

Conflict Presses Syrian Economy

This is the VOA Special English Economics Report.

Eighteen months of conflict in Syria have hurt the country’s economy. But in the capital, Damascus, a certain level of normalcy exists. Prices are higher. But goods are still available.

VOA reporter Elizabeth Arrott recently visited Damascus. Her visit took place under the guidance of a Syrian government official.

She says the Spice Market of Old Damascus is an unusual sight in a country affected by civil war. Syrian military forces are striking nearby towns where rebels have support. But in the center of Damascus, business is good.

One man operates a business once by his father and grandfather. He sells cumin, dried peppers, pine nuts and almonds.

He says work is about the same, but prices have gone up. This has affected both his customers and business. He is thankful that supplies are still arriving at his shop. But he says people are cutting back, and mainly buying only essential goods.

Another shopkeeper says business has fallen.

“You know we live in a very difficult atmosphere, the atmosphere of crisis.”

Afif Dala is with the Syrian Ministry of Economy and Trade. He says Western restrictions on Syria for its violent reaction to government opponents have caused problems. But the government has worked to keep business in the capital normal.

“But the Syrian economy actually depends on itself. There is a self-sufficiency in the Syrian economy because the Syrian economy is very diverse.”

Syria, however, also seeks help from outside the country. Russia, China and Venezuela are major trade partners of Syria.

“There are a lot of countries, actually, because finally the interests, the economic interests between countries are talk, not anything else. It is not a moral thing, the Syrian economy, only; also its interests.

But conditions in Syria are important to other countries. This is especially true when many thousands of people have been killed in violence across Syria. This has forced tens of thousands of people to cross the border to escape the conflict.

This week, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticized Syria at a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul. He said actions of Turkey's neighbor are "hurting the heart of humanity and the whole Islamic world."

Mr. Erdogan said there are almost one hundred thousand Syrian refugees in Turkey. And he expects more will enter as they flee fighting between Syrian government and rebel forces.

And that's the VOA Special English Economics Report. I'm Mario Ritter.