



**RUKBAN, Jordan:** A member of the Jordanian armed forces carries a toddler from the informal Rukban camp, which lies in no-man's-land off the border between Syria and Jordan in the remote northeast, through the rain outside a UN-operated medical clinic on the Jordanian-side. — AFP

# TRAPPED SYRIANS TELL OF MISERY IN NO MAN'S LAND

## UN DELIVERS AID TO 15,000 TRAPPED SYRIAN FAMILIES

**RUKBAN, Jordan:** A Jordanian army ambulance pulled up at a makeshift clinic a few hundred meters from a desert border camp where tens of thousands of Syrian refugees are trapped in no man's land. A paramedic clambered out, carrying an emaciated boy around two years old. "Whose child is this?" he shouted as a border guard covered the crying child with his jacket to protect him from the cold. A woman in the ambulance said the boy's family had left him on a berm, an earth embankment running the length of Jordan's borders with Syria and Iraq, in the hope he would be taken for treatment.

The UN set up the clinic just inside Jordan in December to serve Rukban camp, a makeshift settlement in no man's land on the border with Syria where the United Nations says 60,000 Syrians are trapped. The temperature in the desert varies from a searing 50 degrees Celsius in the summer to below freezing in winter. "The conditions are very, very hard," said Maria, 30, wearing a hijab and a black gown covered in mud, waiting at the clinic in the cold and pouring rain.

She fled to Rukban from the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group's Syrian stronghold Raqa nine months ago in a terrifying 18-hour journey. Three of her children had died in the fighting. "I want to go back to Syria when things calm down. But now I can't go back to my

death," she said. "The hell of waiting here in the desert is easier than going back to die."

### Closed borders

At the time when Syria's war broke out in March 2011, Jordan operated 45 border crossings. By 2012, it had closed all but five over security concerns. Syrians continued to stream in-the kingdom now hosts around 650,000 UN-registered Syrian refugees, along with a further 700,000 who are not registered, the government says. In June 2016, a car bomb at the Rukban crossing, claimed by IS, killed seven Jordanian security personnel. The army responded by closing the border completely and declaring it a military zone.

Syrians in Rukban were blocked from entering Jordan and aid deliveries halted for much of the summer. In November, they resumed, with regular batches of essentials dropped over the border by crane. With residents in desperate need of health care, the UN in December opened the clinic in pre-fabricated huts a kilometre (less than a mile) from the camp, under Jordanian protection. Every day, the UN and Jordanian border guards shuttle people in for treatment then return them to the camp.

The clinic has treated 785 patients from Rukban and the smaller camp of Hadalat nearby, the UN said. "The UN is

delivering aid to around 15,000 Syrian families trapped in the Rukban and Hadalat areas," said Mohammed al-Hawari, spokesman of the UN's refugee agency, the UNHCR. "The clinic gives basic healthcare, but cases that need specialist treatment are referred to Jordanian hospitals." The clinic sits in a sensitive military zone. Army and border guard vehicles fan out along the border nearby, as Jordanian forces monitor movements on the Syrian side.

"Our borders are safe, we will not let anyone approach them," said Brigadier General Barakat al-Ajarmah, a border guard commander. "Our forces have set up cameras along the entire border to monitor it day and night," he said. "Even if IS has a presence in the camp, we are kept informed." Salah Khodeir, a member of a southern Syrian tribal militia set up to fight IS, to protect refugees and organise aid deliveries, said the camp was safe and that aid was arriving.

"The Jordanians are giving us every assistance," he said, standing near the berm, surrounded by women and children. Maha, who fled Homs in central Syria a year ago and has been in the camp ever since, waited with her four children, aged between two and 12. "Life is really, really hard here in the desert. It's so cold and there are lots of diseases," she said. "People need to be allowed in to get the treatment they need" inside Jordan. — AFP

## TURKEY ACCUSES BERLIN OF WORKING AGAINST ERDOGAN POWERS REFERENDUM

**ANKARA:** Tensions between Turkey and Germany soared yesterday as Ankara accused Berlin of working for a 'No' vote in a referendum on Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers and a German town received a bomb threat after blocking a Turkish rally. The Turkish public will vote on April 16 on whether to create a presidential system which Ankara says will be like that in France or the United States and ensure political stability.

But critics say the system will further weaken parliament and herald one-man rule by Erdogan, Turkey's strongman president. Ahead of the referendum, Turkish politicians' trips to Germany have sparked controversy, notably a rally by Prime Minister Binali Yildirim in the western city of Oberhausen to garner support for a 'Yes' vote. And on Thursday, several local authorities blocked rallies by two more Turkish ministers, prompting a furious response from Ankara which promptly summoned the German envoy to protest.

"They don't want Turkey to campaign here, they are working for a 'No'," Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters in the Turkish capital yesterday. "They want to get in the way of a strong Turkey." Vienna has also said it would not allow any campaign-related events. Tensions with Berlin have also increased over Ankara's provisional detention of a German journalist on terror-related charges on Monday.

### Bomb threat

As the political fallout continued, the western German town of Gaggenau which cancelled a rally by Turkish Justice Minister Bekir Bozdog said it received a bomb threat early yesterday. "The caller cited the cancellation of the event with the Turkish justice minister as a reason," local official Dieter Spannagel said. Bozdog had been due to meet the Turkish community there on Thursday, but cancelled his address after the Gaggenau authorities withdrew their consent, citing capacity problems at the hall that was to have been used.

Cologne city authorities also withdrew permission for the Union of European Turkish Democrats to use a hall on Sunday for a speech by Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci. Writing on Twitter, Turkey's EU Minister Omer Celik said Germany was damaging "the bridges between the democracies and building ideological Berlin walls that cut people off from each other." And Cavusoglu accused German officials of double standards and failing to "honor democracy, freedom of expression or freedom of assembly". Lashing out, he accused them of allowing "terrorists" from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party to speak but denying the same right to Erdogan. — AFP

## CHEMICAL WEAPONS INJURE SEVEN IN MOSUL AREA

**BAGHDAD:** Seven people, among them five children, have been hospitalized over the past two days near Iraq's Mosul with injuries from chemical weapons, the Red Cross said yesterday. The Islamic State jihadist group, which holds the majority of west Mosul, has periodically used rudimentary chemical weapons in the course of its more than two-year war with Iraqi forces. "During the past two days, the hospital has admitted five children and two women showing clinical symptoms consistent with an exposure to a blistering chemical agent," Robert Mardini, the Red Cross Middle East director, said in a statement, referring to a facility near Mosul.

"The use of chemical weapons is absolutely prohibited under international humanitarian law. We are deeply alarmed by what our colleagues have seen, and we strongly condemn any use of chemical weapons, by any party, anywhere," Mardini said. The statement did not specify whether the seven were injured in one or more attacks, how the chemical weapons were delivered, or who was responsible. Several Iraqi military officers said they did not have information about recent chemical weapons attacks in the Mosul area.

IS overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in 2014, but Iraqi forces backed by US-led air strikes and other support have since regained much of the ground they lost to the jihadists. IS has periodically used chemical weapons in the course of the conflict, but while this has garnered widespread attention, the jihadists' bullets and bombs are far deadlier weapons. Iraqi forces launched an operation to retake west Mosul, the largest population centre still held by the jihadists, on February 19. —AFP