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IDLIB: Turkish medics carry a wounded Syrian woman, evacuated from Aleppo, to a field hospital near Idlib, Syria yesterday. Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said 7,500 civilians have been evacuated from the Syrian city of Aleppo and that he has reached out to Tehran in a bid to keep the process on track.—AP

ASSAD'S ALEPPO WIN DASHES SYRIANS' HOPES OF RETURN

FEARS OF MASS ARRESTS, CRACKDOWN BY ASSAD GOVERNMENT

BEIRUT: They fled Aleppo from different districts and at different stages of Syria's civil war, seeking refuge abroad. Now, for refugees who supported the opposition, President Bashar al-Assad's victory has dashed hopes of ever going home. Even as the uprising in Aleppo and cities across Syria descended into conflict, several former residents interviewed by Reuters said they had hoped there could still be change, a negotiated settlement and a chance to return.

But as Assad reasserts control after the army and its allies routed rebels in Aleppo, these Syrians living in exile fear that a new crackdown that will include arrests and executions, and be worse than anything witnessed pre-war. "If I go back, I'll be executed," said Abdulhamid Zughbi, a 30-year-old who fled besieged eastern rebel-held Aleppo earlier this year for Turkey, seeking medical treatment for his wife and infant son.

"I can't even think about returning as long as the Assad regime is still in power. It's impossible for anyone from the opposition," he said. Nearly 5 million Syrians have fled the country in a conflict that has killed more than 300,000 people and pitted multiple warring sides against each other, including jihadists who have come to dominate the insurgency in many areas.

The permanent displacement of millions of Syrians is one way in which its war and others in the region are causing irreversible changes. Most refugees are in neighboring countries including Turkey and Lebanon, and hundreds of thousands have gone to Europe.

Some will see Assad's win in Aleppo and other gains he has made with Russian and Iranian support as a chance to return and rebuild their lives - but not those involved in dissent when protests began in 2011.

Zughbi took part, then worked for years in medical aid and rescue in rebel-held eastern Aleppo. "My wife was lightly wounded in shelling and my son was ill. I thought I'd take them to Turkey and come back. That day, they closed the road, and I couldn't return," he said, referring to when government forces sealed off the rebel-held part of the city in August. They besieged it for months and then made a lightning advance to drive insurgents out of most of their areas they held in a matter of weeks.

'arrests have just begun'

As residents have poured out of rebel districts, including into areas under government control, the army has begun making arrests,

Zughbi said. "The arrests have just begun. They detain the more prominent people (activists) on the spot ... but for others - now they (the government) have the time, they'll investigate and then arrest them at a later stage.

"A friend of mine went to a government-held area and three days later they detained him." The United Nations voiced deep concern about reports of Syrian soldiers and allied Iraqi fighters summarily shooting dead 82 people in east Aleppo districts this week - accusations denied by the army and the Iraqi militia in question. Assad's opponents accused the government of mass arrests and forced conscription. A Syrian military source denied arrests but said identities of people leaving rebel-held areas were being checked and anyone who was unknown was being put into "specific places" in areas where civilians were gathered. The army says Syrians eligible for military service must serve.

For Abu Rakan, a 51-year-old refugee living in Lebanon, the death of his brother in law, a rebel fighter, and disappearance just days ago of his sister have underscored the danger for anyone linked to the opposition. "If we go back, it'll be more dangerous than before. Anyone

with the opposition is in danger.

"We've lived with this regime for 40 years. We know how it behaves, what it does," he said, referring also to Assad's father and former president Hafez al-Assad, who crushed leftist and Islamist challenges to his rule.

Abu Rakan said he would only return to Syria under a "full national reconciliation", and if there were a freely elected government in place and a new constitution - all of which look more than distant than ever. Hala, an activist who left government-controlled Aleppo in 2014, said she would not trust any settlement between the government and opposition - Assad had to go. "There's no way I can go back while the Assad regime is there," said the 37-year-old, who now lives in Beirut and works for a Syrian citizenship organization.

miserable exile

"Even if there was a kind of reconciliation, we wouldn't be able to live there. The oppression that existed before the revolution will multiply. "When the revolution began we were able to express our views and to live more freely. Even if we weren't arrested, we can't go back, knowing it will be just like it was," she said.—Reuters