

Health situation in Shehba after 5 years of displacement

A report on the health situation in the IDP camps in
Shehba with a focus on women and children

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KONGRA STAR
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A report on the health situation in the IDP camps in Shehba with a focus on women and children.

This report explores the health and economic situation of displaced people from Afrin living in five different refugee camps in the Shehba region. Our focus is on women and children.

As Kongra Star, a women's movement in Rojava (West Kurdistan/North Syria), we monitor social developments in the region. We have offices throughout Rojava as well as contacts in North and East Syria that help us to monitor the situation and collect data. This data is collected and analyzed by the Kongra Star information Center. We follow the situation in the refugee camps in Shehba with grave concern. In this report we give an insight into the impacts of the situation regarding Women's health and well-being.





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1. Method:

This report is based on surveys conducted by Kongra Star Information Center in all five refugee camps in Shehba, each one being composed of 500 households (families in a tent). The survey focused on the health and economic situation as well as on access to education, with a focus on women and children. We were very limited in our movement, due to the blockade by the Syrian regime that makes it difficult to obtain fuel in the Shehba region. This led to us not being able to travel from one refugee-camp to another or to travel multiple times, hence, we were only able to conduct 500 surveys, rather than the original goal of 1000. In addition to the surveys, we conducted an interview with Ezdihar Naza, a staff member in the gynecology department and midwife at Avrin Hospital in Shehba.

The survey was conducted in a randomized manner throughout all five camps. In some cases, refugees, after learning about our work, sought us out themselves. During the survey, intensive interviews were conducted with displaced people from Afrin to gain a better understanding of the situation there. After evaluating the survey and observing the camps, this report focuses on the health situation of women and children.





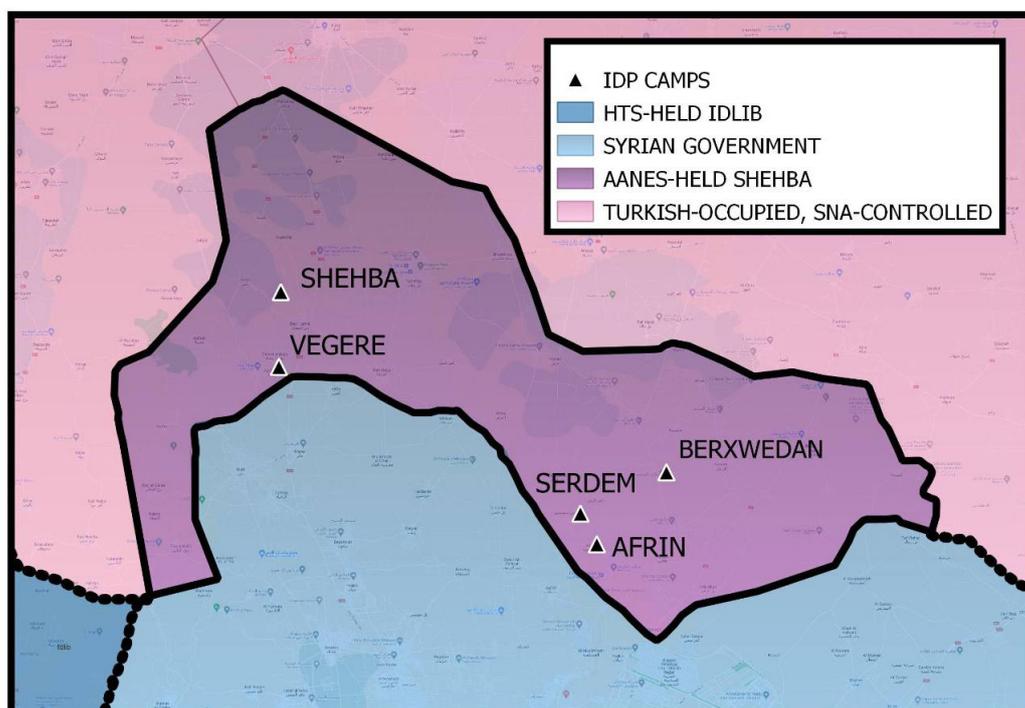
2. Shehba region

Afrin was occupied by the Turkish state with the help of its jihadist allies in March 2018. In the course of this illegal invasion and occupation, around 300,000 people, half of the total population of Afrin, were displaced. The majority of them, about 157,000 people, currently live in the Shehba region near Afrin, with more than 10,000 living in refugee camps. Shehba is the last in the Afrin Canton that is not occupied by Turkey. The Shehba region is located between the cities of Manbij, al-Bab, Azaz, Semann, Jarabulus and Tel Rifat. It is run by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the displaced people receive little international attention or support, leaving the region and the Autonomous Administration left to fend for themselves. As a result, the people in the camps have poor medical, sanitary and economic services.

The five refugee camps in the region are located in different places, the five camps are Afrin camp, Serdam camp, Shehba camp, Berxwedan camp and Veger camp. With some displaced people in the area also living in regular houses or with family members.

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE'S (IDP) CAMPS

AANES' SHEHBA ENCLAVE





2.1 Isolation of Shehba

The region is isolated from the other regions of the Autonomous Administration and surrounded by regions controlled by the Syrian government or occupied by the Turkish state and its jihadist allies. Due to this geographical situation and the fact that the government in Damascus controls the routes between Shehba and other regions of the Autonomous Administration and has imposed a strict embargo on the region, the delivery of goods, aid or medicines to the region is not possible. This leads to a lack of medicine, as well as many other essentials in the refugee camps.

2.2 After the earthquake

The earthquake on February 6, 2023 in Turkey, Kurdistan and Syria also affected Shehba and Aleppo. Especially in Aleppo, many buildings that were already damaged by the previous war and bombing, collapsed. After the earthquake, 2,205 families from Aleppo (who were displaced from Afrin in 2018) took refuge in Shehba and decided to stay in the tent camps in Shehba, where they were welcomed with open arms by the Refugee Council.

Even after the earthquake, the government in Damascus did not lift or ease the strict embargo, obstructing the delivery of fuel, aid and medicine. So, stopping aid deliveries for days in this critical time.

2.3 Continuous attacks on Shehba

Since the occupation of Afrin, the Shehba region has been subjected to daily light and heavy weapons shelling and aerial bombardment by Turkey. The people who have already been displaced by the occupation continue to be terrorized on a daily basis and have been for more than 5 years now.



3. Evaluation of the survey

The questionnaires we created included questions about the economic opportunities in and around the camps, the health situation and opportunities in the field of health in and around the camps, and assessments of educational opportunities.

Almost all of the women who participated in the survey live in tents with five or more people. All respondents were mothers of multiple children and in some cases grandparents were living with them.

It is well known that poor economic conditions or poverty have a negative impact on health, so it was important for us to examine the economic opportunities in relation to the health situation.

3.1 Poverty due to conditions in the camps affect health

About 80% of the interviewed women stated that there is a lack of employment opportunities in and around the camps, which worsens the financial situation and often makes the women dependent on their husbands. Most of the husbands of the interviewed women, worked in institutions of the autonomous administration, other job opportunities are very few in the region.





We asked how often the respondents were unable to see a doctor for financial reasons despite being ill. The answer shows one effect the financial situation has on respondents health. 82% of respondents stated that they had not seen a doctor many times for financial reasons despite being ill. 10,4% of the respondents stated that they did not go to the doctor a few times and 2,4% of the respondents stated that they did not go to the doctor at least once.

Also, when asked if they think if the available food is balanced and rich in vitamins all respondents answered in the negative. Although the administration distributes food to the camp residents, it is very one-sided. In some cases, the interviewed women stated that they occasionally sell the distributed food in order to buy other types of food, milk or diapers.

As shown in the interviews and the survey results, poverty, which is caused by the lack of work opportunities, affects the women's health. Moreover, their financial situation is not good enough to eat a balanced diet and prevents them from seeking medical help, worsening their health even more.





3.2 Health situation

Fleeing is a very traumatic experience in itself, which can lead to psychological stress and subsequent health impacts. In our report about miscarriages of women during the Turkish invasion attacks and the flight conducted in 2020, we concluded that due to a lack of financial resources, the limited availability of health centers and above all the psychological stress caused by the fleeing and the life in the camps the health of women has been impacted. (<https://womendefendrojva.net/en/2020/01/22/report-from-kobane-miscarriages-and-maternal-health-risks-from-turkish-invasion/>).

3.3 Embargo

The conditions in the camps and the embargo by the Syrian regime are main causes for the bad health situation. Temperatures in the region vary widely, with very hot summers and freezing winters.. To counteract this, air conditioners or heaters are needed, but because the regime forces, represented by the Fourth Division, does not allow the import of essential materials and fuel, the electricity needed for these devices cannot be produced and the suffering continues to worsen.

Ezdihar Naza, a midwife at Avrin Hospital in Shehba, explained that they are facing difficulties due to the embargo. In her words: "Currently, we are seeing an increase in pregnant women with hepatitis B and C. When pregnant women with hepatitis B and C come to the hospital, we have to send them to Aleppo because we can't access the medicine to treat them, but the regime checkpoints often don't let us through. In one case a 39-year-old pregnant woman died because we couldn't get her to Aleppo and we didn't have any means to treat her here."

Additionally, she spoke about the lack of medicines caused by the Embargo: "We have a big shortage of medicines, so even if we prescribe medicines, they might not be able to buy them."

The procurement of medicines is another big problem due to the embargo of the Syrian regime. There is a hospital in Shehba and the Kurdish Red Crescent is present in the camps, but they do not have sufficient access to medication. Many people are



forced to buy overpriced medication in Aleppo and smuggle them (it is illegal to import medication to the region). Some women stated that they are searched at the checkpoints and if medicines, including painkillers, are found they are confiscated by the regime forces.

Ezdihar Naza addressed the connection between pregnant women's health and general children's health: "Due to the lack of nutritional supplements and medication in the region and the poor nutrition of pregnant women caused by the camp condition, both the children's health and women's health is severely affected."

3.4 Lack of health facilities

The lack of health facilities is a serious problem for the refugees and residents of Shehba. In particular, there is a lack of health centers that specialize on children or women. Women have to travel to Aleppo to access health care for pregnancy and childbirth. There women are often advised to give birth by cesarean section, even though this is not necessary and often poses a greater risk to the woman and the child. However, since there is little education about the different methods, women often choose this route. Facilities are needed to better educate and treat women and girls for their specific health concerns.

Ezdihar Naza also pointed out many shortcomings in the existing facilities while talking to us and said that there is only one room for treatment and surgery in the gynecological department at Avrin Hospital.

For people with special needs, the conditions in the camp are very bad. 10% of the surveyed households had people with disabilities in their family. All these households indicated that there are neither facilities nor possibility for the treatment of special needs. Care and treatment services are needed for children with disabilities in Shehba and the lack of such services causes further stress and psychological pressure for parents and the whole family.



3.5 Psychological burden for women

The interviewed women stated that the lack of privacy is one of the biggest problems in their daily lives. The tents are very close to each other, so that there is no privacy between the different families and at the same time there are often more than 6 people living together in one tent, leading to a lack of privacy within the family. All the women have stated that this puts a lot of psychological strain on them and even leads to depression.

In the questionnaire we did not refer specifically to hygiene, but almost all of the interviewed women stated that the poor hygienic situation and the lack of privacy are the most difficult things in their lives. In the camps, many people live in a confined space and many people use the same sanitary facilities or toilets and showers. The hygienic conditions and sanitary facilities are of particular importance for women, especially during their monthly menstruation.

Despite many changes in society, it is still women who are responsible for raising children and running the household. It is the women who are at home all day, taking care of the children, cleaning and washing. Therefore it is a double psychological burden for women with the lack of privacy, little access to clean water, malnutrition of children and lack of activities for children and men. The interviewed women stated that they think that the camp life and the given conditions negatively affect the children's. The feeling of not being able to educate their children well is a source of even more psychological stress. All the interviewed women stated that there is a lack of baby food and about 80% of the women stated that it is psychologically stressful that they cannot feed their children properly or give them toys and other playing opportunities.



5. Result

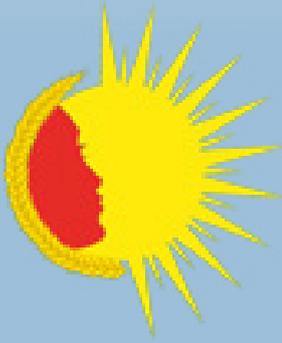
The displaced people from Afrin live in refugee camps in poor living and health conditions which deteriorate over time, especially for women and children.

Both the conditions of camp life and the Syrian regime's interference affect the poor health situation. With so many people living in one space, the risk of contagious diseases such as hepatitis, corona, cholera, etc. spreading is high and protection against them is almost impossible. Secondly, the lack of medication is one of the biggest problems, for many diseases such as tuberculosis, heart disease, diabetes, etc. no medication can be found in Shehba. In emergencies, people have to go to Aleppo and pay ten times as much for the medicine. With many of the camp residents lacking the financial means to do this.

As long as the embargo and occupation continue, the suffering of the population of Afrin, 300,000 people, will continue. The refugees suffer from a lack of job opportunities and resulting poverty. These conditions are worsened by the embargo imposed by the Syrian regime. The international community should recognize the seriousness of the situation of thousands of people: poverty, poor health and lack of adequate sanitation. The embargo and the occupation should be condemned.

On one hand, the thousands of refugees have not received any international attention or support, and on the other hand, support is not allowed due to the embargo. The international community must recognize the seriousness of the situation of thousands of refugees. An end to the embargo, the occupation and financial support are needed immediately. In particular, medication, health centers and better sanitary conditions are needed.

It should be mentioned that despite all this sufferings and the terrible conditions in which people are living, when asked what people in this situation hope for the future, all of them, without exception, said that they hope to return to Afrin soon, that the Turkish occupation will end and that they will be able to live in security, stability and peace. The only solution to the problems they face, is for the Turkish state and its gangs to withdraw from Afrin and end the occupation.



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