

International

# Long after guns fall silent, Mosul residents suffer from hearing loss

**MOSUL:** For months, Alia Ali endured the din of fighting in Iraq's second city Mosul. Then a missile slammed into her home, killing her husband and her hearing. The 59-year-old lost her sense of sound in the final phase of the ferocious battle between government forces and militants of the Islamic State group, not long before the guns fell silent in July 2017. For nearly nine months, air strikes, mortar rounds and car bombs pummeled the city relentlessly, and thousands of residents still suffer hearing problems ranging from tinnitus to profound deafness. "I lost my sense of hearing two years ago," Ali recalled. "A warplane hit our neighborhood in the fight for the western half of the city and my husband died of very bad burns," she told AFP. Ali spent two years piecing her life back together, but could not afford to get specialized care for her diminished hearing. "We lost our home and all our possessions - we didn't have money to go to private clinics," she said.

Blasts in conflict zones can propel debris into the human ear and rupture the eardrum, which transmits sound further into the cochlea. Nerves in the cochlea, which sends sound on to the brain to be processed, can also be destroyed by explosions. Mines have noise levels approaching 170 decibels - twice the loudness needed to cause permanent damage to ears. In Mosul, civilians were

exposed to repeated loud blasts that sent between 15 and 20 a day to hospitals complaining of hearing loss. "They were bleeding from their ears because of the shelling, but they had nothing to stop the flow," according to hearing specialist Mohammad Saleh. "Some never recovered because their nerve cells were torn by the loud sounds." Mosul's health infrastructure was ravaged by IS' reign and subsequent fighting, with the 6,000 hospital beds available before the jihadist takeover reduced to just 1,000.

With help from outside charities, hospitals are slowly reopening wing by wing. At Jumhuriya hospital in west Mosul, a specialized hearing impairment center opened its doors less than a year ago with backing from Iraq's Dary Humanitarian Organization. The waiting room is packed with people, young and old, waiting to get long-delayed hearing tests to see how badly the blasts have damaged their ears. "My hearing deteriorated after three mortars hit my house in west Mosul," 65-year-old Fathi Hussein yelled. He can only respond to questions that are virtually screamed, and answers them at the same volume. "I put off treatment because I'm poor. I don't have the money for consultations or medicine," he said.

Since the centre opened less than a year ago, it has treated several thousand patients, according to specialist Mohammad Said.



MOSUL: Iraqi patients queue to get hearing consultation at Jumhuri hospital, a specialized hearing impairment center, on Feb 24, 2019. — AFP

"We have distributed 2,000 hearing aids so far. More complex cases get sent to hospitals in Baghdad for treatment, including cochlear implants which aren't available here yet," Said told AFP. He expects there are thousands more cases that have yet to visit the Jumhuriya centre. "Some patients went to private clinics, others went elsewhere in Iraq or even left the country and still others have received no treatment at all," he said.

For younger patients, partial deafness

means more than just shouting to be heard - it can affect schooling. "In kids especially, hearing loss can damage speaking ability," Said said. "It's extremely important because it means the hearing aids we distribute aren't enough, and these children are in need of treatments and speaking rehabilitation that we don't offer here." Five-year-old Mohammad may not remember much of life under bombardment in Mosul, but it will likely mar his education for years to come.—AFP

## UN chief rejects Yemen president's accusation of bias

**DUBAI:** UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has assured Yemen's leader that the world body will remain impartial in efforts to resolve the country's conflict, rejecting accusations that its envoy was siding with rebels. The pledge came in a letter from Guterres to President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, who had accused the UN special envoy to Yemen of bias. "I would like to assure you that every effort will be made to maintain the impartial stance that is expected of the United Nations," while implementing a ceasefire agreement, Guterres said in the letter seen by AFP yesterday.

In his own letter addressed to Guterres, Hadi accused envoy Martin Griffiths of "providing the Houthis militia with guarantees to stay in Hodeida and its ports under the umbrella of the UN". "I can no longer accept these offences by your special envoy which threaten chances to find a (lasting) solution," Hadi said. Hodeida is the main entry point for the bulk of Yemen's imports and humanitarian aid, providing a lifeline to millions of people.

Earlier this month, the United Nations supervised the rebels' handover of the ports of Hodeida. Saleef and Ras Issa to a "coast guard", but the government said they were in fact Houthi forces in different uniforms. The pullback is in line with a ceasefire deal for Hodeida reached in Stockholm in December. Guterres said that he and Griffiths were prepared "to discuss the legitimate concerns of the government of Yemen referenced in your letter, which we take very seriously."

He also gave an assurance that the United Nations had no plans to set up an international administration in Hodeida. The UN humanitarian coordinator in Yemen, Lise Grande, on Sunday condemned a deadly strike on a petrol station east of the city of Ta'ez. The attack on Friday killed 12 civilians, seven of them children, she said, updating an earlier death toll. "Innocent lives continue to be lost in Yemen because of this conflict," she said in a statement, without identifying the assailants.—AFP

## Sudan opposition rejects strike call in protest rift

**KHARTOUM:** Sudan's main opposition group and supporter of the protest movement yesterday rejected its call to stage a two-day general strike, in the first sign of a rift within the movement negotiating the launch of civilian rule. Talks between leaders of the umbrella protest movement, the Alliance for Freedom and Change, and army generals who seized power after ousting autocrat Omar Al-Bashir last month are deadlocked over who should lead a new governing body - a civilian or soldier.

In a bid to step up pressure on the generals, the protest

movement has called for a general strike starting Tuesday, but the National Umma Party, a key backer of the movement, rejected the measure. "We reject the general strike announced by some opposition groups" in the Alliance for Freedom and Change, the National Umma Party said in a statement. "A general strike is a weapon that should be used after it is agreed upon by everybody," Umma said. "We have to avoid such escalated measures that are not fully agreed."

The National Umma Party led by former premier Sadiq Al-Mahdi said any such decision should be taken by a council of leaders of the protest movement. Such a council is still not in place and "will be composed in a meeting on Monday", it said. It was Mahdi's elected government that Bashir, who himself was deposed on April 11, toppled in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989. In a recent interview with AFP, Mahdi warned protesters not to "provoke" the army's rulers as they had been instrumental in ousting Bashir.

Minutes after Umma's statement, another key member of the protest movement, the Sudanese Congress Party, said the strike will go ahead as planned. It said the strike was a new measure "to complete the mission of the revolution, which definitely will achieve its victory". The military toppled Bashir after months-long protests across Sudan led by the Alliance for Freedom and Change against his iron-fisted rule of three decades. But the generals who seized power have resisted calls from protesters and the international community for civilian rule.

Thousands of demonstrators remain camped outside the army headquarters in central Khartoum demanding that the generals step down. Talks between the generals and protest leaders remain deadlocked over who should lead a new governing body to oversee the formation of a civilian administration - a soldier or civilian. Protest leaders insist a civilian must head a new sovereign council and that civilians should make up the majority of its members, proposals rejected by the ruling generals.—AFP

## After years in jail, Syrian mother eyes new life

**MAARAT MASRIN, Syria:** After giving birth and raising a toddler during four years in a Syrian prison, 30-year-old Hasna Dbeis is now free - and determined to forge a new life for her family. Dbeis says she was two months pregnant when she was detained in August 2014 in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, accused of working with rebels; an allegation she denies. She was shuffled around various detention centers, including one where she saw her father and brother for the last time. "They were tortured in front of me," she told AFP, her face veil revealing tired eyes.

She is one of tens of thousands of Syrians jailed during the conflict for opposing President Bashar Al-Assad. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says around 200,000 people have gone missing since the civil war started in 2011. Nearly half are believed to be held in government jails. Dbeis said she was kept in solitary confinement for 40 days at one stage, in a cell littered with garbage. Insects crept up the walls, and the screams of inmates being tortured rang around her, she recalled.

She was allowed out of jail only once, when she went into labor. "A newborn came into my life and I didn't know what to do," she said, clad in black. After giving birth to Mohammad, Dbeis was transferred to the notorious Al-Fayhaa prison in Damascus. The facility housed other mothers, including Iraqi women detained on suspicion of working with the Islamic State group, she said.

Dbeis shared a cell with her newborn and a 20-year-old Ethiopian woman. Her cellmate, who other inmates called Lamees, would help her sew clothes for the little boy, she said, but also care for the infant when Dbeis was being interrogated. Guards usually entered her cell at around midnight to take her to another room where she was beaten and suspended by the wrists, she said. The first time, she recounted, "the interrogator started by taking off my veil. He looked at my hair, brought a knife, and started cutting" it. "Then he started beating me," she said.

Her hands were cuffed behind her back, she said, and she was left hanging from her wrists for hours. She also contracted tuberculosis, she claimed, and had to be kept away from her child for more than four months while she received treatment. By the time she recovered, her son - then nine months old - thought Lamees was his mother. "He didn't know who I was," Dbeis said.

For three years, her hope for a better life dwindled, as she watched Mohammad grow up in a cell, the sound of other children playing echoing in from outside. "I used to dream of walking in the street with my child and entering a store to buy him clothes like normal mothers do," she said.

In April 2018, she was released. She did not return to Eastern Ghouta, which had fallen under government control that month, after regime bombardment and a crippling siege.

### New regime assault

Instead, she boarded a bus that took rebels and their families from the Damascus suburbs to opposition-held territory in the northern province of Aleppo. Dbeis remembers the first time Mohammad saw a stand selling tomatoes. "He ran towards it, grabbed a tomato, and started gobbling it up," she said. "He'd never seen a tomato before."

But catching up with one of her sisters in the neighboring province of Idlib brought new trauma. Dbeis was told that her mother was dead and that her husband had been killed by regime forces. Two of her sisters were detained by the government, and the fate of her father and brother -



MAARAT NASRIN, Syria: Hasna Dbeis, a 30-year-old former detainee in a Syrian-regime jail, rests with her son Mohammad outside her home in this town in the rebel-held part of Idlib province on May 14, 2019. - AFP

who she last saw in jail - was unknown. "After hearing about my family's heart-wrenching fate, I decided to start a new life," Dbeis said.

She remarried and moved to Idlib, a region outside regime control ruled by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate. But four months after her wedding, her 25-year-old husband was hit in the stomach by shell shrapnel, leaving him unable to work. In a desperate bid to provide for her family, she joined a sewing workshop employing former female detainees. "The money I make, I spend on my home," said Dbeis, who makes children's clothes. But her life is under renewed threat. Since late April, heightened bombardment of Idlib by the regime and its ally Russia has sparked fears of an imminent full assault against the jihadist stronghold.—AFP

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