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Rebels Say Russia Blocks Food Supply to Syria Refugee Camp

By Reuters

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Muhammad Hamed / Reuters

Russian military police and Syrian troops have blockaded food and goods supply routes to the Rukban refugee camp in Syria in a bid to force thousands of desperate residents to leave the U.S.-protected area near a Pentagon-run base, camp residents and rebels said on Wednesday.

Russia's defense ministry announced on Tuesday it was opening two so-called humanitarian corridors on the outskirts of the camp for those who wanted to leave. More than 50,000 people, mainly women and children, live there in dire conditions.

Residents and rebels said the army and the Russian military placed checkpoints to prevent traders coming from government-held areas to supply the camp with food and fuel, causing prices to skyrocket and causing scarcity.

"They are preventing traders from coming here; there is no fresh produce or wheat or fuel,"

Colonel Muhanad Talaa, commander of the Pentagon-backed Maghawir Thawra in the area, told Reuters.

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Developments at Rukban are watched closely around the region because the camp falls within a 55-kilometer so-called deconfliction zone established by the Pentagon with the aim of shielding the Tanf garrison from attacks.

The U.S. base lies on the strategic Damascus-Baghdad highway, once a major supply route for Iranian weapons into Syria.

"The aim is to get people to leave by force to get out of the zone," Talaa said echoing widespread fears by residents.

Tens of thousands of displaced Syrians living in former Islamic State territory in eastern Syria who fled a massive Russian bombing campaign had over the last few years trekked to the border area seeking protection from air raids.

Most of the camp's residents have preferred to stay rather than go back to their homes in territory regained last year by the army for fear of retribution or being drafted.

"They opened the corridors to pressure people to go to regime areas where they get arrested and taken to military conscription," said Mahmoud Humaili, a local camp figure.

Moscow and its ally Damascus say the U.S. forces are occupying Syrian territory and providing a safe haven for rebels they regard as terrorists.

The U.S. State Department said on Monday that Rukban residents should not leave under duress and rejected any unilateral process by Moscow or Damascus, saying safe, voluntary and dignified evacuations should be coordinated with U.N. bodies.

Damascus-based U.N. spokeswoman Fadwa AbedRabou Baroud said the international body was not involved in the decision to set up the corridors nor would it be on site although it welcomed any effort to end the suffering of displaced people in Rukban. Western diplomats believe the latest siege of the camp that raised the specter of starvation is part of a renewed Russian-led effort to put pressure on Washington to get out of Tanf.

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