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منظمة الهلال الأحمر العربي السوري
SYRIAN ARAB RED CRESCENT

برنامج الأغذية العالمي
غير مخصص للبيع



Syrian Arab Red Crescent Accused of Discrimination in UN Aid Distribution

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Civilians in south Syria were denied humanitarian assistance despite signing reconciliations with the Syrian government

Introduction

After the Syrian regime reclaimed southern territories; the provinces of Daraa and al-Qunaitra, in August 1, 2018, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), supported by the World Food Programme (WFP), started distributing relief and food baskets to the population there during January and February 2019.¹ However, not all civilians received that assistance, as there were inequities and selectivity based on political considerations. According to statements obtained by STJ, some were deliberately deprived of assistance for having 'impurities' in their security files, so the SARC members asked them to check their security status first in the nearest security branch. But, despite doing so, they haven't received their shares of the assistance as of the date of preparing this report, July 4, 2019.

Other civilians denied access to assistance for having links with Syrian armed opposition groups, as witnesses confirmed to STJ. They said that the 'local delegate' - the man in charge of writing the distribution lists for the SARC-, (who is also a Syrian security agent), in their neighborhood, refused to write certain names.

SARC justified by one of its members that the request from some civilians to check their security status before receiving the aid is just a formality. As they could come and receive their share after a little investigation at a security branch. However, allegations of SARC denied by all the civilians interviewed by STJ in Daraa and al-Qunaitra, who confirmed receiving no assistance, despite visiting security branches as the SARC employees asked them to do.

According to STJ field researcher, depriving civilians in southern Syria from the UN assistance continued, despite their reconciliation with the government under Russian guarantees.²

Despite signing settlements with Russian guarantees, some civilians in southern Syria still deprived from the UN assistance, which has been decreased recently; since the beginning of March 2019.

Rising food and fuel prices besides the lack of employment opportunities and the destruction of infrastructure made it hard for the SARC to deliver humanitarian aid to southern Syria. The assistance during the armed opposition groups' rule was greater, since it was easier for the convoys to access from the Jordanian borders. In addition, the relief organizations then were supported by the UN's The World Food Programme (WFP) and the

¹ The Syrian government forces launched a military campaign on the Syrian south (the provinces of Daraa and al-Qunaitra) on June 19, 2018, and managed to fully control it after a short period of time, specifically on August 1, 2018.

² The Syrian Army reclaimed the province of Daraa by signing a settlement agreement with the opposition forces there in July 2018. The agreement was conducted in two stages and was guaranteed by the Russian military police. The first stage covered the rural northern areas and the Al-Lajat area, while the second stage included the rest of the province except the Yarmouk Basin (which was retaken by Syrian regular forces at the beginning of August 2018). One of the agreement's provisions provides that the Syrian regular forces are not allowed to enter the villages before the Russian military police does or before the civilians sign reconciliations, according to STJ field researcher in Daraa.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Yet, there were violations to the WFP's humanitarian principles for providing assistance.

1. Civil society institutions in the Syrian south before being retaken by the government:

Relief, development, education and health services provided by civil society institutions along with local and international relief organizations in the Syrian south during the insurgents' control, were disrupted on June 19, 2018, with acknowledging the inadequate supervision on those organizations' action and the occurrence of misconduct, thefts and corruption.

STJ monitored the work of about 100 civil society institutions, which were active in the south from late 2012 until mid-2018. Those institutions used to provide services and support to the war-affected civilians in southern Syria, and sometimes in other areas. But they all were dissolved or relocated out of the area after the Syrian government retook it.

Institutions provided services and support to both local and displaced people in southern Syria through their psychosocial, relief and media programs. They also promote cooperation between themselves and the population-and among the population-, through social movements, campaigns, private charitable associations and the activities of unions, culture associations along with those of research and study centers.

During rebels' control, the SARC was operating very poorly in the south of Syria. Its activities were conducted in secret, because of the significant opposition it met from the populace, local councils and the armed opposition groups, in their different political orientation. However, after the Syrian forces control the southern territories, the SARC has been able to replace all these organizations and institutions. It begins its work by forming teams of employees in September 2018, one month after the settlement agreement concluded in southern Syria. The SARC has been providing the baskets given to it by the UN's WFP. Its distribution criteria primarily required from the civilian to present a family book to receive his share of the baskets. According to STJ field researcher, SARC has no schedule for distributing the food aid in the Syrian south. He pointed out that the food items in a single basket include rice, flour, lentils, tomato and oil, and some health items, and the weight of each basket ranges between 35-45 kg.



The contents of one of the baskets distributed by the SARC in south Syria during February 2019.
Photo credit: STJ.

2. The 'Reconciliation Deals' in southern Syria protect their signatories:

A media activist, who is familiar with the terms of the reconciliation agreements concluded in the south between the government and opposition groups in June 2018, said that signing such agreements is a right of every Syrian citizen including military defectors, armed civilians, civilian activists, government employees, members of professional unions, humanitarian and relief workers, civil defense personnel, individuals arrested in connection with the war events, Palestinians in refugee camps, media workers, mandatory and reserve military service evaders, students who have dropped out or been dismissed in addition to refugees and diaspora

The activist added that the reconciliation deals vowed to protect all the mentioned categories from instituting public proceedings o personal claims against them by any legal, administrative, military or civil bodies during the war. These reconciliations also guaranteed them access to the rights of citizenship, and obtaining personal documents including the travel documents, and to renew them or issuing replacements for the lost, damaged or missing documents. Actually, it allowed all procedures which would facilitate the citizens' lives. He went on to say:

“Concerning the civilian activists, the acceptance of their settlement shall cancel all claims, reports and public or personal prosecutions filed against them, it also prevents or stops any prosecutions against them. As for the media workers, after signing reconciliations, their security status be resolved and all claims or reports against them be canceled. The retiring government employees have the right to return to employment, while retaining the right to retroactively claim all benefits and pensions, including those of retirement. Southern Syrian refugees can also settle their situation and prevent prosecution for leaving the country illegally, while retaining the right of voluntary return. The expatriates can settle their situation in the Syrian embassies abroad and reserve the right of voluntary return without prosecution. Members of trade unions also have the right to retain membership of the union retroactively and from an earlier date. All dismissal and dismissal decisions shall be canceled during the war period. The signers of settlement agreements shall be exempted from fees and fines. Those who have been employed in relief organizations and humanitarian medical organizations during the past years, have the right to not be pursued and to be retained all rights related to his profession and to accept all experience certificates he/she obtained during that period after testing them.”

The activist added that the terms of the agreement are clear and need no explanation. Anyone who has remained in the Syrian south and has not left to the Syrian north has immunity from international arrest or detention except for those involved in dealing with the Israeli enemy or linked to the Islamic State organization (ISIL). He pointed out that depriving civilians from assistance for their previous connection to the Syrian armed opposition as activists or fighters, despite handing over their weapons, is a violation of the terms of the settlement.

3. Former employees at the opposition’s institutions denied access to relief aid

Mohammed M., 29, is a resident of the city of Nawa in Daraa province. He stopped teaching after the armed opposition groups seized his city in 2014. He signed the reconciliation agreement and have a card proves that. But even so, he was deprived of his share from the aid baskets provided by SARC of Daraa. He spoke to STJ saying:

“In February 2019, I went like all the city residents to receive my aid basket. On my turn I presented my family book to the employee and when she read my name, she said that I had to go to the political security branch, otherwise I don’t be able to get my aid share. When I asked her about the reason, she said that it was a routine procedure, just for asking me some questions related to an old security report filed against me. Indeed, I went to the political security branch and then went back to

the SARC, but they gave me nothing. Actually, I haven't received any relief aid to date. Signing reconciliation actually protects the individual from arrest, but does not protect him/her from accountability and provisional detention"

Amer F., 31, a witness from the village of Tell Shihab in Daraa used to work with a medical organization during the opposition's control over the area. He was also deprived from the UN aid and services of the SARC though reconciled with the government. In this regard, he said:

"Just like the others, I went to the SARC center to get assistance in February 2019, but I was told to go first to the al-Khateeb Branch- State Security in Damascus. Not only me, most of those who had worked in the area of humanitarian action before signing the settlement agreement were denied access to assistance and requested for an investigation in relative security branches. For me, I went to al-Khateeb Branch, as the SARC employee requested me to do. There, I was asked about my previous work at a medical organization and they told me to come back to them again. Indeed, I went there two more times and the SARC just keep promising to give me a basket. I don't want to get that aid any more. I fear that my repeated visits to security branches will lead to my arrest and I am the sole breadwinner of my children and wife."

4. "A malicious report led to my deprivation of relief aid"

N.S., a man born in 1976 in northern rural al- Qunaitra works in agriculture and livestock was also deprived of the food baskets provided by the SARC during January 2019. He said to STJ:

"When I went to get my share of the aid, the SARC employee asked me to check my security status first. I learned from my relative, a member of the SARC at al-Qunaitra Branch, that my name is included in the 'security forces' lists', in which they listed persons who had conducted opposition political activities, or a security report filed against them. However, when I went to the security branch, I was shocked to hear false allegations filed against me. I told them that was a false report and that I've never carried a weapon or joined any armed or unarmed armed opposition group. I've always been a farmer and a shepherd, and all my town residents know that. It has been several months since I went to the security branch and I have not received my share of relief until today."

5. The local delegate prevented me from my food aid basket because my husband was a fighter in an opposition group

L.M., 47, a witness from the city of Jasim, Daraa said to STJ that her husband was a fighter in the Southern Front/*al-Jabha al-Janoubia* rebel group and killed by a roadside bomb between Nawa city and Al-Shaykh Saad village. Sleeper cells of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army of ISIL in western rural Daraa, were the suspect of planting it. She said:

“In February 2019, the man in charge of writing the distribution lists for the SARC refused to list my name. I told him that I have four children and I’m their only breadwinner. He basically replied: “All of those who take up arms against the state will not receive aid baskets”.

This man’s son was a fighter in the ranks of the Syrian Army and killed by the opposition armed groups. That’s why he has malice in his heart against the people of the city. He tries to punish them or take reprisals against them by preventing them from the relief aid. It’s my husband’s fault, me and my children made no guilt. I signed reconciliation agreements for me and my children to keep them out of trouble, and I’m still waiting to receive my share from the aid.”

6. SARC denies civilians’ claims

A SARC employee in Daraa assured STJ that the organization didn’t de-list any name or prevent anyone from the assistance. The local delegates in neighborhoods and villages are to blame, since they are the responsible of writing the names of those in need of assistance in their areas-prior distribution- and submitting list to the SARC. Noting that those delegates represent neither the organization nor its staff. He stressed that the organization administration have never de-listed any name, who is qualified for assistance, for any political considerations.

Another SARC employee in the province of al-Qunaitra justified the organization’s requests from some civilians to visit a security branch saying:

"It is a routine procedure requested by the administration. We write the word ‘security’ next to the names of those wanted for the security branches, which means that he/she must visit a security branch for a routine investigation and then he/she is entitled to receive his/her basket. No one has been arrested or detained after signing reconciliation, but those whom the branch has a security report against, or those involved in violent acts would be held at the security branch until he/she proves his/her innocence.”

7. humanitarian principles for providing assistance

Syria's seven-year war, which has no end in sight, disproportionately affected civilians, which led the humanitarian actors to ignore and abuse their international legal obligations, according to the director of a relief organization which was active in the Syrian south during the insurgents’ rule. He confirmed to STJ that there was a lack of respect for the principles of humanitarian action in the south of Syria, especially the basic principles that any civil

society institution in the world should adhere. from both; the armed opposition groups, which are mostly dishonest and impartial in providing services, and the SARC.

- *The seven Fundamental Principles*

Proclaimed in Vienna in 1965, the seven Fundamental Principles bond together the Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. They guarantee the continuity of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and its humanitarian work³.

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

³ "The seven Fundamental Principles", IFRC, <https://www.ifrc.org/en/who-we-are/vision-and-mission/the-seven-fundamental-principles/>

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide

In that context, activists in southern Syria spoke to STJ of the importance of impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian operations. They said that there shouldn't be any favoritism toward any party to the Syrian conflict, in accordance to the UN's humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Ratifying a settlement agreement which aims at resolving the conflict and turning a page on a very painful past, strengthen this process.

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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