

Aleppo 'now a synonym for hell': Ban Ki-moon; evacuation suspended due to obstructions

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Beirut: A ceasefire agreement to evacuate tens of thousands of civilians from the remaining parts of the ISIS-held eastern Aleppo has been suspended.

Residents gathered near govt buses for evacuation from eastern Aleppo

According to reports, a Syrian government official overseeing the operation said that it was suspended due to obstructions, raising fears the ceasefire can collapse with thousands still desperate to escape the region.

The government-run SANA news agency reported that at the time of the deal's suspension, more than 8,000 residents of eastern Aleppo, among them fighters, had been evacuated.

Another report suggested that the evacuation was suspended after a report of shooting at a crossing point into the enclave. The Syrian government pulled out its buses that since Thursday had been ferrying out people from the ancient city that has suffered under intense bombardment, fierce battles and a prolonged siege.

The halt also appeared to be linked to a separate deal to remove thousands of people from the government-held Shiite villages of Foua and Kfarya that are under siege by the rebels.

The Syrian government said that those evacuations and the one in eastern Aleppo must be done simultaneously, but the rebels said there's no connection.

Meanwhile, a closed emergency meeting of the UN Security Council was held on the crisis in Aleppo, discussing a French proposal to have independent monitors oversee the evacuation of civilians and fighters. The council meeting ended with diplomats saying they would convene again this weekend.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the Syrian parties to resume the evacuation of civilians from Aleppo after operations were suspended in the battered city.

Describing Aleppo "now a synonym for hell", the outgoing Secretary-General said, "The carnage in Syria remains a gaping hole in the global conscience."

The cease-fire and evacuation marked the end of the rebels' most important stronghold in the five-year-old civil war.

On the other hand, US President Barack Obama in a year-end news conference said that he "feels responsible for some of the suffering in Syria", but he defended his decision to avoid significant military action there.

He put the bulk of the blame on Russia, as well as Iran, for propping up Assad.

"This blood and these atrocities are on their hands," he said.

Several rounds of UN-mediated indirect peace talks this year in Geneva were suspended with no progress.