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Looters take advantage of Syria's ongoing conflict



Sitting on a cushion she has placed atop debris, Samia stares dismally at a pile of rocks, all that remains of her Aleppo home after it was hit by what everyone here simply refers to as “Scuds.” Every day since the strike last month she has come to sit by her former home, protecting what is left of it from those who would pillage the remains. “We haven’t seen any humanitarian aid, the only ones who come to see us are thieves,” the 50-year-old says bitterly as men work behind her. Armed with pickaxes, they break through the concrete and stone strewn across the area where houses once stood, hoping to find something of value left behind after the deadly strike that hit the Tariq al-Bab district on February 22. Residents say their neighborhood was targeted with Scud missiles, though watchdog groups have been unable to confirm that. But there is no doubt that ground-to-ground missiles hit the area that day, killing at least 12 people. Nearby, resident Mustafa discusses the looters, his face and beard covered in white dust. “People don’t have anything to eat, so they come to take whatever they can from the destroyed houses,” he said. The destruction is staggering. The strike razed buildings in four streets, and not a single structure in a 100 meter radius has been left standing. Dozens of people were injured in addition to those who were killed. According to the United Nations, 1.2 million homes have been destroyed since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011. Awash, 60, cannot hold back her tears as she presents her granddaughter.

“She has been motherless, along with her five brothers and sisters, since the Scud fell on us. We were in the house and the ceiling fell in on us,” she says, wiping the tears from her eyes with the end of her black veil. “Since then, no one has come to help us, no one has given us a penny. We’re waiting here to die of hunger and to suffer, all of this because of our President Bashar al-Assad,” she sighs.

‘I hate this life’

Amjad, 10, used to live in the neighborhood, but now sleeps in a tent outside of Aleppo, the country's former economic powerhouse, which has been engulfed in fighting between rebel forces and regime troops for nine months now. He describes "the cold, the rain, the wind," and says his brother, still just a baby, "has a fever because of the way we're living." The February 22 attack killed his father, and the rest of the family are surviving only because of the kindness of neighbors who have helped out. Samia is also living in a tent, all she has left to shelter herself, her eight children and her 70-year-old husband. "I have nothing but the dress I'm wearing, we weren't able to take anything," she said. "Luckily the sun has come back, it's our only electricity," she adds, only her green eyes visible between her purple veil. "The other day, my young son said to me 'Mum, I don't want to eat anymore, I prefer to be left to die, I hate this life'," she said. A little further away, 25-year-old Ali, who has two children to feed, gestures towards what remains of a red truck trapped under the rubble. "Here you go, this is what is left of the truck I worked with. I've lost everything. Nothing is left for us," he said. Across the street, a neighbor laments his own fate. "I was a lawyer, now I'm a shepherd! You see, this is what we are reduced to. Overnight, I've lost everything."