

INDONESIANS DECRY IS 'LIES' AFTER FLEEING RAQQA

AIN ISSA, Syria: When Leefa set out from Indonesia for the Islamic State group's Syrian stronghold of Raqqa, she says she thought she was headed to an earthly paradise for the faithful. She and her family imagined being surrounded by true believers and expected free healthcare and jobs paying salaries they could only dream of in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

But now, as IS battles to defend its onetime bastion, Leefa and 15 other Indonesians are among thousands who have fled Raqqa in northern Syria. They are sheltering at a camp for the displaced in Ain Issa, 50 km north of Raqqa, waiting to learn their fates as the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advance inside the jihadist bastion.

In broken English, scattered with Arabic words picked up during their 22 months in Syria, Leefa and her compatriots admit they chose to travel to IS territory. They tell piecemeal stories, with details missing and lost in translation. "When we in Indonesia... we read, we watch in the internet, Dawlah Islamiya is a place to live, to become a real Muslim," said Leefa, 38, using the Arabic for jihadis. "I have health problems, I need an operation in my neck and it's very, very expensive in Indonesia," she added, her eyes downcast behind her black-rimmed glasses.

"But in Daesh, there's all free, all free," she said, using the Arabic acronym for IS. "We come to Daesh for become a real Muslim and for my health," she added, her face framed by a green headscarf. As she speaks, a young girl with the group wearing a purple headscarf uses a flattened plastic bottle as a makeshift fan to battle the heat. Ain Issa is overflowing with people displaced by the campaign to oust IS from Raqqa province.

'Everything is lies'

Leefa explains haltingly that she was in contact with IS members in Syria over the internet, who told her that those who made it to Raqqa would be reimbursed for their tickets and would enjoy good lives. But upon arrival, they found the situation harshly different from their expectations. Leefa discovered the operation she needed was not free after all, and went untreated. "Everything is lies," said 19-year-old Nur, another of the Indonesians at Ain Issa, her beige headscarf pinned neatly below her chin. "When we enter Daesh, enter their country, turns out all of them very different from what they said on the internet."

Nur said she and her family expected the male relatives among the group to have jobs. But when they arrived they were told that all men were obliged to join the ranks of IS fighters. "Our men enter to the jail, my father, my brother,"



Indonesians arrive at the Ain Issa camp, 50 km north of Raqqa, after fleeing the Islamic State (IS) group's Syrian bastion on Tuesday. —AFP

she said, speaking a mixture of Arabic and English, without explaining when her relatives were imprisoned and why. And she found she was constantly pursued by IS fighters seeking to marry her, she said. "There are many divorced (IS fighters), just married for two weeks or two months," she said. "Many men come to my house and tell to my father, I want your daughter," she said with disgust. Her brother was even stopped by a stranger

in the market in Raqqa, who asked him "do you have some girl or some sister, I want a wife." "Everywhere they talk about women," she said bitterly.

'They were tricked'

The stories told by members of the group, among them eight women, three children and five men, are impossible to confirm. But they match accounts by some other foreign escapees from IS ter-

ritory who describe being seduced by online depictions that differed vastly from the reality they discovered upon arrival in the jihadist group's self-declared "caliphate". The SDF fighters now advancing inside Raqqa against IS are interrogating the members of the Indonesian group but expect to free them, said Ain Issa camp official Fayruz Khalil.

"From what I understood from them... they were tricked," she told AFP. "They discovered that the picture the Islamic State group has painted for them was false... For the last 10 months they were trying to leave, but they only managed in the last few days to flee." The SDF plans to send the group of Indonesians over the border to the Iraqi city of Arbil and hand them to the Indonesian embassy.

According to Indonesian authorities around 500-600 Indonesians are believed to be in Syria at the moment. Around 500 more have sought to reach Syria but were deported before reaching IS territory. So far, authorities have registered over 60 people returning from Syria, who mostly face light vetting before being released without further monitoring, experts say. Indonesia has long struggled with Islamic militancy. IS has provided a potent new force for the country's radicals to rally around, and there has been a string of plots by local militants linked to the jihadists. — AFP

'STAGGERING' CIVILIAN DEATHS FROM US AIR STRIKES IN RAQQA

DAUNTING AID CHALLENGES AS CIVILIANS FLEE

GENEVA: Intensified coalition air strikes supporting an assault by US-backed forces on Islamic State's stronghold of Raqqa in Syria are causing a "staggering loss of civilian life", United Nations war crimes investigators said yesterday. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a group of Kurdish and Arab militias supported by a US-led coalition, began to attack Raqqa a week ago to take it from the jihadists. The SDF, supported by heavy coalition air strikes, have taken territory to the west, east and north of the city.

"We note in particular that the intensification of air strikes, which have paved the ground for an SDF advance in Raqqa, has resulted not only in staggering loss of civilian life, but has also led to 160,000 civilians fleeing their homes and becoming internally displaced," Paulo Pinheiro, chairman of the U.N. Commission of Inquiry told the Human Rights Council. Pinheiro provided no figure for civilian casualties in Raqqa, where rival forces are racing to capture ground from Islamic State. The Syrian army is also advancing on the desert area west of the city.

Separately, Human Rights Watch expressed concern in a statement about the use of incendiary white phosphorous weapons by the US-led coalition fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, saying it endangered civilians when used in populated areas. In its speech to the 47-member forum in Geneva, the US delegation made no reference to Raqqa or the air strikes. US diplomat Jason Mack called the Syrian government "the primary perpetrator" of egregious human rights violations in the country.

Pinheiro said that if the international coalition's offensive is successful, it could liberate Raqqa's civilian population, including Yazidi women and girls, "whom the group has kept sexually enslaved for almost three years as part of an ongoing and unaddressed genocide". "The imperative to fight terrorism must not, however, be undertaken at the expense of civilians who unwillingly find themselves living in areas where ISIL is present," he added.

Pinheiro also said that 10 agreements between the Syrian government and armed groups to evacuate fighters and civilians from besieged areas, including eastern Aleppo last December, "in some cases amount to war crimes" as civilians had "no choice". Syria's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Hussam Edin Aaala, denounced violations "committed by the unlawful US-led coalition which targets infrastructure, killing hundreds of civilians including the deaths of 30 civilians in Deir al-Zor".

The battle to oust IS from its stronghold is creating daunting challenges for aid groups. Tens of thousands of civilians have fled Raqqa and its surroundings since the SDF began its operation to capture the jihadist stronghold last year. But new waves of displacement are expected as the battle inside the city progresses. A key problem is getting aid supplies to the relatively remote desert region in Syria's north, with just a trickle of assistance currently crossing from neighboring Turkey and Iraq.

"There is supply but it's very, very limited and the needs of the population are very high," said Puk Leenders, emergency coordinator for northern Syria for the group Doctors Without Borders (MSF). Turkey considers the key Kurdish component of the SDF a "terrorist" group and its border with the area north of Raqqa is effectively closed. The border crossing with Iraq, over 300 km east of Raqqa city, is open to goods, but in practice sees little traffic, local officials say.

The United Nations, which operates inside Syria with government permis-

sion, has been able to airlift supplies to the city of Qamishli, northeast of Raqqa, from government-held Damascus. But "this offered limited capacity and was insufficient to meet all needs," said David Swanson, regional spokesman for the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The UN is now hoping to start transporting aid from Aleppo to Qamishli, a distance of more than 400 km, but the route must first be tested for security, said Swanson.

'Volatile security situation'

An estimated 300,000 civilians once lived under IS rule in Raqqa, including 80,000 displaced from other parts of Syria before the group seized the city. Tens of thousands fled Raqqa and surrounding areas as the SDF closed in on the jihadist bastion. The UN estimates more than 169,000 people fled Raqqa city and its environs in April and May alone, and thousands of displaced civilians are now living in overcrowded and underresourced camps.

In Ain Issa, 50 km north of Raqqa, new arrivals say they are sleeping on the ground, with neither mattresses under them nor tents overhead. "There are now more than 25,000 people in the Ain Issa camp, which was built with a capacity of 10,000," camp director Jalal Ayyaf told AFP. "International organizations are providing support, but it's not sufficient for the numbers who are arriving."

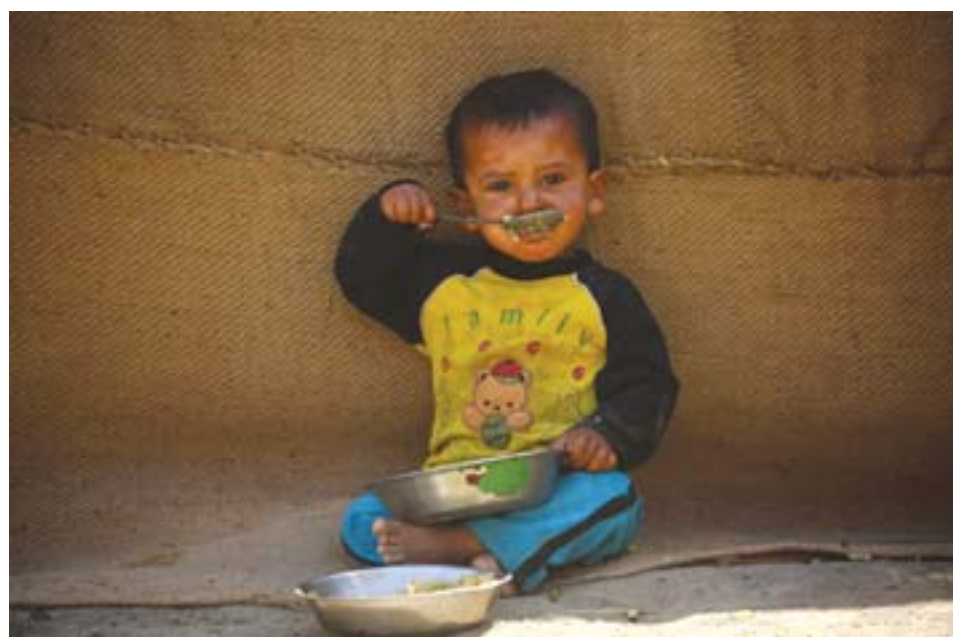
MSF's Leenders said up to 800 people were arriving at Ain Issa each day, and many more people were simply sleeping on roadsides or under trees in the countryside north of the city. The "highly volatile security situation" is another major concern for aid groups working in the region, said Paul Donohoe, senior media officer at the International Rescue Committee NGO. "We know that there are many mines and IEDs (improvised explosive devices), there is also the risk of IS attacks and there have been reports of some fleeing civilians being killed by coalition air strikes." "It is thought up to half the population of Raqqa could ultimately flee the city and they will still be very vulnerable to mines and IS snipers, as well as air strikes."

'Impossible choices'

Arriving civilians are already presenting health problems ranging from dehydration to untreated chronic illness. And aid groups expect an uptick in wounded arrivals as the fighting intensifies. MSF is establishing stabilisation points near the frontline to provide emergency care to keep the seriously injured alive until they reach hospitals. But there is a severe shortage of qualified medical staff in the region, Leenders said, and medical facilities have also been affected by the fighting. "Hospitals are being mined and it's really difficult to start those back up because they need to be demined... It can be extremely challenging."

The most difficult problem of all may simply be reaching those in need. "Many people fleeing... initially end up in locations too close to the frontline for aid agencies to safely respond," said Donohoe. And others cannot leave at all, with IS reportedly using threats, arrests and violence to prevent civilians fleeing. Those who do escape risk unexploded ordnance en route, and the threat of being mistaken for fleeing IS fighters by SDF forces or the US-led coalition.

MSF warned last week that civilians in the city faced "impossible choices". "Either they stay in Raqqa, subjecting their children to increased violence and air strikes, or they take them over the frontline, knowing they will need to cross minefields and may be caught in the crossfire." —Agencies



A young Syrian boy displaced from Raqqa eats at the Al-Karamah camp, some 20 km east of the Islamic State (IS) group's Syrian bastion on Tuesday. —AFP

WORLD'S LARGEST REFUGEE CAMP STRAINS TO KEEP KIDS IN SCHOOL

BIDI BIDI, Uganda: At this kindergarten on the edge of the world's largest refugee camp, there are no notebooks. When it's time to practice writing skills, children sit under a tree to doodle in the dirt while teachers use a blackboard. "Maybe this term we will provide the books," said Kevin Afura, who teaches at the school for 500 children operated by the aid group Save the Children. "They write on the ground."

Schooling is the latest challenge in this overcrowded refugee settlement where basic facilities like toilets are in short supply. This school's only classroom is a tent in which dozens of kids swarm an overwhelmed teacher. She soon releases them to the playground, where they either swing and slide or simply go home. One recent morning, parent Reida Yeno pointed dismissively and said the children like her 4-year-old son are falling behind in their studies: "They are just only playing."

The sprawling Bidi Bidi refugee settlement in northern Uganda is home to over 270,000 refugees from neighboring South Sudan's civil war, most of them women and children. There is an urgent need to keep the thousands of children in school despite funding shortages that have slowed the pace of humanitarian work, including a reduction in food rations for some refugees. This month Uganda hosts a United Nations-backed summit at which it hopes to raise global awareness of the crisis. Ugandan authorities have said they need about \$2 billion as thousands of South

Sudanese continue to pour in. In Bidi Bidi, the children often have to walk long distances to the nearest school in the roughly 230-sq-km settlement. Absenteeism is high, and other students have dropped out.

At Ombechi Primary School, supported by Uganda's government, head teacher Olega Drangu said some children attend in tattered clothes. Pencils and notebooks are few. Temporary classrooms have been battered by heavy winds. Drangu's office is in a decaying classroom block that local government engineers recently condemned as uninhabitable. Drangu said he hesitates to be as strict with refugee students as he might be toward locals. When a refugee child heads home at lunch break and doesn't return for afternoon classes, he said, it's probably because there was no food at home.

Nearly half of Ombechi Primary School's 1,470 students are refugees from South Sudan, where tens of thousands have died in often ethnically targeted violence since December 2013. Hundreds of thousands of people have poured into Uganda in the past year, creating what has been called the world's fastest-growing refugee crisis. One of the South Sudanese students is 17-year-old Lilian Mercy, who will sit her final examinations later this year. Yet she despairs over the lack of notebooks, which makes her return to old ones to find empty spaces in which she can scribble notes.



In this photo taken on June 7, 2017, a mixture of South Sudanese refugee children and Ugandan children stand outside their classroom during break at the Ombechi Primary School in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement in northern Uganda. — AP

News

in brief

Razed Bahrain protest hub reopens with new name

DUBAI: Bahrain's Pearl roundabout, hub of 2011 protests for a constitutional monarchy and an elected government, reopened under a new name yesterday six years after being demolished and sealed off. Witnesses in Manama told AFP that the roundabout, which was one of the capital's landmarks before the protests were crushed, has been replaced with a simple crossroads named Farouk Junction. The old roundabout, which boasted an imposing central monument of a white pearl supported by six white columns representing the six Gulf Arab states, was razed after troops and anti-riot police stormed a month-old protest camp there in March 2011. Inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings which swept the region that year, demonstrators had taken to the streets of the kingdom to demand sweeping reforms from the ruling family.

Tunisia extends 2015 state of emergency

TUNIS: Tunisia has extended for another four months a state of emergency in place since a 2015 jihadist attack, the president's office announced yesterday. "President Beji Caid Essebsi decided yesterday to extend the state of emergency for four months starting from Thursday, June 15," his office said on Facebook. The state of emergency has been in place since a Nov 2015 bombing in Tunis that killed 12 presidential guards. The Islamic State group claimed the attack as well as bombings earlier in 2015 at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis and at a beach resort near Sousse that killed a total of 59 foreign tourists and a Tunisian guard. A source in the president's office, who asked not to be identified, said that after recent attacks claimed by IS in London and Manchester, "it's better to be vigilant". The state of emergency gives much greater powers to the police and allows the banning of strikes and meetings likely to provoke "disorder", as well as measures "to ensure control of the press". It also allows the interior ministry to place under house arrest anyone whose activities it deems a "danger for security or public order".

PALESTINIANS NOT STOPPING 'MARTYR' PAYMENTS

RAMALLAH: Palestinian officials say there are no plans to stop payments to families of Palestinians killed or wounded carrying out attacks against Israelis, contradicting comments by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Tillerson told a Senate hearing on Tuesday he had received reassurances from President Mahmoud Abbas that the Palestinian Authority would end the practice of paying a monthly stipend to the families of suicide bombers and other attackers, commonly referred to by Palestinians as martyrs.

The issue of compensation has become a sticking point in efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, with Israeli officials citing it as one reason they do not regard Abbas as a "partner for peace". "They have changed their policy," Tillerson said, referring to the Palestinians. "At least I have been informed they've changed that policy and their intent is to cease payments."

But Palestinian officials said they were not aware of any change and that it was unlikely a policy that has been a cornerstone of social support for decades would be altered. "There have been talks about making the payments in a different way, but not ending them," said one official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment on discussions held with the Americans. "They could perhaps be labelled differently," he said, suggesting the description "martyr" could be dropped, but he added: "They are not going to be stopped." The Palestinian Authority makes a variety of social security payments, mostly to families, for those convicted and imprisoned by Israel for fighting against the occupation and those killed in violence, whether they were carrying out suicide attacks, shot while throwing stones or in other circumstances. Amounts vary depending on whether the person killed was married or had children. Those wounded also receive aid.

In total, some 35,000 families receive support from a dedicated fund established in the 1960s, including those living outside the Palestinian territories. Some estimates suggest the fund distributes as much as \$100 million a year. At the same time, there are 6,500 Palestinians in Israeli jails, including 500 detained without charge, in some cases for years. All of them, including around 300 children and 50 women, receive monthly support from the Palestinian Authority. For Abbas, ending such payments would be politically fraught. Surveys show he is highly unpopular and that would only likely worsen if support were stopped. It would probably strengthen his rival in the Islamist group Hamas. However, Abbas has taken some steps to stop payments in recent weeks, following meetings he held with President Donald Trump in Washington at the start of May and later the same month when the president visited the region. — Reuters