

Starvation in Madaya: How Hezbollah role in siege could hurt it in Lebanon

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(The Christian Science Monitor) Broadcast images of emaciated children and tales of starving Syrians forced to eat grass and leaves in the besieged town of Madaya have provoked horror around the world.

In Lebanon, they have fuelled criticism of Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Shi'ite political group that is encircling the town alongside Syrian troops. On Friday, demonstrations in support of the town and against the siege were held here amid warnings the humanitarian crisis could be detrimental to Sunni-Shi'ite relations internally.

Hezbollah blamed anti-regime fighters for monopolizing the dwindling food supplies in Madaya and refusing to allow civilians to leave.

The growing outcry concerns the fate of some 42,000 people in Madaya, according to United Nations figures. The Syrian government agreed yesterday to temporarily lift the siege as part of a UN-brokered deal that will also see supplies reach two Shi'ite towns in northern Syria besieged by Syrian rebels.

Several thousand Hezbollah fighters are fighting in Syria on the side of the regime and have led multiple offensives across the country. They have proven more reliable than the depleted Syrian army and relatively inexperienced militias from Iraq and Afghanistan also being supported by Iran.

For the past six months, Hezbollah fighters have helped Syrian troops mount a siege on Madaya, west of Damascus and 7.5 miles from Lebanon's eastern border, using checkpoints, snipers, and landmines to hem in the population.

The last food deliveries to reach Madaya were on October 18. With food stocks depleted, starving residents have been forced to eat grass, leaves, and water flavored with spices.

Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) said Thursday that 23 people have died of starvation since December 1 at a medical clinic run by the organization, six of them infants under a year old.

“The medics we support report injuries and deaths by bullets and landmines among people that tried to leave Madaya,” said Brice de le Vingne, MSF’s director of operations, in early January. “The desperation is so acute that yesterday people rioted trying to seize the last food available at an MSF-supported distribution point, which was intended to provide for the most vulnerable.”

Madaya lies at an altitude of nearly 4,000 feet and has been buffeted the past week with snowstorms. Residents reportedly are burning furniture in their homes or risking their lives to chop trees in a wood on the edge of town that falls within range of Syrian government snipers.

“The situation in Madaya is very tragic,” said Abu Omar, a father of four and resident of the town who recently reached Lebanon. “There is no food. I have seen people eat leaves and hunt cats. There are no medicines, none of the things that people need for everyday life. We are living by miracles.”

Hezbollah’s role in the siege has been seized upon in the past two days by its political rivals in Lebanon.

“The Syrian town of Madaya is witnessing a siege of starvation that amounts to crimes of war and can be classified in the category of crimes against humanity,” read a statement released Friday by lawmakers who are rivals to those in the Hezbollah political party. “The Lebanese ... see that Hezbollah’s involvement in the siege and starvation is a shameful act that contradicts its ‘political ethics’ which the party claims to uphold.”

Other leading Sunni politicians in Lebanon also have criticized Hezbollah’s actions in Madaya.

“[Hezbollah’s] possible involvement in this crime will negatively impact ties between the Lebanese,” said Fouad Siniora, a former prime minister.

On Friday, a Sunni political group held a rally in Beirut in support of Madaya, while another group briefly blocked the main highway linking Beirut to Damascus to protest the siege.

Hezbollah denies that it is deliberately starving civilians. "Armed groups in Madaya control food supplies within the town and sell to whomever can afford it, thus starvation is widespread among poor civilians," it said in a statement Thursday.

Hezbollah added that the militants are banning residents from leaving Madaya and are refusing to negotiate a deal in which 300 of the 600 rebels would hand themselves over to the Syrian government.

"The goals behind the Madaya smear campaign are obviously to tarnish the image of the Lebanese resistance [Hezbollah] and Syrian government," the statement concluded.

Abu Omar confirms some of Hezbollah's accusations, saying the militants are banning residents from leaving because they fear coming under attack if the civilians are no longer present. Abu Omar slipped out of Madaya 10 days ago to reach Beirut where he is working in a bakery.

"It was very scary and a big risk to leave," he said. "I waited until early evening when it was dark because there are snipers on both sides. They shoot at anything that moves."

Madaya is not the only town in Syria under siege. Fouaa and Kefraya, two Shi'ite towns in northern Syria loyal to the Assad regime, have been under siege for months by rebel groups.

In September, the UN brokered a deal to ease sieges on three towns in Syria which if successful could lead to further local cease-fire arrangements. Under the deal, last month, dozens of wounded fighters and civilians were able to leave the town of Zabadani, which lies beside Madaya, and cross into Lebanon where they were flown to Turkey. In exchange, Shi'ites from Fouaa and Kefraya left Syria via Turkey and flew to Lebanon.