Explainer: What are the clashes in Syria's Deraa about?

Fighting between Syrian government forces and rebels is intensifying near Deraa, in what has been described as the heaviest clashes since the southern eponymous province came under government control three years ago.

Fighting started when government forces fired artillery shells towards the former opposition hub of Deraa al-Balad in tandem with a ground offensive.

Nearly half of the population of the rebel-held district fled the heavy shelling and ground battles, but the United Nations warned remaining civilians are cut off with dwindling supplies.

On Thursday, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, said civilians were suffering from "acute shortages" of food, fuel, water and medicines in a "near siege-like" situation.

"The situation is alarming," Pedersen said.

Here is what you need to know about the conflict:

Why is Deraa important?

Deraa, which borders Jordan and is close to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, is widely seen as the cradle of the 2011 uprising in Syria, which sparked a decade-long civil war that has killed almost half a million people.

In 2011, young boys who scrawled graffiti against President Bashar al-Assad were detained in Deraa, sparking nationwide protests.

After the demonstrations evolved into war, rebels seized control.

The rebels hung on until 2018. But after weeks of deadly fighting, the Russia-backed regime retook control under a surrender deal.

Moscow had brokered similar so-called "reconciliation" accords in Syria's second city of Aleppo, as well the Eastern Ghouta region, outside the capital, Damascus.

Under those deals, rebels handed over their heavy weapons and left on buses. But in Deraa, many former opposition fighters stayed behind.

While some did switch sides and join regime forces, others kept their guns and maintained control over several areas.

In the provincial capital, Deraa city, regime forces returned to the northern half, known as Deraa al-Mahatta.

But the southern half, Deraa al-Balad, remained under rebel control.

What sparked the fighting now?

Since the 2018 "reconciliation" deal, Deraa province has seen regular explosions and hit-and-run attacks.

During presidential elections in May – a vote widely criticised by Syria's opposition – protesters in Deraa al-Balad took to the streets demanding the "fall of the regime".

The election was held only in the two-thirds of Syria under government control, and there were no ballot boxes in Deraa al-Balad.

After al-Assad celebrated winning his fourth term in power, he promised to return all of Syria to state control.

Residents and activists believe the government wants "revenge".

"Many people in Deraa al-Balad are wanted by the regime," said activist Omar al-Hariri.

Which forces are involved?

In late July, some of the fiercest clashes to rock the province since government forces returned left 32 dead, including 12 civilians, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said.

The government seized farmland outside Deraa al-Balad before the fighting largely subsided and Russian-mediated talks began.

But Hariri said pro-Damascus forces continued to shell the area "to exhaust fighters who only have light weapons".

Mohammad al-Abdallah, director of the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, said Iran was pushing Damascus to bolster its forces there.

Deraa is close to the Golan Heights, occupied by Tehran's arch-foe Israel. Pro-Iran fighters are deployed in parts of the province.

Russia, meanwhile, has sought to boost its influence by backing the Syrian army's Fifth Corps, which has absorbed many ex-rebels.

"Competition between the Iranians and the Russians over areas of influence in Syria" was also at play, al-Abdallah added.

Hariri said residents in Deraa al-Balad now face a bleak choice.

"We have two options," he said. "Let the Fifth Corps deploy with Russia pulling the strings, or face a sudden onslaught from regime forces."

What is the effect on civilians?

The UN's envoy, Geir Pedersen, warned on Thursday of his "growing concern" at the situation, calling for an end to the fighting and unimpeded humanitarian access. About 24,000 of Deraa al-Balad's 55,000 residents have fled to surrounding areas or regime-controlled parts of the city, the UN humanitarian agency says.

"Civilians are suffering with acute shortages of fuel, cooking gas, water and bread," Pedersen said. "Medical assistance is in short supply to treat the injured".

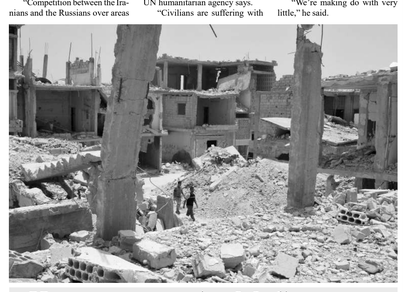
Government forces encircle the district with entry limited to a single road with checkpoints.

Abu al-Tayb, a media activist in Deraa al-Balad, said people were "at the mercy" of al-Assad's forces.

"Sometimes only women and children are allowed to take the road, and sometimes they close it off completely," he said.

He said flour had run out, the regime had cut off the water supply to the main storage tank, and there were regular power cuts.

"We're making do with very little," he said.



Heatwave sweeping Mediterranean latest sign of climate change impacts

A dangerous heatwave is sweeping across the Mediterranean, the latest in a series of recent extreme weather events that underscore the real-world impacts of climate change.

The Italian island of Sicily may have smashed continental Europe's heat record when thermometers hit 48.8 degrees Celsius (119.8 Fahrenheit) on Wednesday. While residents in the region are used to warm weather this time of year, authorities across the Mediterranean are warning their populations to take precautions as temperatures soar above 100°F.

The severe heat comes just days after the world's top climate scientists said in a landmark report that the past decade was most likely hotter than any period in the last 125,000 years and that global temperatures will only keep rising without drastic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

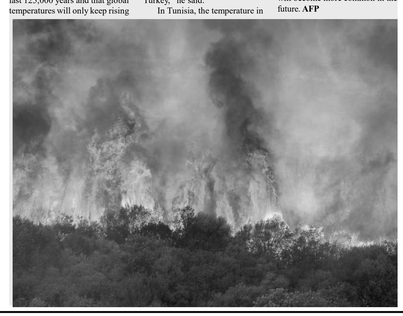
Researchers found that climate change has caused heatwaves to become more frequent and intense across the world, leading to the deaths of vulnerable people who don't have access to proper protection. Heat can be particularly dangerous for children and the elderly.

"This is the Mediterranean, so summers are hot and dry, but this is unusually intense, said Bob Stefanski, head of applied climate services at the World Meteorological Organization. "It's a taste of things to come. The weather system that's causing the heat is set to most greatly impact central and southern Spain, southern Italy, Greece, the Balkans and western Turkey," he said.

In Tunisia, the temperature in the capital Tunis hit a record 48.9° C on Tuesday, breaking the previous record set in 1982, according to Mehrez Ghannouchi, a forecaster at Tunisia's Institut National de la Meteorologie. Kairouan, another city located south of the capital, recorded a record-breaking 49°C on Wednesday.

There's a risk the temperatures could worsen fires that have been raging in Greece in recent days. "The heatwave will exacerbate and dry out and make the fire danger much greater, Stefanski said.

There should be some relief next week with temperatures forecast to dip. Still, as burning fossil fuels continue to play a major role in the world's energy system, scientists predict that such heatwaves will become more common in the future. **AFP**



US envoy heads to Ethiopia to urge end to fighting

US President Joe Biden is sending his special envoy for the Horn of Africa to Ethiopia to push for an end to increased fighting that has worsened fears of an unfolding humanitarian disaster.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan announced the trip by envoy Jeffrey Feltman on Thursday, while urging Ethiopia's government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to come to the negotiating table after nine months of conflict.

"Months of war have brought immense suffering and division to a great nation that won't be healed through more fighting," Sullivan tweeted.

"We call on all parties to urgently come to the negotiating table," he said.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's federal troops and forces from the TPLF, which controls Tigray, have been battling since November in a war that has killed thousands of people and sparked a major refugee crisis. The conflict has been marked by ethnic killings and rape as a weapon of war.

In July, the United Nations warned more than 100,000 children in Tigray could suffer life-threatening malnutrition in the next 12 months. A total of 400,000 people risk famine in the region, according to the UN, with aid workers saying they have struggled to gain access.

Earlier this week, TPLF forces said they were in talks to forge a military alliance with fighters from Ethiopia's most populous region, Oromiya, heaping pressure on the government in Addis Ababa.

The leader of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) told Reuters news agency by phone on Thursday the group opted to join forces with the TPLF, which it bitterly opposed during its three decades in power in Ethiopia, because they now have a common cause.

"I hope we are going to squeeze this government and if possible – and I know it's possible – we are going to overthrow this regime and stop this crisis," said OLA leader Kumsa Diriba, who goes by the nom de guerre Jaal Marroo.

The government has designated both the TPLF and the OLA as "terrorist" organisations.

Also this week, Abiy's government urged citizens to join the fight against the resurgent TPLF. It said all capable Ethiopians should join the army, special forces and militias to show their patriotism.

After retaking control of most of Tigray in late June and early July, Tigrayan forces have pushed into the adjoining Afar and Amhara regions, capturing the United Nations World Heritage site of Lalibela last week.

Feltman's mission follows a trip earlier this month to Addis Ababa by US aid chief Samantha Power, who pushed all sides to end hostilities and warned of an impending "humanitarian catastrophe" if more aid cannot enter.

What is the Ebola-like Marburg virus?

A severe, highly fatal virus called Marburg has been detected in Guinea, killing one and potentially spread to more than 150 others.

The case, detected last week in Guéckédou, marked the first time the virus has been spotted in West Africa, and has sparked a desperate scramble to find everyone that may have come into contact with the man who died. All of the people – about 155 - he met have now been traced and told to self-isolate. They are also being kept under observation for three weeks.

No other cases have been detected yet — but the World Health Organization warned the affected village is near the country's border with Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The Marburg virus disease was first diagnosed in 1967 and is capable of causing haemorrhagic fever in humans and is similar to Ebola. The virus is one of the deadliest pathogens known to exist, killing between half and 90 per cent of everyone who gets infected.

How is it spread?

The virus is carried by fruit bats but can be spread between humans through blood and bodily fluids, as well as touching contaminated surfaces. Pathogens have tended to cross from animals to humans in the region because of their close interaction, notably in the hunting and eating of 'bushmeat' from the wild.

What are the symptoms?

Infected patients can resemble ghosts, with deep-set eyes and expressionless faces, according to the WHO. Other symptoms include headache, diarrhea, stomach pain and vomiting. After five days, many patients start to bleed under the skin, in internal organs or from openings such as the mouth, eyes and ears. Patients often die from nervous system failure, not blood loss.

How is Marburg treated?

There is no vaccine or drug specifically directed to the virus. Only supportive care is available.

what are the experts saying?

Dr Matshidiso Moeti, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa has applauded "the alertness and the quick investigative action by Guinea's health workers."

He added: "The potential for the Marburg virus to spread far and wide means we need to stop it in its tracks.

We are working with the health authorities to implement a swift response that builds on Guinea's past experience and expertise in managing Ebola, which is transmitted in a similar way."

Dr Georges Ki-Zerbo, the WHO's country head in Guinea, said Marburg had been circulating in animals, particularly bats, in southern Guinea and neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia.

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REQUEST FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST (REoI)

(CONSULTING SERVICES)

Country: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Grant No.: Funded by ATRA (TDF)
Assignment Title: Post-Implementation Review (PIR)
Duration of Assignment: 60 days
Implementing Agency: Afghanistan Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (ATRA)
Province: Kabul Afghanistan
Reference No: ATRA –NCB- 1400- CS-QCBS-03
Issue date: August- 9, 2021
Expressions of interest must be delivered in a written form to the address below (in person, or by e-mail) by **August 30 - 2021** at **10:00 p.m. Kabul Local Time**
Further information in respect to this REOI and TOR can be obtained at the address below by email or in person during office hours *08:00-04:00 Hours.*
Address of Focal Persons for Enquires and Submission of EoIs:
Attn: Maryam shah, Acting Procurement Director or Mohammad Iqbal Rahmani Head of Procurement / Najeeballah Sherzai Procurement General Manager of ATRA
E-mail to: **m.shah@atra.gov.af**
Copied to **n.rahmani@atra.gov.af**
n.sherzai@atra.gov.af
Contact# 0770660294 ,073035500 ,0700062489,+93202106037
Afghanistan Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (ATRA), Mohammad Jan Khan Wat 13 floor of MCIT Building of Kabul, Afghanistan

Websites: (www.atra.gov.af) or AGEOPS.