More Starvation Deaths of Besieged Syrians Reported

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Fifteen to 20 people, four of them children, died of starvation in the Syrian city of Deir al-Zor last year, the United Nations said Saturday, citing unverified reports by health personnel.

The world body warned that thousands of residents faced sharply deteriorating conditions — no electricity for more than 10 months and a water supply for only three hours a week — in a city cut off from aid by the government, Islamic State and other insurgent groups involved in the country's civil war.

With about 450,000 people, Deir al-Zor is the most populous of about 15 besieged areas in Syria. Another besieged population of 42,000 is trapped in the town of Madaya, which has received two convoys of aid this month, but local aid workers have reported 32 deaths there from starvation.

With hundreds of thousands of Syrians living in a “nightmarish reality dictated by a conflict that respects few rules and obeys no laws, you cannot let more people die on your watch,” Kang Kyung-wha, deputy emergency relief coordinator, told the 15-member U.N. Security Council during a briefing Friday.

“Food, water and medicine are not bargaining chips or favors that the parties to a conflict can grant or deny at will,” she said. “They are basic necessities that lie at the very essence of survival and the right to life, which this council and its members have a responsibility to protect.”

Kang reminded the council that for more than four years, the humanitarian community has sounded the alarm about the impact of Syria's conflict on ordinary men, women and children.

On Thursday, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the General Assembly that the situation in Syria was “utterly unconscionable,” and he warned that the use of starvation “as a weapon” during conflict is a war crime.

Speaking to reporters in New York following remarks highlighting his 2016 priorities, Ban said that “perhaps nothing more urgently reflects the need to act than the harrowing scenes from Madaya.”

Ban described the situation there as “shocking depths of inhumanity.” Relief staff who have entered Madaya have reported seeing “the elderly and children, men and women, who were little more than skin and bones: gaunt, severely malnourished, so weak they could barely walk, and utterly desperate for the slightest morsel,” he said.

Ban said his special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, would continue to work for convening intra-Syrian Geneva talks on January 25.