

SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA



Refugees who fled from Syria and Aleppo sit on a street outside a public park at the Fatih district in Istanbul, Turkey, 18 July 2014. © EPA

“EVERYONE WANTS TO LEAVE”

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SPEAKS WITH KURDISH CIVILIANS BESIEGED BY THE ISLAMIC STATE IN KOBANI, NEAR SYRIA'S TURKISH BORDER

The mainly Kurdish-populated border city of Kobani (also known by its Arabic name of Ayn al-Arab) in Aleppo province has been besieged by the Islamic State armed group (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)) since July 2013 following clashes with the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), the armed group linked to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), who took control of Kobani and the surrounding area in July 2012 in the context of the armed conflict taking place in Syria. Militants from IS currently surround the city and its inhabitants. There are estimated to be up to 200,000 people trapped inside Kobani. In July 2014 fighting intensified between IS and the YPG, and the siege in Kobani tightened as IS advanced closer, seizing several villages on the way. Similar to other areas besieged by government forces or other non-state armed groups across Syria, civilians in Kobani are forced to endure a life under siege, with all the hardship and privations this entails.

Until recently Kobani, at the border between Turkey and Syria, was a gateway for those hoping to flee the conflict and a route for the provision of food and medical supplies. However, border closures and stricter conditions imposed by the Turkish authorities have left many either trapped in Kobani or forced to take dangerous journeys through unofficial border crossings in order to escape. Amnesty International is

currently investigating reports of abuses at the Turkish border as individuals seek to flee from Kobani and elsewhere in Syria.

Living under harsh conditions, further heightened by the siege, and in increasing fear of an IS advance on the city, an activist described the situation in Kobani to Amnesty International after he was able to flee earlier this month:

“Around 6 months ago, IS deliberately cut off the electricity and the water. We have been relying on generators but we can't afford the petrol to run them anymore. We dug wells but we don't have chlorine to disinfect the water and therefore we have had a rise of water-related illnesses. Diarrhoea has spread very fast and many people have developed kidney stones. Food is scarce and very expensive when it is available as it has to be smuggled into the city either through IS-controlled areas or Turkey.

“Relief does come in through Turkey, but it is not enough. We don't have enough medical supplies to deal with the most basic illnesses, let alone diseases like tuberculosis [TB] and hepatitis, which are spreading at the moment. While in the past we used to take urgent cases to Turkey for medical treatment, this has become very difficult.

“Everyone is terrified of ISIS. Everyone in Kobani is talking about leaving; it is all you hear on the streets. The displacement that is happening from Kobani is enormous, thousands of people try to leave every day. The problem is that not everyone can afford to leave, and those who can leave now face being shot at by the Turkish border force

“A few days ago I went to the Turkish border in order to cross over legally but was stopped for many hours and denied entry. I was forced to cross illegally later and was shot at by Turkish border guards, but managed to run and hide. While I was waiting at the border crossing I witnessed a 17-year-old boy who had lost both

his arms and was trying to enter Turkey for medical treatment. He waited at the border for four hours, was refused entry and eventually had to go home.”

Another resident expressed similar concerns: “People are so tired, most are just passing days until they can leave. Everyone wants to leave. But the big question is ‘where do we go?’ We can’t go to Iraq, the world saw with their own eyes what IS did to the Yazidi in Sinjar there. We are also concerned about treatment in Turkey. We feel like IS is everywhere. The rich among us are trying to escape to Europe, while the poor are stuck here to face what is coming.”

CASE FOCUS - NASSER SABER BONDEK

"FEAR HAS BECOME OUR COMPANION, FEAR OF YOUR FATE"



Nasser Saber Bondek © Private

Nasser Saber Bondek (pictured) has been disappeared since 17 February 2014, when he was arrested at home by Syrian authorities.

Until his arrest, Nasser Saber Bondek wrote poetry and worked at the Arab Organization for Advertising, part of the Syrian Ministry of Information. His family home is in Sahnaya, a suburb of Damascus, though he is originally from al-Suwayda, a predominantly Druze area near the Jordanian border.

On the evening of 17 February, members of the Syrian security forces believed to be part of Military Intelligence, arrested at least four people from Sahnaya, including Nasser Saber Bondek.

A released detainee claims to have seen Nasser Saber Bondek shortly after his arrest at Military Intelligence Branch 227 in Damascus. However the Syrian authorities have not provided any information on Nasser Saber Bondek since his arrest.

The reasons for his arrest and enforced disappearance are unknown but could be related to his humanitarian assistance activities. Nasser

Saber Bondek had been providing aid to people internally displaced in Syria as a result of the conflict. At least two of the other people arrested from Sahnaya on the same day were arrested in connection with their alleged support for displaced people.

Amnesty International fears for Nasser Saber Bondek’s well-being. The body of another man arrested with him was returned to his family from the same Military Intelligence branch where Nasser Saber Bondek was last seen, three weeks after his arrest. A former detainee who was held in the same facility at the time around Nasser Saber Bondek’s arrest told Amnesty International:

“The treatment there was very bad, we were insulted, degraded and beaten. Other detainees were tortured in my view – kicked with military boots and electrocuted with four-pronged wires. They put us under cold water. But for me the worst torture was making us drink water with a petroleum-like substance in it, it would weaken our lungs. There was no medical care, it was non-existent. My family had no idea where I was. They thought I was dead. I never saw them throughout my detention there, I was not allowed to contact them.”

Farizah Jahjah Bondek, Nasser Saber Bondek’s wife, is a peaceful activist who fled Syria with their children prior to her husband’s disappearance out of fear of arrest. She told Amnesty International how her husband’s disappearance affects her family:

“Nasser, every minute of our day is spent in pain and agony since you were detained. We have lost any joy and fear has become our companion, fear of your fate. We long for your presence and to hear your voice. The children’s fear over your fate is robbing them of their childhood. There are no words to describe our pain and fear over your long absence and not knowing your fate.”

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Nasser Saber Bondek if he is detained solely for his humanitarian work.

CAMPAIGNING

To campaign for Nasser Saber Bondek, please visit:
amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/022/2014/en

For more information on Nasser Saber Bondek’s case, please visit:
<http://free-syrian-voices.org/nasser-saber-bondek/>

MORE INFORMATION