

Highlights

- At the end of July 2017, Hayyat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and Hezbollah reached an agreement whereby civilians and HTS fighters in Arsal Mountains (Lebanon) and Flita Mountains (Syria) would be “evacuated”¹ to north-western Syria.
- After delays due to disputes between the parties to the agreement, 5,288 people were evacuated from Arsal and Flita mountains to parts of Idleb and Aleppo governorates.
- Humanitarian organizations provided multi-sectoral assistance during transportation, at the point of entry into non-state armed group (NSAG)-held areas, at reception centres, and at their in final destinations, as well as transport once in NSAG-areas.
- The provision of transportation from the drop-off points to the reception centers was difficult for humanitarian organizations to organize and placed further strains on already-stretched resources.

Situation Overview

At the end of July 2017, an agreement regarding the evacuation of Hayyat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) fighters and civilians from the Arsal Mountains (Lebanon) and Flita Mountains (Syria) area was reached between HTS and Hezbollah. The first phase of the agreement stipulated the release of some prisoners and bodies of the deceased by both sides, while the second phase included the evacuation of people.

The UN and the humanitarian community had no part in reaching this agreement and have repeatedly expressed deep concern at the continuing use of such “local agreements”, which do not appear to meet international legal standards or humanitarian principles. Such movements should be voluntary and within a conducive protection environment. However, as part of the humanitarian principle of “humanity”, assistance and services is being provided to the new arrivals.

Following several delays due to disputes between the parties to the agreement, the evacuation process commenced on 03 August. 113 buses and 13 ambulances departed from the Arsal area in Lebanon and crossed into Syria, heading towards non-state armed group (NSAG)-held areas in north-western Syria. Initial reports indicated that Rahjan village, in the north-eastern countryside of Hama governorate, was to be the drop-off point for the evacuees to enter NSAG-held areas. However, due to the large number of buses, the narrow roads in the area and an agreement between parties to the conflict to synchronize the evacuation with the release of fighters, some of the buses had to be re-directed to Qasr Bin Wardan village, more than 15 kilometers away. This change created confusion among humanitarian actors,



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

¹ The terms “evacuation” and “evacuee” are used as a descriptor of the situation and do not imply that the UN and humanitarian community believe that these “evacuations” meet international standards of voluntariness, safety, security, and dignity, or that these “evacuations” are endorsed by the UN and humanitarian community.

who prepared to receive all evacuees at Rahjan village, and from there to take them to reception centers in north-western Syria.

On 05 August, the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster issued an update, which it stated that 5,288 people arrived in north-western Syria from Arsal and Flita mountains. The new arrivals dispersed to more than 25 locations, including to two NGO-supported reception centers in Maaret Elekhwan and Meznaz towns, Idlib and Aleppo governorates respectively. Onward movement of some of the new arrivals continues, making it difficult for NGOs to track and provide assistance to everyone.

In addition to the agreement between HTS and Hezbollah, a separate agreement was reached between Saraya Ahl Al-Sham and Hezbollah, whereby a reported 3,000 people, including 300 – 400 fighters, will be evacuated from Arsal and Flita to Raheiba town in the eastern Qalamoun region in Syria. According to Lebanese and Syrian media sources, it should take place within the coming days.

Humanitarian Response

Health organizations identified three hospitals for medical cases to receive treatment, and 22 cases were received in total. The cases included patients with complicated fractures, shrapnel injuries and scorpion bites. Furthermore, health organizations mobilized more than 50 ambulances and sent two mobile clinics to the drop-off point, to assist in the transfer medical cases and to provide preliminary medical assistance to those who needed it. Due to the insufficient number of buses, some of the ambulances participated in the transportation to reception centers. Medical teams were also dispatched to the reception centers in Maaret Elekhwan and Meznaz towns. Nutrition partners also responded at the drop-off point, in Idlib city, and at the two reception centres.

Shelter/NFI Cluster partners distributed 1,109 NFI kits covering the NFI needs of more than 5,000 people. Additionally, 406 baby and dignity kits, 250 pillows, 1,250 mattresses and 3,250 blankets were distributed. Water provision to the new arrivals is provided through existing water structures, with no major gaps reported. A challenge WASH partners faced, particularly for the distribution of hygiene kits, is the continuous movement of these new arrivals. As a result, WASH partners prefer to wait until they have settled down before providing them with hygiene kits.

The Protection Cluster had two NGO focal points at the reception centers in Maaret Elekhwan and Meznaz to provide services in line with the cluster’s emergency response package. Following reports of many houses being identified to host the new arrivals in the western countryside of Aleppo governorate, the Protection Cluster emphasized the importance of adhering to house, land and property rules and furthermore, raised serious concerns regarding the proximity of some of these houses to the frontlines. There are reports that some of these locations also may be contaminated with unexploded ordinance or other explosive hazards. Protection Cluster partners are following up with local authorities and the people, who moved into this area to understand the risks they may have exposed themselves to, and to find solutions if that is the case.

During the initial transportation through GoS-controlled areas, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent accompanied the evacuees from the Lebanon border and provided 13 ambulances, and basic food and water.

A response that remains an ongoing challenge is in the transportation sector. Though not a core humanitarian activity, humanitarian organizations in north-western Syria are placed in a position of having to organize transportation from the drop-off point to reception centers and other communities. Without humanitarian organizations providing transport, people would be stranded at the drop-off location. In addition to not knowing with sufficient time the exact location and number of people being dropped off, transportation is also very costly. For example, the choice of Rahjan village as the drop-off point reportedly increased the cost of transportation due to its distance from main transport routes and the lack of organizations in the area, placing extra strain on the resources of organizations.

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