

Syria's Douma faces catastrophe, says council, as assault grinds on

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People are seen in the besieged town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta, in Damascus, Syria March 9, 2018.

Amman/Beirut: Syria's rebel-held city of Douma faces a "catastrophic" situation after becoming the main haven for thousands of people fleeing advances by government forces into eastern Ghouta, its local council said on Monday.

Hundreds of people have been killed in the Syrian army's fierce air and artillery bombardment of eastern Ghouta since Feb. 18 as President Bashar al-Assad's government seeks to crush the last major rebel stronghold near the capital Damascus.

Government forces have now captured more than half of the rebel enclave and have entirely besieged Douma, the largest urban centre in eastern Ghouta, cutting it off from neighbouring areas with advances on Saturday and Sunday.

The opposition-run council in Douma said thousands of families were now sheltering in open streets and public gardens as existing basements and shelters were already overcrowded.

"After more than 20 days of the barbaric campaign and mass annihilation of eastern Ghouta.. this has led to a deterioration of the humanitarian and food situation to a catastrophic level," it said in a statement.

One man cowering in a heavily damaged shelter in Douma said: "It is completely uninhabitable. It is not even safe to put chickens in. There is no bathroom, just one toilet, and there are 300 people." He declined to give his name for fear of reprisals if the army retakes the area.

The Douma council appealed for international help, saying even burials of the dead at the main city cemetery had been suspended due to the intensity of aerial strikes.

At least 70 people were buried in a public park in Douma as the aerial strikes made it difficult to reach the main burial grounds on the outskirts of the city.

EVACUATION DEAL

Residents said dozens of people were still buried alive under rubble, with rescuers unable to reach them due to the intensity of the raids. They also said the loss of remaining farmland to Assad forces would worsen the plight of civilians.

Children gather wood in the besieged town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta, in Damascus, Syria March 9, 2018.

Jaish al-Islam, one of the main rebel groups in eastern Ghouta, said on Monday it had reached an agreement with the

government's ally Russia to evacuate wounded people.

It communicated with Russia through the United Nations to reach the agreement, it said.

Across eastern Ghouta heavy aerial strikes continued on the towns of Irbeen, Harasta and other residential areas on Monday, state media said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, put the total death toll in Syria's civil war since it erupted seven years ago at about 511,000 people.

The Observatory, which tracks death tolls using a network of contacts inside Syria, said about 85 percent of the dead had been killed by government forces and their allies.

Eastern Ghouta has been besieged for years after many of its residents joined the initial protests against Assad's rule in 2011 that triggered the slide into civil war.

Assad and his ally Russia say the assault on eastern Ghouta is needed to end the rule of Islamist insurgents over the civilian population and to stop mortar fire on nearby Damascus.

The ferocity of the assault has prompted condemnation from Western countries and calls from U.N. agencies for a ceasefire.

The United Nations has warned of impending starvation if aid cannot reach the area, where international deliveries have long been erratic and obstructed by the Syrian government.

A convoy of relief trucks crossed front lines into eastern Ghouta on Friday and unloaded all its food to the trapped population despite the fighting.

- Reuters