Highlights

- Fighting continues in Deir-ez-Zor, leading to rising casualties and growing humanitarian needs; the besieged enclave remains cut in two.
- Severe shortages of basic commodities and fuel were reported, with SARC food stocks almost depleted, despite reports of airdrops by the Government of Syria and the Russian Federation.
- Urgent medical evacuations are required for at least 97 civilians who are in critical condition.

Situation Overview

An ISIL offensive on Deir-ez-Zor that started on 15 January has effectively cut the besieged enclave in two as of 17 January. This cut resulted in the separation of the Deir-ez-Zor airport and the two eastern neighborhoods (Harabesh and Alrasafa) populated by an estimated 6,000 people from the western neighborhoods, where the bulk of the city’s 93,500 population live.

Fighting between ISIL and Government of Syria (GoS) forces is currently concentrated in the Al-Ommal and Rasafa neighbourhoods, the Al-Baghlieh area and west of Deir-ez-Zor airbase, and resulted in the death and injury of scores of civilians. There are unconfirmed reports from local sources that 40 bodies of under 15-year-olds were discovered in the areas where the clashes between ISIL and the GoS took place. If confirmed, this would substantiate allegations that ISIL is recruiting children for active combat.

Medical sources inside the besieged city reported 19 civilian deaths and at least 44 civilian injuries due to shelling between 15 and 23 January. Al-Assad-Hospital resumed operations at limited capacity after a temporary closure on 18 January due to fighting in the area, and media reports that the hospital had been looted by ISIL were not confirmed by sources on the ground. However, only individuals located in the western besieged enclave can access the facility, and many injuries and critical medical cases inside the eastern besieged enclave cannot be cared for adequately. At least 42 critical civilian medical cases need to be transported from Harabesh to the Al-Qusour area and from there transition to hospitals in Damascus due to the severity of their conditions. An additional 55 injured civilians in Harabesh are in urgent need of transportation to Al-Qusour and Al-Joura areas for medical care. Five Syrian government military helicopters are used to transport injured military personnel to Qamishli and Hama airports. The SARC health center in the western enclave is still functioning, but the SARC mobile clinic went out of service on
Due to insufficient medical resources and the ongoing fighting, the number of people in need of medical evacuations is expected to rise.

The humanitarian situation inside the two besieged enclaves remains drastically affected by the temporary suspension of WFP airdrops into Deir-ez-Zor since 15 January, as the drop-zone remains under the control of ISIL. WFP is in the process of identifying a new safe drop-off zone with the hope that airdrops can resume as soon as possible. Due to the deteriorating security situation, SARC food distributions inside Deir-ez-Zor city have been repeatedly delayed, and WFP food stocks are almost depleted. At this point, SARC is trying to reconstitute food commodities that had been partially damaged during previous airdrops (due to the high velocity at which pallets hit the ground) in order to meet at least some of the growing needs.

After ISIL cut the roads between Harabesh in east Deir-ez-Zor and the western enclave, vegetables, milk and yoghurt can no longer be delivered from the eastern neighborhoods to the western parts of the city, and wheat flour and fuel for bread production can no longer be delivered from the western neighborhoods to the eastern ones. In addition, the bakery in the besieged eastern enclave ceased operations, due to lack of wheat flour and fuel supply.

The GoS is airlifting limited supplies on a daily basis into the besieged enclaves, much of which is reportedly destined to resupply troops fighting ISIL. On 23 January, the GoS airlifted 1mt of additional medicines into the western besieged enclave of Deir-ez-Zor which are also reportedly mainly intended for military personnel. During the reporting period, a private Syrian company additionally airlifted 24 tons of potatoes and onions into the western parts of Deir-ez-Zor city for sale on the market at comparatively expensive prices. On 17 and 18 January, Russian forces airlifted bread supplies sufficient for two days into Harabesh (eastern enclave) via helicopter, and SARC distributed these bread bundles in the area close to the brigade 137 and the Deir-ez-Zor airport.

Oil prices have been steadily increasing and temporarily peaked at SYP 6,000 (approx. $10) last week. However, following the SARC distributions of WFP-provided oil from previous airdrops in the western enclave at a rate of six liters per family, prices have become noticeably cheaper, back to around SYP 2,400 (approx. $4). Prices of other basic food commodities are currently not available, but it is understood that they have increased significantly.

Inside Deir-ez-Zor city, generators remain the only source of electricity as fuel is scarce, but they are only being used to supply civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals, water networks and bakeries. Water continues to be pumped into Deir-ez-Zor once per week as per standard practice. In Harabesh people depend mainly on the river water which they can only access at night because ISIL is in control of the opposite river bank. While having to fetch water in proximity to ISIL controlled territory is an obvious protection concern, the consumption of untreated water from the river also exposes residents of Harabesh to the risk of water-borne diseases.

Mobile communications remain cut from 12am until 7 am.

All schools are currently closed for the mid-year vacation, yet all students in the Harabesh area were unable to take their exams due to the road cut. At Al-Furat -University, students were exposed to shelling and sniper fire when taking their exams. Snipers were reportedly positioned on the roof of the education facility.

The area of Deir-ez-Zor city under government control has been besieged by ISIL since July 2014, depriving up to 93,500 people from regular access to food and medicines. As the enclave cannot be accessed by
land due to the ISIL presence. Before the operation was suspended, WFP had completed 177 airdrops, delivering food rations to 93,000 people as well as medical and hygiene supplies on behalf of other humanitarian agencies to the besieged areas of Deir-ez-Zor. Over 3,300 metric tons of relief items on 4,500 pallets with over 10,000 parachutes were delivered in an unprecedented high-cost and highly technical operation (an average US$10,000 per metric ton). The humanitarian airdrops had previously been collected by SARC staff who were also in charge of the distribution of the collected items. WFP is still in the process of identifying an alternative dropoff location and hopes to resume airdrops as soon as a suitable location has been identified.

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