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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA ARMED CONFLICT

Syria: Hundreds of civilian lives at risk as Afrin offensive escalates

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Syria: Hundreds of civilian lives at risk as Afrin offensive escalates

Turkish military, and to a lesser extent Kurdish forces, are carrying out indiscriminate attacks in the embattled Syrian towns of Afrin and Azaz respectively in northern Aleppo, killing scores of civilians, according to eyewitness testimonies obtained and verified by Amnesty International.

The organization interviewed 15 people living in - or recently displaced from – cities and villages in Afrin and Azaz who painted a grim picture of indiscriminate shelling allegedly carried out by both sides. Amnesty's Digital Verification Corps was able to corroborate many of these claims by video analysis.

"The fighting in Afrin between Turkish and US-backed Kurdish forces has already caused numerous civilian deaths and is putting the lives of hundreds more at risk," said Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty International's Middle East research director.

"Reports of shelling of villages and residential areas in cities are deeply troubling. The use of artillery and other imprecise explosive weapons in civilian areas is prohibited by international humanitarian law and all parties should cease such attacks immediately."

According to the Kurdish Red Crescent, Turkish military attacks have so far claimed the lives of 93 civilians and injured 313 civilians including 51 children. Meanwhile, Kurdish YPG forces shelling in Azaz city has allegedly killed four people including a nine-year-old girl.

Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps' analysis was consistent with some of the testimonies received from residents in Afrin and Azaz, including an attack on 18 January on a hospital in Azaz that reportedly left one patient dead and 13 injured.

Violence in the region escalated after the Turkish government announced on 20 January the start of a military offensive codenamed "Olive Branch" against Afrin, attacking it from several fronts including the villages of Jenderess, Shara, Balbali, Shih, Rajo and Al-Shahba'.

Reported attacks by Turkish forces

According to the Kurdish Red Crescent, between 22 January and 21 February 2018, 93 civilians were killed, including 24 children. A further 313 civilians were wounded, including 51 children.

People living in the Afrin villages of Jenderess, Rajo and Maabatli described how they were subjected to hours of indiscriminate shelling even after Turkish forces promised to ensure civilian protection. Some fled their houses and saw their neighbours being killed.

Zeina, a resident of Jenderess which is located seven kilometres from the Turkish border, told Amnesty International:

"At the beginning, we were relieved when we heard and saw a statement by the Turkish government on TV claiming that they will not shell civilian areas... But it was all a lie. I have never see shelling like that, the bombs were pouring on us like rain."

Sido, a resident of Maabatli, described how a shell hit his neighbor's house on 25 January, killing five out of six family members:

"The attack destroyed the house completely, killing the father, mother and three children younger than 15, and a fourth child – a girl – stayed under the rubble for several hours. She survived but is in critical condition... There are no military headquarters next to the house... The closest frontline is 41 km away at the border."

The Digital Verification Corps was able to independently confirm this deadly attack in Maabatli.

Hussein, a resident of Jenderess, witnessed his neighbor being killed by shells which residents believed were fired by Turkish artillery on 21 January. He said:

"We were having breakfast around 8am when we heard explosions... we packed what we could carry and fled to a basement around 200 metres from our house. On the way, we saw Fatme, our 60-year-old neighbor. My mother told her to come with us but she replied that she would follow us. As soon as we arrived, we heard a huge explosion. I went outside and walked towards the smoke because I feared that my house had been hit. I arrived and saw that a shell had landed around 50 metres from my house. The shell landed on Fatma's house... She died instantly."

Most people had been unprepared for the onslaught on residential areas and had to scramble into crowded basements with no time to stock up food or water, hoping that the shells would not reach them.

Reported attacks by YPG forces

Azaz residents described to Amnesty International indiscriminate attacks allegedly by Kurdish forces which struck homes and hospitals. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Democratic Forces allied to YPG fighters have carried out a series of attacks on the city since mid-January.

Mustafa, a media activist from Azaz, told Amnesty International he had witnessed the aftermath of an attack on 5 February in which a child was killed and five family members were injured.

“The shelling of Azaz by the Kurds started with the “Olive Branch” operation in January. The shelling has been daily with recent targeting of civilians in the centre of Azaz. None of the military points were targeted. Civilians have been the main target. We haven’t had any military presence in the residential areas in Azaz for years now.

“On 5 February, I witnessed the worst attack. A car was hit by a rocket launched by the PKK [referring to YPG forces]... A nine-year-old girl was killed immediately and five of her family members were severely injured. They were transferred to Turkey. I don’t know how they survived. The car was on fire. It was horrible to watch.”

Saed, a pharmacist working in a psychiatric hospital, believed Kurdish military forces were responsible for an attack that hit the hospital on 18 January. He told Amnesty International:

“We are sure that we were attacked from Afrin under the control of PKK, because we looked into the trajectory of the rocket, which we believe is Katyusha, and where it hit the hospital. The attack injured 13 female patients, of whom two are in critical condition, and one female patient was killed. The female section was destroyed as a result of the attack.

The psychiatric facility is located next to an orphanage and another civilian hospital. There is no military presence next to the psychiatric facility and all three buildings are kilometres away from any frontline.”

Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps geolocated and verified two videos showing the aftermath and damage to the psychiatric hospital described by Saed.

In addition, a number of missiles and mortar rounds have fallen in residential areas within Turkey. The Turkish government reported that as of 5 February seven civilians had been killed and 113 injured as a result of these attacks.

“The conflict in Syria has inflicted unbearable suffering on those living there as the warring parties consistently fail to take the necessary precautions to ensure the protection of civilians,” said Lynn Malouf.

“The USA, Russia and other states must use their influence to pressure the parties involved to end unlawful attacks and ensure respect for international humanitarian law.”

Topics

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