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Russian Women Stranded in Syrian ISIS Prison Seek Help as Turkey Mounts Offensive – RTVI

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The women are in a camp in northern Syria. **Ahmed Mardnly / EPA / TASS**

Dozens of Russian women in a camp for Islamic State prisoners in northern Syria are seeking help from their motherland as Turkey's incursion against the Kurds has thrown the region into disarray, the international Russian language news outlet RTVI reported on Monday.

Turkey's defense minister said Monday that Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters had emptied a jail holding Islamic State prisoners and their families in a part of Syria where Ankara is mounting an offensive. The region's Kurdish-led administration said 785 Islamic State-affiliated foreigners escaped a camp at Ain Issa. The British-based war monitor Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, citing sources in the camp, said around 100 people had escaped.

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RTVI published a series of Russian-language audio messages Monday it said were sent by women held in Ain Issa, claiming that the Kurdish guards had ordered them to leave. One woman said a group of women had decided to stay in the camp in defiance of the orders.

"There are many of us from Dagestan and the Caucasus," one woman was heard saying. "They're the only ones who remained while the others have fled. There's a lot of us, around 200 people."

Chechen human rights activist Kheda Saratova estimates that around 50 Russian women are being held in Ain Issa.

"We don't know what to do. We're sitting here, thinking what to do," another woman said in the audio message.

Saratova told RTVI she had forwarded the women's appeals to Russia's human rights chief, the Russian Foreign Ministry and the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB).

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Turkey launched a cross-border operation against the YPG militia in northeastern Syria last week, after U.S. President Donald Trump decided to withdraw forces from two posts in the area in a move that drew strong international criticism.

The Turkish assault has prompted alarm that it could allow Islamic State militants to escape Kurdish-run prisons in northern Syria and regroup. Ankara has dismissed those concerns.

Trump, providing no evidence, tweeted Monday that the Kurds might be releasing Islamic State prisoners deliberately to lure U.S. troops back. Escaped fighters could be "easily recaptured by Turkey or European Nations from where many came, but they should move quickly," Trump said.

Relatives have identified at least 1,779 Russian women and children in Syria and Iraq who want to return from former Islamic State territory, Saratova said earlier this year. She had previously said that 21 women and 105 children had returned to Russia over a two-year period.

Only children were accepted for repatriation after November 2017, following warnings by FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov about terrorism risks posed by adults. Russia is a target for Islamic State, particularly since President Vladimir Putin sent his military to intervene in the Syrian war in 2015 in support of President Bashar al-Assad's forces.

Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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