

Refugees Return to Fallujah

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Those who fled fighting take advantage of new accord to try to get back to their home.

At a checkpoint on the highway outside the besieged town of Falluja, a cluster of men stands just beyond a line of concertina wire.

"When can we get through?" they shout at the Iraqi translator for the US Marine unit guarding this section of the road. He ignores them.

In the line of vehicles that stretches down the road behind them, their families sit waiting, hoping to take advantage of a new accord allowing people who fled the fighting to return home.

This day, according to a member of the Iraqi Red Crescent, who helped broker the arrangement, some 150 families were allowed through the lines. The ones at the checkpoint, however, will not be getting inside today.

Having watched reports of the ferocious battles in the town, they worry about what they will find when they get back.

A good many hope for word of relatives who stayed behind to fight.

"We must come back to Falluja. We left our son here. He refused to come with us, because he could not let his friends defend Falluja by themselves," said pharmacist Khalid Hardan.

"I kissed my son's hand," recalled Hardan's wife. "I said, 'Please, I am your mother. You must obey me'. He answered, 'Don't be angry, mom. I want to [die fighting and] enter paradise'."

Um Dhergam, an elderly woman, says that she is returning to bury her son.

"A person told me my son was killed, and he lay two days in the street," she said. "No one could help him and take him to the hospital. He bled to death.

"He was my only son. I lost his father in the war with Iran, and now I lost my son. I hope to die. I cannot live without them."

Some are returning to stop being a continued burden on the families who volunteered to take them in.

"We spent many days with a family whom we never met before. We thanked them very much for their hospitality but we think now that we are burdening them, so that we must leave," said Um Ahmed, an elderly woman who fled the town.

Others are coming back to find out whether their homes and businesses have survived.

"I've heard that US soldiers have broken down doors when going from house to house to attack the resistance," said Sami Hazem, owner of a grocery. "If they left the doors open, any criminal could go inside and take everything."

"Maybe what I have to say sounds funny, but I have some birds and chickens in my garden," said Jamal Jalal, a pensioner. "I left them only a little food, so if I stay out for long they will die. I have had them for a long time, as I do not have children."

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