

International

Braving shelling, students back to Damascus schools

‘The walk to school has become so dangerous’

DAMASCUS: Hanan anxiously waved goodbye as her 11-year-old daughter headed into class in Syria's capital after more than a week at home under escalating rebel shellfire. "I can't describe my anxiety from the moment Lina leaves for school, until she returns. It's like she's coming back from some adventure or battle, not from class," the 44-year-old mother said. Hanan lives with her husband and three daughters in Al-Amin, a neighbourhood at the heart of Damascus's Old City which has been bombarded by rebels entrenched outside the capital.

Fighting between government troops and rebels escalated during the second week of February, forcing nearly a dozen schools in the Old City to shut for several days and prompting terrified parents to keep children at home. Hanan kept her daughters out of school for eight days. On Sunday, she woke up and checked a Facebook page called "Daily Mortar Strikes-Damascus" to see where shelling had hit overnight. Nervously, she sent her daughters off to class, personally accompanying Lina on the 10-minute walk to Josephine's Girls School.

"Today was better. We woke up to our alarms instead of explosions," she said. The walk to school has become so dangerous that Hanan said she would rather keep Lina at home. "It's better that my daughter loses a year of school than lose her life, or that I lose her," she said. Although it has been relatively insulated from the mass destruction wreaked on other Syrian cities, Damascus is regularly bombarded by armed opposition factions based in nearby Eastern Ghouta.

Wailing sirens

Syrian troops have recaptured most rebel positions around the capital in recent years, and are determined to clear the final pocket in Eastern Ghouta. Government forces intensely bombarded the enclave for five days earlier this month, killing dozens, as rebel rockets and mortars on Damascus

killed at least 20 people including three children, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The rain of shells has traumatised Damascenes including Fadia, who teaches English to eighth graders at a private school in the Bab Sharqi district. "We'd hear the sound of shells, we were so scared. Then one of our students, 15-year-old Rita al-Eid, was killed by a mortar," Fadia told AFP. "The next day, most of the classrooms were empty." She breathed a sigh of relief last week when her school sent out text messages saying classes were cancelled

for three days. "The sound of ambulances didn't stop at all. Sometimes we had to close the windows just so we could hear the students," said the 36-year-old.

"Then we'd open them again, scared the glass would shatter if a shell hit nearby." Now that shelling has subsided, Fadia's school will reopen on Monday. "I think residents will feel safe when they see that schools have opened again," she told AFP, but admitted she's still nervous. "Shells aren't a game. It's a matter of life or death-and life in the Old City is directly tied to the situation in Eastern Ghouta."

'Death can ride buses'

A few blocks away in Bab Touma, a handful of public buses stood waiting for passengers to head to the outskirts of the capital. Driver Abu Mohammad cleaned the glass of his white bus, pausing briefly to point out a crater punched in the pavement by a deadly mortar strike last week. "We all went home then, but we came back the next day—we have to live, and we have no other choice," he said. The unpredictability of the rocket and mortar fire has made Damascus residents afraid to leave their homes, making business slow for bus drivers, said Abu Mohammad, in his fifties. "Usually on days like this, there are tons of people from early in the morning until late at night. But there are so few people today," he said. "No one's leaving their homes except when absolutely necessary. Death can ride buses, too." — AFP



Rain of shells traumatises Damascenes



DAMASCUS: Syrian students head to school following days of calm in Damascus's Old City that has been bombarded by rebels entrenched on the capital's outskirts. — AFP

Saudi welcomes push for action against Tehran

MUNICH: Saudi Arabia yesterday welcomed a draft United Nations resolution offered by Britain, the United States and France that would condemn Iran for failing to stop its ballistic missiles from falling into the hands of Yemen's Houthi group. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir told Reuters the measure, if passed, would help hold Iran accountable for what he described as its "exports of ballistic missiles" to the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, and "radical and aggressive" behaviour in the region, including support for terrorist groups.

A proxy war is playing out in Yemen between Iran and US ally Saudi Arabia. A Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in 2015, backing government forces fighting Iran-allied Houthi rebels. Iran has denied supplying the Houthis with weapons. "In order to ensure that Iran comports itself with international law, we must have firmer positions with regards to ballistic missiles and with regards to Iran's support for terrorism," al-

Jubeir said in an interview during the annual Munich Security Conference. "Iran must be held accountable."

He said Iranian missiles were regularly used by Houthis "to target civilians in Yemen as well as inside Saudi Arabia." Al-Jubeir also called for changes to two aspects of the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran - cancellation of a so-called sunset provision, and expanded inspections to include non-declared and military sites. The draft UN resolution, which needs to be adopted by Feb 26, is likely to face resistance from Russia. A resolution needs nine votes in favor and no vetoes by Russia, China, the United States, France or Britain to pass.

Al-Jubeir said he hoped Russia could be persuaded to support the measure. The draft text to renew UN sanctions on Yemen for another year would also allow the 15-member council to impose targeted sanctions for "any activity related to the use of ballistic missiles in Yemen." Britain drafted the resolution in consultation with the United States and France before giving it to the full council on Friday, diplomats said. US President Donald Trump's administration has been lobbying for months for Iran to be held accountable at the United Nations, while at the same time threatening to quit a 2015 deal among world powers to curb Iran's nuclear program if "disastrous flaws" are not fixed. — Reuters



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