



Rapid Protection Monitoring Report:

Evacuation of Madaya and Az-Zabdani, Rural Damascus

Background Information

Madaya and Az-Zabdani, sub-districts of Az-Zabdani district of Rural Damascus, have been under siege by the Government of Syria (GoS) since 2015. In April 2017, the GoS entered into an agreement to evacuate besieged Madaya and Az-Zabdani in exchange for the evacuation of GoS areas of Al-Fu'ah and Kafraya of Idlib governorate, which had been under siege by non-state armed groups since March 2016. Evacuation of Madaya and Az-Zabdani began in mid-April, transporting residents of the towns in convoys of buses to Idlib. Although exact numbers are not confirmed, it is estimated that 3,200 people were evacuated from these two villages by April 16¹. This report from the Syria Protection Cluster Turkey hub focuses solely on the evacuation of Madaya and Az-Zabdani as the access of Turkey hub partners to the evacuees from these villages was limited.

Methodology

This update is based on information collected by four members of the Protection Cluster from 15 to 20 April 2017. 128 individuals participated in the survey. The majority of respondents were evacuated on 14 and 15 April. The respondents were interviewed in Ma'arrat Misrin community and Idlib city of Idlib governorate. Nearly equal numbers of men and women participated in the survey (65 male and 63 female). 13 key informants (8 male and 5 female) reported they had a disability.

70% of key informants self-identified as civilians, 21% as combatants, and 9% did not answer. Information about association of civilians with armed groups cannot be verified. 44% of respondents stated that they were unemployed, while 23% identified as housewives.

Situation in Madaya and Az-Zabdani Prior to the Evacuation

Madaya and Az-Zabdani were under the siege of the GoS since 2015. During this period, residents faced challenging living conditions and difficulty accessing basic services such as food and water. Humanitarian organizations emphasized limited access to humanitarian aid during this period, as well as limited access to fuel, medical care, and medical supplies. In April 2017, it was estimated that 43,300 individuals were in need of assistance in besieged Madaya and Bqine areas of Az-Zabdani².

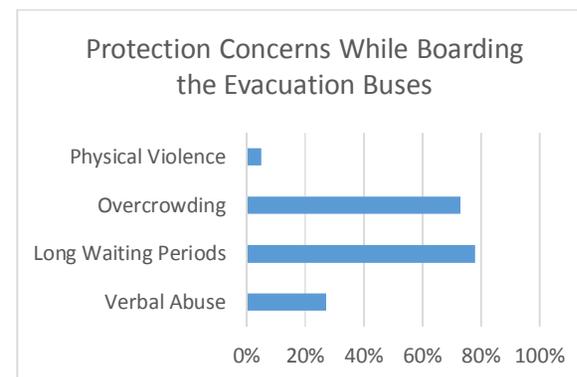
The Evacuation

Evacuations of Madaya and Az-Zabdani residents began on 20 April. Residents were required to leave their homes and board the evacuation buses within short periods of time. They were able to take a limited amount of belongings with them. 87% of those interviewed travelled with their families. 75% of key informants stated that they knew of individuals from their neighborhoods who were unable to access the evacuation buses.

Elderly men and elderly women in particular faced challenges. Some elderly persons did not have a caretaker to assist them to reach the buses while others were unwilling to leave their homes. In addition to the elderly, those active in the community such as activists, members of the local council, and humanitarian workers and journalists also faced challenges in accessing the buses. One Protection Cluster member noted that these individuals may have chosen not to evacuate in fear of retaliation from the GoS during the journey.

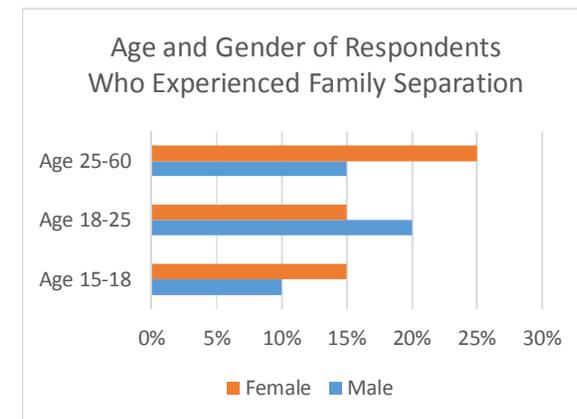
Documentation:

13% of key informants stated that they were unable to take their documentation during the evacuation. The reason for this was not captured. 14% stated that their documents were taken or photocopied by armed forces during the displacement.



Problems While Boarding the Bus:

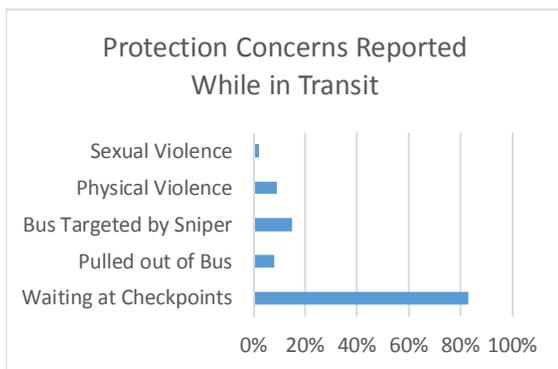
96% of survey respondents stated that they experienced problems while boarding the evacuation buses; overcrowding (73%) and long waiting periods (78%) were problems mentioned the most. Verbal abuse was a significant problem experienced by all demographics while boarding. 27% of survey respondents stated that they experienced verbal abuse. Men were roughly twice as likely as women to report verbal abuse against any group; and verbal abuse was reported to affect men, women, boys and girls in this order.



¹ Figures provided by the Health Cluster Flash Update No. 1, dated 16 April 2017.

² Figures provided by UN OCHA, April 2017.

20 (16%) survey respondents became separated from family members during the evacuation. All of these individuals stated that the separation occurred while boarding the bus, either due to overcrowding and chaos or due to priority given to certain vulnerable groups such as wounded persons, older persons, women and children. Of those separated, all but 4 (20% of those separated) were reunited with their relatives at the time of the survey, including unaccompanied children. Child Protection actors responding to the crisis assisted in family reunification.



Protection Risks While in Transit:

In the transit between Az-Zabdani and Idleb governorate, the evacuation convoys transferred through many checkpoints. At one such checkpoint in Al-Rashidin, Aleppo, a powerful explosion took place in the afternoon on 15 April, causing the death of around 100 people³. Many of the deaths are believed to be of evacuees from Al-Fu'ah and Kafraya. The explosion also had a negative impact on Madaya and Az-Zabdani evacuees who traveled through the same area. One of the key informants lost a relative in the explosion. In addition to the protection concerns described below, the psychological state of evacuees was negatively affected by this incident, and contributed to their concerns of safety and well-being during and post-evacuation.

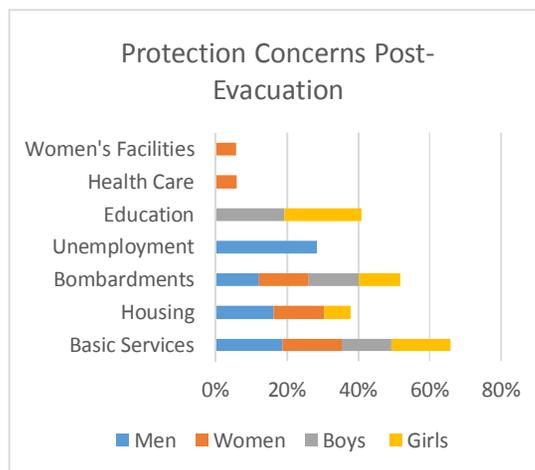
84% of respondents stated that they experienced protection risks during the trip. Long waiting periods at checkpoints (83%) was the number one problem expressed by both male

and female key informants. The IDPs travelled more than a day in order to reach their destinations in Idleb governorate. 20% of those interviewed identified a risk of mines or explosive hazards during transit.

A number of respondents stated that the journey was challenging due to lack of food, water, and rest breaks. Evacuees also reported experiencing violence, including the targeting of buses by snipers and physical violence encountered mostly by male IDPs, caused psychological distress. 12 (9%) key informants stated having experienced physical violence either while boarding the bus or during the flight. 19 (15%) key informants stated that buses were targeted by snipers. 8 key informants (6%) reported that people were pulled off of buses including men, women, boys and girls. Cases of sexual violence at checkpoints during the journey were also reported.

Protection Risks Faced Post-Evacuation in Ma'arrat Misrin and Idleb City

For men, women, boys and girls, lack of basic services, lack of adequate housing and bombardments were identified as primary risks at the time of the interview. Post-evacuation assessments also confirm that food, shelter and non-food items (NFIs) remain areas of need for IDPs from Az-Zabdani⁴.



For example, although IDPs from Madaya in Idleb governorate were provided food, shelter, water and NFI assistance upon arrival, it was noted that the assistance was insufficient in most locations⁵. Syrian NGOs responding to the crisis emphasized the need for infant formula and diapers.

In addition to the above-mentioned risks, lack of employment for men, lack of education for boys and girls, and lack of health care and facilities for women were mentioned as current risks. Women respondents described difficulty in moving freely and lack of personal freedom due to being in a crowded environment. Women expressed a need for a women's center in their area. Five respondents expressed concern about early marriage, given that those in this unknown environment may perceive that it will provide security for girls.

Overall, the difficulty of adapting to new living areas and lack of basic needs emerge as the most notable concerns and risks for IDPs in their current location.

Intentions for Onward Movement

When asked whether they are planning to travel onwards, the majority of survey respondents noted that they plan to stay in their current locations in Ma'arrat Misrin or Idleb city. There was no significant difference between the preferences of male and female respondents. 28 key informants (22%) stated that they are planning to travel onwards. Of these, 13 planned to travel to Turkey. The remaining stated that they plan to travel to other areas of Idleb such as within Idleb city (4) or towns in other governorates, such as Al-Atareb, Aleppo (1). Those who planned to travel onwards were mostly looking to settle with relatives and friends. Only 4 of 28 key informants mentioned seeking safety from aerial bombardments as the reason for their planned onward movement.

The Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey) is composed of the Protection Cluster, as well as three Sub-Clusters: Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence, and Mine Action.

³ Figures provided by the Health Cluster Flash Update No. 1, dated 16 April 2017.

⁴ Information provided by the Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM) Programme Flash Update, dated 19-21 April 2017.

⁵ Information provided by the Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM) Programme Flash Update, dated 15-18 April 2017.