the targeted areas in opposition-held Aleppo. Moreover, the attacks allowed the Syrian Democratic Forces – which mainly comprises militants from the Kurdish People’s Protection Units – to initiate another military operation from an alternate axis. These operations aimed at controlling the towns and villages in the northern countryside at the expense of Syrian armed opposition groups there.

Mujahed Abu al-Joud, a member of the Aleppo Media Center, told VDC:

“After the Russian attacks on the northern suburbs of Aleppo began, and as the shelling of the vital areas and facilities intensified, a minor displacement movement started to move from areas exposed to heavy bombing to other areas where there was less shelling.

“Residents from the towns and villages of Masqaan, Marea, Minnigh and Deir Jamal were displaced to Tell Rifaat and Darat Izza. Fewer people were displaced to camps for IDPs (internally displaced persons) along the Turkish border, like Shamarin and Bab al-Salama,”

he added.

“As airstrikes on villages and cities of the northern suburbs increased, starting from 1 February 2016, and with the advance of Syrian government forces and pro-regime groups, the northern suburbs of Aleppo witnessed a large displacement movement towards the Turkish borders that lasted four days.”

Ahmad Abu Subeh, a resident from Darat Izza, explained to VDC:

“(Following the airstrikes) thousands of families were displaced to the western suburbs of Aleppo, most of them from Darat Izza city. As for the rest, they came from Anadan, Hayan, Haritan, Ratyan, Tell Rifaat and al-Tamoura. All of them now live in buildings that are under-construction, poultry houses or in exposed farmlands.”

Omar Zaidan, head of IDP camps administration in the area, reported:

“We registered 130,000 people after the last displacement movement. This is in addition to about 35,000 people who are living in the farmlands nearby. About 70 percent of the displaced people are women and children. Upon the recent wave of displacement, the population of the border city of Azaz has risen to 270,000 people.”

The camps administration, an independent body that manages and organizes the services within the region camps, revealed to VDC that the number of regular camps now sits at 11, namely Bab al-Salama New Camp, Akda Camp, Bab al-Nour Camp, Shimrin (Martyrs Township) Camp, Bab al-Iman Camp, Sajjo Camp, Shamarikh Camp, Niyara Camp, Ahl al-Sham Camp and al-Haramain Camp.

The attacks on the towns and villages of Aleppo’s northern suburbs has caused large displacement movements among the local residents, with the number of displaced recorded to have reached around 50,000. Turkey’s border with Syria is the key destination for those fleeing the violence. According to the Emergency Response Unit of the Local Council in Azaz,, more than 65 percent of the population of northern Aleppo have been displaced to the borders crossings. In response, Turkish authorities have set up tents on the Syrian side

of the Bab al-Salama Crossing, provided food supplies and allowed only those with critical injuries to enter into Turkish territory with ambulances. Meanwhile, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu [announced](#) that the borders will remain closed for the time being.

The city of Idlib, largely controlled by Nusra Front, has been seen as a secondary destination for displaced residents from the northern Aleppo countryside. The city of Afrin, controlled by Kurdish People's Protection Units, has also received more than 10,000 people, according to local estimates. These displaced are recorded to have come from the villages and towns of Tell Rifaat, Kafer Naha, Hardatin, Ratyan and Sheikh Issa, in addition to others who travelled from Aleppo's eastern countryside.

Aleppo city was not among the destinations displaced residents from the countryside attempted to resettle, largely because it was known to be completely blockaded by armed opposition groups. Furthermore, over one and a half million people currently reside in Aleppo city amid an acute shortage of food, services and medical care, coupled with daily airstrikes and random shelling by Syrian government warplanes.

The displaced, mostly women and children, have headed towards the border crossings of Kilis and Bab al-Salama. The number of stranded refugees has reached 10,000 at the Kilis Crossing and 30,000 at the Bab al-Salama Crossing according to local estimates, despite the deteriorating humanitarian conditions, severe weather and below zero temperatures at night. According to the Qatar Red Crescent Society, which operates in the area and provides logistical and medical support, infections like the mumps virus and skin diseases such as mange have spread among the refugees due to the lack of proper sanitation.

Regarding the situation in Azaz city, Taim Omar, a media activist who works at the Emergency Response Unit of the Local Council in Azaz city, told VDC:

"The displaced live now in collective shelters, storehouses, schools, mosques and some tents situated here and there, not to mention thousands of others who live on the city's outskirts.

"Although we don't have the means to serve more than 1,000 people due to our scarce resources, we – the Emergency Response Unit – have provided shelter for large numbers internally displaced people in Azaz city inside the camps and schools. We usually provide them with clothers and one meal a day, which is dinner, in light of the inaction from international and humanitarian organizations in the city," Omar added.

"The suffering of the displaced people stuck at the Turkish borders is intensified by the low temperatures and the lack of humanitarian aid available to them. Two children have died due to the freezing temperatures. What makes the situation even more challenging is the increasing numbers of displaced people flooding towards the border despite the poor conditions."

Omar also revealed that the centers housing the displaced have been shelled by warplanes. "The city's neighborhoods were targeted one week ago with three long-range ballistic missiles, one of which struck the center's surroundings. However, no casualties were reported," he said.

Yahya al-Rajo, a journalist from Aleppo city who works at the camps for the displaced, told VDC:

“In each camp there is a medical unit supervised by independent paramedics, but it is not enough to oversee the needs of the entire camp. Furthermore, there aren’t any medical units dedicated to the homeless or the displaced outside the camps. What added fuel to the fire is that the sewage drains were directed, through already exposed drainpipes adjoining the camps, towards some valleys that may cause diseases and epidemics to spread.”

Journalist Mujahed Abu al-Joud, a member at the Aleppo Media Center, recounted his observations during his visit to the camps, saying: “the number of tents varies from one camp to another, in some they might reach 200 tents while in others there might be no more than 100.”

Joud added: “I paid a visit to the camps of Bab al-Salama, Sajo, al-Nour, al-Rayan, Shamarin, Shamarekh and Haramin, which are all at the Syrian-Turkish borders. Al-Nour Camp displayed the worst conditions, although all of them have been established on farmlands and suffer from a lack of water or waste disposal systems. Also, the toilets and the medical units there are in poorly-built prefabricated huts.”

Impacts of Military Operations in the Northern Countryside on the Living Conditions in Aleppo

The seizure of northern Aleppo’s main roads and the consequent blockade of the western suburbs by Syrian government forces and allied militias served to strangle the city as the entry of goods and fuel became extremely scarce. This, coupled with the steep rise in the price of food and daily essentials, contributed to the already challenging living conditions for local residents.

Aya Haritani, a woman from Aleppo’s Sukkari neighborhood, told VDC:

“Living conditions in Aleppo have dramatically changed since the government forces and pro-regime militias imposed the siege after capturing most of the northern suburbs, including Marasta al-Khan, and blocked the roads connecting Aleppo, Idlib and the suburbs of Hama. Prior to the blockade, daily essentials and bread used to be somewhat available despite their high prices. We could get goods from the suburbs of Aleppo or from the border areas like Bab al-Salama and Bab al-Hawa crossings. Now, we have been living without electricity for over 100 days and we are trying to get it using special generators.

“The water supply has also been cut by the Islamic State for almost 20 days. So we began to take water from wells. But unfortunately, several residents were poisoned by this water as it turned out to be polluted. We also used to get fuel from the border areas with Turkey, but we haven’t been able to since the government forces took control of Marasta al-Khan village. Because of this, the electrical generators have stopped, we can no longer get water from the wells and the bakeries have stopped functioning. However, we have begun making our bread at home instead.

“The hospitals and medical units have doctors for every medical specialization. Although they operate with minimal capacity, they are expected to stop functioning due the lack of fuel. Psychological disorders are also widely common due to the fear of the daily shelling and brutality carried out by the government forces and the groups that support them.”

Journalist Ahmad al-Khatib elaborated further on the current conditions residents face in the northern suburbs of Aleppo:

“We have suffered from a lack of power and water in the suburbs of Aleppo in general, and in the northern areas in particular. However, recent military developments have resulted in concerns and fears over the closure of the road to Bab al-Salama border crossing (with Turkey), which is the only way to transfer goods and humanitarian aid to the suburbs of Aleppo.

“After government forces seized vital roads like the ones leading to Marasta al-Khan and Kafar Nasih, it became almost impossible to acquire any fuel, which – if found – would be unaffordable in light of the residents’ poor economic circumstances. The medical situation is also critical after the three main hospitals in the countryside of Aleppo (Azaz, Anadan and Haritan) were shelled by the Russian warplanes, while their small teams struggle to cope with minimal equipment. The local schools have also been closed due to the shelling.”

Legal Conclusion

VDC believes that international humanitarian law should be applicable in the case of the northern countryside of Aleppo given that the area is witnessing an armed conflict as defined by international law. Consequently, Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 on the protection of civilians, property and persons should be applied in addition to the rules of the Additional Protocol II of 1977. Moreover, according to the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice, the Human Rights Act remains a complementary law to international humanitarian law.

VDC also stresses that the attacks referred to in this report are a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and notes that Russian and Syrian forces are fully aware that attacking medical teams and hospitals are considered war crimes. Accordingly, it calls upon them to take preventive measures to avoid targeting civilians, abstain from launching random strikes against non-military targets or those of no military nature, and allow the medical personnel to carry out their humanitarian duty without fear of being killed or injured.

Our center, moreover, refers to the continued use of vacuum bombs (thermobaric weapons) by the Russian troops. Such incidents have been referred to several times among the attacks that have been listed in the body of the report. VDC sees the use of these bombs as an act that aims at claiming the lives of the largest number of civilians as the forces using them are fully aware of that civilians are not guaranteed safety in any shelter to protect them from the destructive impact of such weapons.

In conclusion, VDC refers all the conflicting parties in the northern countryside of Aleppo to the provision of international humanitarian law and holds all individual leaders who have issued orders or any person who has committed, facilitated or provided aid and assistance to the perpetrators of these attacks on civilians criminally responsible for their actions.



The Syrian-Turkish Borders. Source: Majed al-Najjar.



Al-Nur Camp, 21 Feb 2016. Source: Mujahed Abu al-Jud



Al-Rayyan Camp, 26 Feb 2016. Source: Yahya al-Rajo.



The Syrian-Turkish Borders, 5 Feb 2016. Source: Mustafa Sultan.



Displaced from the northern countryside near the Syrian-Turkish Borders, 5 Feb 2016. Source: Mustafa Sultan.



Some of the Tents that were Built at the Syrian Side of Bab al-Salama Crossing. Source: Mustafa Sultan.



Violations Documentation Center in Syria

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