

The escalation in the fighting, along with Russian airstrikes, is fueling the kind of desperation that has propelled a growing number toward neighboring countries and to Europe.



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MIDDLE EAST

Violence in Syria Spurs a Huge Surge in Civilian Flight

By KAREEM FAHIM and MAHER SAMAAAN OCT. 26, 2015

BEIRUT, Lebanon — A tenuous truce in the Syrian countryside north of the city of Homs was shattered this month when Russian warplanes attacked the village of Ter Ma'aleh, killing at least a dozen people and sending most of the residents into hurried exile.

The assault on the village was part of a wider escalation of violence across the country that has displaced tens of thousands of people in just weeks and led relief workers to warn that Syria is facing one of its most serious humanitarian crises of the civil war.

The intensity of the fighting, they say, is fueling increased desperation as a growing number of Syrians are fleeing to neighboring countries and, especially, to Europe. More than 9,000 migrants a day crossed into Greece last week, according to the International Organization for Migration, the most since the beginning of the year.

The influx has overwhelmed the authorities in Greece and the northern European countries where most asylum seekers aim to settle. The leaders of

those countries moved late Sunday to deal with the increasing flow of tens of thousands of people escaping the war in Syria and elsewhere. European Union leaders in Brussels agreed to establish reception centers in Greece and along the so-called Balkan route in Europe to process and hold up to 100,000 asylum seekers.

In Homs, Hama and Aleppo, a Syrian government offensive backed by Russian air power has reactivated dormant front lines and swept through areas that had largely escaped the fighting.

Thousands of families have fled as the government, the rebel groups and the Islamic State all try to hold or capture territory. Aid groups based in Turkey are rushing to provide food and other supplies to civilians, saying they are concerned that roads will be captured or cut by the new hostilities. And with winter approaching, they fear they are running out of time.

“You are really seeing these huge front lines open up, and a significant amount of bombing comes with it,” said Sylvain Groulx, the head of mission for Syria at Doctors Without Borders. “There is so much displacement. We are very worried.”

The United Nations said in a statement that at least 120,000 people had been uprooted in Aleppo, Hama and Idlib Provinces this month. Most of the displaced have found shelter near their home villages as they try to wait out the fighting, with few Syrian provinces considered safe and the border with neighboring Turkey closed, for the moment.

For almost two years, a relative calm in the village of Ter Ma’aleh had made it a refuge for thousands of people displaced by the war from other towns, residents said.

A woman who asked to be identified as Umm Suleiman, or the mother of Suleiman, said her family decided to flee Ter Ma’aleh a week ago, after a bomb fell near her house and killed a relative. They found a car to drive them out of

the area, but ran into snipers and more shelling on the road. The family rented a hut on a farm and were waiting there, dreading the arrival of government troops.

It was at least the second time that they had been forced from their home in four years, said Umm Suleiman, who is expecting her fifth child. "All we want is for someone to look with mercy upon us," she said.

Her family, though, was unlikely to receive help anytime soon. Roughly five million Syrians in similar circumstances are already living in areas that are considered difficult to reach by relief workers, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Nearly half a million of those are in areas that are besieged by fighting, living on either side of the front lines, according to Pawel Krzysiek, a Red Cross spokesman in the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Even before the latest upsurge in violence, life had become significantly more desperate this year in Syria, with two-thirds of the country's 18 million people in dire need of humanitarian aid, according to the Red Cross. For those who are internally displaced, roughly eight million people, the decision to stay in Syria was becoming increasingly untenable. Prices of basic goods inside the country, for instance, have risen 30 percent since the beginning of the year, Mr. Krzysiek said.

Rae McGrath, the Turkey and northern Syria country director for the charity Mercy Corps, said that it was becoming harder and harder for people to secure food in places like Aleppo Province because of the sustained intensity of the fighting among the government, the rebel groups and the Islamic State.

Markets are harder to reach as movement itself has become more perilous or impossible. In recent months, for the first time during the conflict, people have been telling him that they depended on food deliveries from aid agencies to survive, he said.

For many Syrians in government-held areas, Russia's intervention, on

Sept. 30, came just in time, shoring up the flagging Syrian Army and staving off the threat from the rebels. But in parts of central and northern Syria, where the violence has recently spiked, residents said Russia had exacerbated the suffering.

Government troops, buoyed by Russia's assistance, have embarked on a broad new offensive against the insurgents, leading to the latest wave of displacement. And the Russian warplanes, dropping what were widely perceived as more powerful munitions, have added to the sense of fear.

"It has been a very severe, difficult war, but what we see now is far worse," said Zaidoun Alzoabi, the head of a union of Syrian medical care and relief organizations, speaking on the phone from Turkey after returning from a trip to Syria last week. "The battles are quite intense, and the airstrikes have become very, very heavy," he said.

Mr. Alzoabi said that in opposition-held areas in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib, he had found people "full of despair."

"The airstrikes are the major reason," he said. "There is some psychological effect for people, hearing there is a superpower intervening in the war."

Over the past few weeks, Syrian medical groups and human rights workers have documented several Russian airstrikes that appeared to target hospitals and other medical facilities. And in a report released on Sunday, Human Rights Watch said that at least two Russian airstrikes on Oct. 15 — in Ter Ma'aleh, and in another village in northern Homs — had killed at least 59 civilians, including 46 people from one family who were apparently related to a rebel commander. The Kremlin rejected the report on Monday.

In the aftermath of the airstrikes and other attacks, some residents of rural Aleppo Province had fled toward northern Idlib Province, near the border with Turkey, sometimes with their animals in tow, according to a local

activist at a camp along the border. But that was as far as they could go: With the frontier largely sealed by Turkey, smugglers were charging up to \$300 to cross, an impossible sum for most.

If the current hostilities continue, Turkey could face more pressure to open the border, opening the door for a new wave of refugees to make the dangerous voyage toward Europe, relief workers said. Approximately 48,000 migrants arrived in Greece over five days last week, the highest rate this year, according to the International Organization for Migration.

In northern Homs, for now, fleeing villagers sheltered under trees or in destroyed houses or slept in the open on the side of the road. To leave the province meant risking the government's checkpoints. "There are no safe roads for them," said Hassan Abou Nouh, an activist in the area.

"You can see people everywhere, scattered around the roads," he said. "The situation is disastrous."

Hwaida Saad contributed reporting.

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