

Syria: Army personnel celebrates recapture of Jordan border crossing

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Damascus: Syrian soldiers fanned out across towns and villages in southern Syria on Saturday, celebrating the recapture of the main border crossing with Jordan by raising portraits of President Bashar Assad and tearing down rebel flags.

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Some flashed victory signs and pumped fists in the air as they chanted pro-Assad slogans.

One officer said that troops have taken up positions along the border with Jordan and are blocking illegal crossing points.

“We have ended their existence,” he said of the rebels. “They have no future anymore, God willing.”

The crossing was once a bustling and vital artery through which Syria exported goods to Jordan and from there on to oil-rich Gulf countries. Rebels seized it in 2015, severing that lifeline and disrupting a key overland trade route also for Jordan.

Heavy white smoke rose from a smoldering match factory in the free zone next to the crossing. Government buildings also bore the marks of fighting and shelling. Some were partially burned, windows were broken and looting appeared to have been pervasive.

Russian military police were seen taking up positions on both sides of the border.

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In one village, Saida, there were few residents two days after Syrian soldiers captured it from the rebels. Broken glass littered streets lined with bombed out houses.

“They (rebels) destroyed the town, God will punish them,” said a 50-year-old villager who returned to check on her home.

The recapture of Naseeb in Daraa marks the return of Assad’s forces to the province where the uprising against

him began seven years ago, following successive military victories across most of the country with the help of powerful allies Russia and Iran.

Weakened by a crushing government offensive backed by Russia and abandoned by their U.S. allies, rebels in southern Syria found themselves compelled to accept yet another humiliating surrender deal that would see opposition fighters transported by buses to areas held by rebels in the country's north.

The rebels in southern Syria once received significant backing and support from the U.S. that has and all but dried up over the past few years. Although the U.S. government negotiated a de-escalation agreement for southern Syria last year, it has remained silent as Assad's forces marched onto Daraa in the past two weeks in a crushing assault that displaced more than 330,000 people.

State-run news agency SANA said the army deployed at the crossing after combing and clearing it of the remnants of "terrorist groups." It said Syrian army units have also established control over the town of Nuaima in the past 24 hours.

The government's offensive to retake Daraa and the nearby Quneitra region on the frontier near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights began on June 19, and is now expected to turn more forcefully toward retaking Quneitra, potentially setting up a clash between Israel and Hezbollah and Iran unless they agree to stay away from the area as Israel demands.

The assault has forced hundreds of thousands to flee toward the sealed Jordanian border and the frontier near the Golan in one of the largest displacements in the seven-year Syrian conflict. Dozens have been killed.

Meanwhile on Saturday, some 400 displaced people who had been living in Lebanon near the northeastern border town of Arsal returned home to war-torn Syria. They drove back using private vehicles, including trucks and tractors piled high with mattresses and belongings.

They are the second batch of refugees from the Arsal area to return to Syria in a repatriation organized by the Lebanese General Security, which describes it as a voluntary return. The first group of 400 headed back to Syria a week ago.

Around 3,000 in total are set to return in coming weeks, most of them to the Qalamoun region near the border with Lebanon.

Lebanon hosts around 1 million registered Syrians "roughly a quarter of Lebanon's population" and officials have said that the country can no longer afford the strain on its fragile economy.

UN officials and rights groups have expressed concern over the organized repatriations, calling them premature as violence is ongoing amid a government crackdown in Syria.

- (With AP inputs)