

War-torn Syria rations fuel amid ongoing closure of Suez Canal

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Even before the Ever Given ran aground in the canal, Syria had been suffering from fuel shortages mostly caused by Western sanctions. (Photo: Mohammed Abdullah/Reuters)

Damascus, March 29 (RHC)-- The Syrian government has started rationing the distribution of fuel in the country amid concerns that shipments could be delayed because Egypt's Suez Canal is being blocked by a giant cargo ship that ran aground, according to the oil ministry.

The blockage has held up a ship that was carrying fuel and oil products from Iran, an ally of the Syrian government, the Syrian oil ministry said over the weekend. Pending a resolution, "the ministry is rationing the distribution of available oil products" to ensure the continuity of essential services, such as bakeries and hospitals, the ministry statement said.

The Ever Given container ship has been stuck sideways in the Suez Canal since Tuesday, blocking the crucial waterway in both directions. On Saturday, authorities prepared to make new attempts to free the vessel and reopen a crucial east-west waterway for global shipping.

Oil Minister Bassam Tomeh told state TV the cargo had been due to arrive at the port of Banias on Friday but that if the Suez blockage persisted, the ship may re-route around the southern tip of Africa, an expensive detour many companies have been forced to consider. Meanwhile, the ministry "expressed its hope for the success" of the operations under way at the Suez Canal.

Even before the Ever Given ran aground, Syria had been suffering from fuel shortages mostly caused by Western sanctions. More than half a million people have been killed in Syria's 10-year conflict that has also left the country's economy and infrastructure in ruins, created shortages of basic goods and medicines, and left most of its oil and agricultural resources outside of government control.

Nearly 80 percent of Syrians live in poverty, and 60 percent are food insecure – the worst food security situation ever seen in Syria, according to the United Nations. Syrians have been forced to wait in long lines to buy subsidised bread and fuel.

Earlier this year, the Syrian government raised the price of fuel, including fuel products that had been subsidised, by more than 50 percent, in the third increase this year. It also raised the price of cooking gas.

Prior to the war, Syria enjoyed relative energy autonomy, but in the past decade an estimated \$91.5bn in hydrocarbons revenue has been lost, Syria's oil minister said in February.

The pandemic restrictions have added to pressure on the economy, compounded by the financial crisis in neighbouring Lebanon, which has been a bridge to Syria economically and financially.

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