

Pentagon rejects UN call for pause in siege of Raqqa

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The Pentagon has rejected an urgent call by United Nations officials for a humanitarian pause in the US-led siege of Raqqa to allow the up to 25,000 civilians trapped in the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-controlled Syrian city to escape the intensifying bloodshed.

“Going slower only delays the liberation and subsequently costs more civilians their lives,” Col. Joe Scrocca, director of public affairs for the command of Operation Inherent Resolve, as the Pentagon has dubbed the US military offensive in Iraq and Syria, told the website Middle East Eye. “The only way to save the people is to liberate them from ISIS. The longer this takes, the more the people will suffer under ISIS.”

The nearly three-month old offensive has already devastated the city, driving out some 270,000 of its inhabitants and leaving much of it in rubble. Those left behind lack access to food, water, electricity and medical attention. Residents have reportedly been reduced to eating leaves and grass to stay alive. At least half of those trapped in the city are children.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians have been killed by US bombs, rockets and artillery shells. The London-based monitoring group Airwars gave a conservative estimate at the end of last week of at least 725 such deaths since the siege began in June. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, another monitoring group based in the UK, gave the figure of 773 civilians killed by US strikes, including 197 children and 119 women.

US proxy ground troops organized in the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, which is dominated by the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia and operates under the direction of US special operations troops, have reportedly captured up to 60 percent of the city, leaving what remains of the population trapped in heavily

populated urban areas.

The top advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria told the media in Geneva recently that he could not imagine a “worse place on earth” than five densely populated central Raqqa neighborhoods in which the majority of the city’s civilian population has been subjected to relentless bombardment.

Calling for a pause in the siege, Egeland stated: “This is the time to try anything to allow the safe escape. At the moment few people leave, because they are afraid for their lives. There is heavy shelling from the surrounding and encircling forces, and there (are) constant air raids from the coalition. So the civilian casualties are large. There seem to be no escape for these civilians.”

Egeland specifically called for an end to US attacks on boats carrying civilians attempting to flee Raqqa by crossing the Euphrates River.

Earlier this summer, Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, the commander of the US forces in Iraq and Syria, announced that the US military would “shoot every boat we find.”

In addition to scores of daily air strikes, US Marine units have provided support to the advance of the Kurdish militia by shelling the city with Howitzers firing 155 mm shells and GPS-directed 227 mm mortars. In a recent report, Amnesty International condemned the use of these weapons, “which have a wide impact radius and which cannot be accurately pinpointed at specific targets,” and noted that their use against “civilian neighborhoods has exacted a significant toll on civilians.”

Their use, the report suggested, constituted “not only disproportionate but also indiscriminate attacks,” i.e., a war crime. The Pentagon has also used white phosphorous shells in Raqqa, a chemical weapon that

burns flesh to the bone and has been banned under the Geneva Conventions for use in populated areas.

On Wednesday, US-led command reported that it had conducted 51 airstrikes in Syria the previous day--46 of them against targets in Raqqa--involving 84 separate "engagements."

On the ground, Raqqa is being Slaughtered Silently, a monitoring group originally formed to expose the crimes of ISIS within the city, reported on its Twitter account Wednesday that there had been 140 airstrikes over the previous 48 hours, including one that destroyed the city's Almoasa hospital.

Washington is reprising in Raqqa the criminal slaughter it directed against the civilian population of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, where estimates of the number of civilians killed during a US-led, nine-month-long siege range as high as 40,000.

In both cities, the Pentagon has pursued what the US defense secretary, recently retired Marine Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis, described in May as "annihilation tactics" that have entailed indiscriminate violence against heavily populated areas.

The slaughter in both Mosul and Raqqa has been largely passed over in silence by the same US and Western media that relentlessly denounced both the Syrian government and its ally Russia for war crimes in the retaking of eastern Aleppo from Al Qaeda-linked militias, an operation whose civilian toll pales in comparison to that inflicted by the US-led sieges.

The US rejection of the UN call for a pause in the siege against Raqqa is driven not by any desire to save human lives or "liberate" civilians from the clutches of ISIS. Rather, Washington is determined to wage an uninterrupted offensive with the aim of seizing control of strategically vital territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq held previously by ISIS and thereby denying it to Syrian government forces backed by Iran and Russia.

While the US and its proxy forces have laid siege to Raqqa, the Syrian army has largely driven ISIS forces out of the central desert region, advancing east into Deir Ezzor province to within 40 miles of its capital, where government forces and an estimated 200,000 civilians have endured an ISIS siege since 2015.

The area is the center of the Syrian oil industry and borders Iraq. Washington aims to seize control of the border area to counter Iranian influence in the region

and interrupt a land route linking Iran through Iraq to Syria, Lebanon and its ally, Hizbollah the powerful Lebanese Shia political movement and militia. To that end, US and British forces have established a base in southeastern Syria, training "rebels" that it hopes to employ in seizing territory from ISIS and denying it to Damascus.

The threat of this scramble for eastern Syria escalating into a wider regional war has been fueled by the aggressively anti-Iranian posture adopted by the Trump administration, which appears determined to smash up the 2015 nuclear agreement reached by Tehran with the so-called P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States—plus Germany).

Meanwhile, the US intervention has been further complicated by armed clashes between US troops and a Turkish-backed militia in northern Syria near the city of Manbij, which was seized by the US-backed and Kurdish-dominated SDF last year. Turkey has opposed the consolidation of an autonomous Kurdish-controlled entity on its border.

"Our forces did receive fire and return fire and then moved to a secure location," Pentagon spokesman Col. Ryan Dillon said Wednesday, adding that the US told Turkey to make clear to the forces it backs in Syria that that firing on US forces "is not acceptable." These same "rebels" were previously armed and supported by the CIA.



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