

Iraqi Turkmen 'left for dead' in desert

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Thousands of Turkmen refugees who fled ISIL violence in Telafer are being abandoned to their fate under 50 degrees of hot weather in the desert



Hürriyet Photo, Selçuk Şamiloğlu

A humanitarian tragedy is unfolding in Iraq as Turkmen who fled the advance of the feared Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are now succumbing to the region's scorching summer sun as refugees. And with death approaching, many refugees are apoplectic at Turkey and Kurdistan's indifference to their plight.

"There is always someone to look after Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, but there is no one to look after Turkmen. Turks were calling Telafer 'Little Istanbul;' why doesn't Turkey take care of us now?" said Eyat Suttu, 35, noting that said his wife had been seriously ill for five days but that he had not been able to bring her to a hospital because the Iraqi Kurdish peshmarga had not let them enter Arbil.

"We are going to die here under the sun in the dust. Just kill all of us at once and this torture will be finished for all of us," he said.

On June 15, ISIL, who had recently renamed itself as the Islamic State (IS), seized the control of the northern Iraqi city of Telafer, a largely Turkmen city.

Thousands of Shiite Turkmens first fled to the northwestern city of Sinjar in order to flee to either Kirkuk, Baghdad, Karbala or Najaf. However, they have been kept waiting for days in 50-degree weather in the desert by peshmarga forces at the Hazer security checkpoint just outside Arbil.

Hazer is the main security checkpoint between Arbil and ISIL-controlled Mosul. Outside the checkpoint, there are thousands of people from new-born babies to the elderly, who have been trying to survive in tents which they have made from blankets in the desert heat.

Small children and elderly people die every day because of the intense heat, according to refugees waiting at the checkpoint.

'We buried three children'

Mahsoun Habil Muhsin, 35, escaped from Telafer with his wife and five children. "We have been suffering here for a week. The peshmarga doesn't allow us to enter Arbil. Our children are dying because of the heat and diseases. We buried two old women and three children yesterday. There are new-born babies in the camp and they could die at any minute," Muhsin said.

The only area Shiite Turkmens think they can take shelter in in northern Iraq is the peshmarga-controlled city of Kirkuk.

"When ISIL attacked Telafer, we have fled to Sinjar on June 16. But there was no food or water there. So we had to leave Sinjar and come here. However, the peshmarga keeps us waiting here. Why don't they let us go? We are Turkish, why doesn't Turkey take care of us?" Muhsin added.

Hidir Suleiman, 42, who used to be an elementary school teacher in Telafer, fled to Hazer with his nine children. "We left everything we had behind. We didn't even take our ID cards. Elderly people died on the road. Our wives and children are dying here. We just want to get out of here, we don't want anything else. Just save us and allow us to enter a town in Turkey," he said.

Thousands of Turkmens stay in the storage as hot as oven

In addition to Turkmens who have been kept waiting at the Hazer checkpoint, there are also thousands more who have been living inside an empty storage in Arbil. They are being sent to Baghdad, Najaf or Karbala in small number of groups by plane once a week.

Inside the storage, it is much hotter than outside. They have divided the storage into three- to five-square-meter rooms with blankets for each family. There are at least 10 people staying in every room.

Fazil Muhammad, a hammersmith from Telafer, fled Arbil with nine people from his family. "We had had clashes with ISIL for three days, and then the Iraqi army brigade who came from Baghdad fought against them for a week. Then ISIL started to bomb the town. Gen. Abu Walid withdrew his soldiers. We had to run away too. We have been staying here for 30 days, we are waiting to be sent to southern Iraq," he said.

'ISIL killed all those left behind'

Hadi Hasan, who came to the storage a week ago, said ISIL had killed all the Shiites who were not able to flee and who were left behind in Telafer.

"They killed even 40-day-old babies and the elderly. They have blasted all the Shiite mosques. They even killed the animals, cows and sheep. We didn't have time to bury some of the bodies."

Zeynep Ali Ekber, 25, said ISIL militants took away 20 people including her father and her brother from the Bekkekut village of Telafer. "They have arrested many from the other Shiite villages. We haven't heard from them since then," she said.