

لنتعد لثورة لسورية في هوة الأحلام لغربية

«مراجعة لصحفة لسورية» #37

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الإجماع الذي كان يسود الصحافة الغربية و الخليجية في الأشهر العشرة الأخيرة بدأ بالتفتت. وفيما أظهرت بعض الصحف المعروفة عمليات الجيش السوري النوعية لتحرير المدن من العصابات الوهابية على أنها حالات قمع سياسي للمدنيين العزل، لكن بدا واضحا أن صور المدنيين المتظاهرين ضد نظام الرئيس الأسد قد حلت محلها صور المسلحين المقنعين، أما التقارير فركزت على الجانب الديني والممترسات الطائفية بدلا عن التظاهرات السياسية. ومازال الإعلام الغربي والخليجي يعكس موقف حكوماتهم مع تغيير بسيط في الآليات حيث أن الصورة الرومانسية للثورة السورية قد تلاشت. فالدعاية الوحيد المتبقية لإقناع القارئ بصحة مواقف بلدانهم هي بإظهار المتمردين على أنهم منشقين عن الجيش السوري بدل تأكيد حقيقتهم بأنهم مرتزقة من العصابات الوهابية، وغالبا هم من عناصر القاعدة. أما فالمحللين والخبراء فهم بانتظار حلول مجلس الأمن حول مقترحات جامعة الدول العربية و روسيا.

Le Monde (France)

Damas ignore le plan arabe et accentue la répression

Le régime syrien a lancé mardi 24 janvier une vaste offensive contre la ville rebelle de Hama

L'armée syrienne a lancé, mardi 24 janvier, une vaste offensive contre Hama pour faire plier cette ville rebelle du centre de la Syrie, au moment où les pays occidentaux redoublent d'efforts pour sortir le pays de la crise.

Les Européens, qui ont adopté lundi de nouvelles sanctions contre Damas, espèrent que le Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies s'exprimera lundi ou mardi sur nouveau projet de résolution en soutien au plan de la Ligue arabe. Dévoilée le 22 janvier au Caire et immédiatement rejetée par le régime syrien, cette initiative appelle à une transition en douceur à Damas, calquée sur le règlement de la crise yéménite. Le président Bachar Al-Assad s'effacerait progressivement devant son vice-président, Farouk Al-Chareh, qui assurerait l'intérim avant la tenue d'élections générales.

« Nous sommes ouverts à toute proposition constructive visant à mettre fin aux violences » en Syrie, a réagi Sergueï Lavrov, le chef de la diplomatie russe, qui a mis son veto, en octobre 2011, conjointement avec la Chine, à un premier projet de résolution. Mais la Rus-

sie reste opposée à toute initiative permettant le recours à la force ou à « des sanctions prises sans aucune consultation » avec Moscou et Pékin, membres permanents du Conseil de sécurité, a-t-il ajouté.

Selon l'agence Reuters, qui s'est procuré une copie du projet de résolution, la question des sanctions n'y est pas évoquée. Le texte invite le secrétaire général de l'ONU à rendre compte tous les quinze jours de la mise en œuvre des dispositions prévues, sans qu'aucun mécanisme contraignant ne soit mis en place. Les chancelleries occidentales, veulent croire que Moscou ne pourra pas s'opposer à une résolution qui ne fait que reprendre les recommandations de l'ensemble des pays arabes.

Sur le terrain, « l'armée syrienne pilonne Hama à l'arme lourde », pour la deuxième journée consécutive, ont affirmé mercredi les Comités locaux de coordination (CLC) qui organisent la mobilisation. « Il y aurait des morts et des blessés. Des maisons se sont effondrées », indiquent les CLC faisant état d'un « déploiement de près de 4 000 soldats » dans cette ville située à 210 km au nord de Damas.

Selon l'agence officielle Sana, un prêtre, Bassilius Nassar, a été assassiné mercredi par un « groupe terroriste armé » alors qu'il portait secours à un blessé à Hama. Les CLC affirment pour leur part que le prêtre a été tué dans « l'offensive dur régime contre Hama ».

Cette attaque survient trente ans après le massacre perpétré dans cette ville par les forces de Hafez-Al-Assad

Cette attaque survient trente ans après le massacre perpétré dans cette ville par les forces de Hafez-Al-Assad, le père de l'actuel président, en représailles à une insurrection menée par les Frères musulmans. La répression avait causé la mort d'environ 20 000 habitants.

Mardi, par la voix du ministre des affaires étrangères, Walid Mouallem, le régime de Damas avait dit sa volonté d'en finir avec cette nouvelle révolte populaire

réprimée dans le sang depuis mars. « Les autorités ont décidé de régler la situation de manière définitive (...) afin de débarrasser la ville des [milices] armées », écrit le quotidien *Al-Watan*, proche du pouvoir.

L'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH), a fait état de 13 victimes civiles mercredi à travers la Syrie, dont quatre à Hama et sa région, parmi elles une jeune fille. Dans la province d'Idleb, le président de la section locale du Croissant-Rouge syrien, Abdelrazak Jbeiro, a été tué par « un groupe terroriste armé », a rapporté l'agence de presse Sana. En outre, six déserteurs et quatre membres des forces gouvernementales ont été tués dans des affrontements armés, qui tendent à se multiplier ces dernières semaines.

Signe du chaos croissant qui prévaut sur le terrain, les Nations unies ont annoncé mercredi qu'elles n'étaient plus en mesure de fournir un bilan précis de la répression. Le dernier décompte, en décembre 2011, faisait état de 5 000 personnes tuées par les services de sécurité syriens, en dix mois de soulèvement. ■

SERVICE INTERNATIONAL

De Morgen (Belgique / Belgium)

'Syrië zet Iraanse sluipschutters in'

BRUSSEL

Het regime van Assad maakt gebruik van Iraanse scherp-schutters om betogers in Syrië te doden. Ook schutters van Hezbollah vervullen tegen betaling opdrachten voor Assad.

"De Syrische veiligheidsdienst was niet gekwalificeerd en beschikte niet over goede scherp-schutters, noch over de benodigde wapens. Daarom had de regering scherp-schutters uit Iran nodig, evenals schutters van Hezbollah", zo meldde insider Mahmoud Haj Hamad aan de Britse krant *The Times*. Hij werkte eerder op het Syrische ministerie van Defensie, maar vluchtte vorige maand met zijn gezin uit schaarste voor het handelen van zijn regering.

Volgens Hamad maakte de regering aanvankelijk, na het begin van de betogingen, gebruik van honderden scherp-schutters. Dat werden er echter al snel duizenden toen

de protesten in omvang toenamen. De buitenlandse scherp-schutters kwamen te wonen in compounds in de Syrische hoofdstad Damascus en werden betaald met uit Iran geïmporteerde Amerikaanse dollars uit geheime fondsen.

Zowel Iran als Hezbollah hebben nauwe militaire banden met het regime van Assad. Twee schepen vol met wapens, bedoeld voor de bestrijding van de betogers, zouden ten tijde van de Egyptische opstand door het Suezkanaal naar de Syrische havenstad Latakia zijn gevaren. "Sommige mensen die toeketen toen de schepen werden uitgeladen, zagen verbrandingsovens. Met die ovens hoefde de regering geen mas-

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'Assadregime gebruikte verbrandingsovens om massagraven te vermijden'

MAHMOUD HAJ HAMAD
GEVLUCHTE DEFENSIEMEDEWERKER

.....

sagraven te gebruiken", aldus Hamad.

Volgens de bron in *The Times* verduidelde Assad het militaire budget in het afgelopen jaar om overal in het land constant militairen in te kunnen zetten. Het regime zou als gevolg daarvan, en als gevolg van de internationale sancties tegen Syrië en de misgelopen belastinginkomsten uit rebel-lenbolwerken als Homs, Hama en Deraa, kampen met grote financiële problemen. Volgens Hamad doet het regime wan-hoopspogingen om geld te vergaren en worden de zonen van rijke zakenlui ontvoerd en vervolgens vrijgelaten in ruil voor losgeld.

De berichtgeving in *The Times* versterkt het beeld dat Assad in grote mate afhankelijkheid is van buitenlandse diensten. Eerder deze maand concludeerde onderzoeker Ben Wagner in een rapport van de mensenrechtenorganisatie Hivos dat westerse bedrijven spionagetechnologie leveren aan de Syrische regering en andere regimes in de regio. Persbureau Bloomberg beschreef daarvoor al hoe Italiaanse technici in opdracht van Assad spionagetechnologie installeerden in Damascus. (VK)

Der Standard (Autriche / Austria)

„Syrien darf nicht Libyen werden“

Russlands Blockade: Antiwestlicher Reflex, Wahlkampf

Josef Kirchengast

Wien – Im UN-Sicherheitsrat zeichnet sich eine neue Konfrontation zwischen dem Westen und Russland im Fall Syrien ab. Während Großbritannien und Frankreich gemeinsam mit arabischen Verbündeten einen Resolutionsentwurf vorbereiten, der die Arabische Liga in ihrer Forderung nach einem Rücktritt des syrischen Staatschefs Bashar al-Assad unterstützt, bekräftigte der russische Außenminister Sergej Lawrow Moskaus Nein zu Sanktionen oder einer Militäraktion (beides ist im Resolutionsentwurf gar nicht enthalten).

„Syrien darf nicht Libyen werden“: Das ist nach den Worten des russischen Nahost- und Islamexperten Georgi Mirskij die Maxime der russischen Blockadepolitik. Mirskij, Professor am Moskauer Institut für Weltwirtschaft und Internationale Beziehungen, sprach am Mittwochabend auf Einladung des Renner-Instituts und des EU-Russland-Thinktanks Iceur in Wien.

„Schuld am Tod Gaddafis“

In Russland herrscht laut Mirskij die Meinung vor, der Westen habe Moskau im Fall Libyen betrogen (wo es sich beim Beschluss des UN-Sicherheitsrats über eine Militärintervention der Stimme enthielt). Viele Russen glaubten, Präsident Dmitri Medwedew (der die Stimmenthaltung anordnete) sei für den Tod des libyschen Ex-Diktators Gaddafi verantwortlich. Seit dem „Libyen-Debakel“ würden wichtige außenpolitische Ent-

scheidungen nur noch von Premier Wladimir Putin getroffen.

Mirskij erklärt Putins Haltung auch mit dem laufenden Präsidentschaftswahlkampf. Der Premier wolle sich als „großer, unabhängiger Führer“ präsentieren, der niemals nach der Pfeife Amerikas tanze. Dies komme der noch immer verbreiteten antiwestlichen und antiamerikanischen Sowjetmentalität entgegen. In Russland glaube auch niemand, dass es dem Westen wirklich um Demokratie gehe – und dass das westliche System sich vom russischen unterscheide. Stattdessen würden vor allem die USA verdächtigt, ständig auf „schmutzigen Tricks“ gegen Russland aus zu sein. „Putin und Medwedew verstehen nicht, was Demokratie, demokratische Institutionen und öffentliche Meinung sind.“

Dennoch sieht Mirskij im Fall Syrien auch rationale Gründe für Moskaus Kurs: Eine Militärintervention könne dort eine Radikalisierung der Islamisten auslösen, im Vergleich zu der die ägyptischen Muslimbrüder ein „Kindergarten“ seien. Angesichts der Entwicklung in Syrien selbst glaubt Mirskij, dass sich Assad nur noch ein paar Monate halten kann.

Zum Atomstreit mit dem Iran meint der Moskauer Experte, Teheran wolle zeigen, dass es „fünf Minuten vor der Bombe steht und sie jederzeit bauen kann – das wollen sie aber nicht“. Die inzwischen verschärften Sanktionen von USA und EU hätten einzig den Zweck, Israel von einem Militärschlag abzuhalten – „denn das hätte katastrophale Folgen“.

Kämpfe in Vororten von Damaskus

Araber wollen Uno einbeziehen

(Reuters/dapd) · Die Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Aufständischen und Sicherheitskräften in Syrien haben die Tore der Hauptstadt Damaskus erreicht. In mehreren Vororten waren in der Nacht zum Donnerstag und tagsüber Kämpfe im Gange, deren Lärm nach Angaben von Bewohnern auch im acht Kilometer entfernten Zentrum der Metropole zu hören war. Ein Armeemoffizier sagte der Nachrichtenagentur Reuters, dass seit den Morgenstunden im Vorort Duma Kämpfe im Gange gewesen seien. Die Sicherheitskräfte suchten in der Hochburg der Regierungsgegner nach Waffen und steckbrieflich gesuchten Personen, hiess es. Aktivisten sagten, die Aufständischen hätten Duma für einige Tage unter ihre Kontrolle gebracht, worauf die Sicherheitskräfte zuerst abgezogen und nun wieder einmarschiert seien. Dabei sei die Armee aber auf keinen Widerstand gestossen. Sie sprachen von 200 Festgenommenen. Kämpfe wurden auch aus den Vororten Harasta und Irbin gemeldet.

Zeitgleich mit der Wiederaufnahme der Beobachtermission der Arabischen Liga forderte ihr Chef, Nabil al-Arabi, in scharfen Worten ein Ende der Angriffe auf die Zivilbevölkerung. Die arabische Staatengruppe sei über die anhaltende Gewalt in Syrien besorgt. Er kündigte für kommenden Montag eine Reise zum Uno-Hauptquartier in New York an, um dort den Plan der Arabischen Liga für Syrien zu erläutern, welcher den Rücktritt des Präsidenten und demokratische Wahlen vorsieht. Das russische Aussenministerium erklärte derweil, es werde seine eigene Syrien-Resolution im Sicherheitsrat vorantreiben. Moskau hat bisher eine Verurteilung der Gewalt in Syrien verhindert.

Publico (Portugal)

Confrontos junto a Damasco entre tropas do Governo e a oposição

Ana Gomes Ferreira

Entre a opção de Assad e a opção dos árabes para resolver o conflito sírio está a Rússia, que apresentará a sua própria resolução ao Conselho de Segurança

● O conflito sírio chegou ontem à fronteira de Damasco, a capital do país. Logo pela manhã, as tropas governamentais atacaram o subúrbio de Douma, zona de refúgio de muitos soldados desertores que combatem agora o Presidente, Bashar al-Assad.

Na quarta-feira, um grupo destes homens tentaram tomar Douma. A “tentativa das tropas de a tomar de assalto” redundou na morte de quatro civis, atingidos pelas forças presidenciais quando participavam nos funerais de outras vítimas da repressão, dizia em comunicado citado pela AFP o Observatório sírio dos Direitos do Homem. Após o raide, as tropas

passaram revista a muitas casas, procurando armas e opositores.

Noutro subúrbio da capital, Harasta, as forças de segurança entraram em força era ainda noite e mais de 200 pessoas foram presas.

Rami Abdel Rahmane, um dos coordenadores do Observatório, questionado pela AFP em Nicósia (Chipre), disse que os desertores (não foi esclarecido se pertencem oficialmente ao Exército de Libertação da Síria, as forças armadas na oposição) também “tentaram realizar uma emboscada a um comboio de forças de segurança numa estrada perto da localidade de Kherbet Ghazaleh”.

Noutro ponto do país, Hama, as tropas criaram perímetros de segurança por toda a cidade, depois de na terça e quarta-feira a terem bombardeado numa tentativa de controlar a rebelião anti-Assad no centro do país.

Foi neste ambiente de grande violência que os delegados da Liga Árabe na Síria, em missão de observação desde o final do ano passado, reto-

maram o seu trabalho (seis Estados retiraram os seus representantes). Tinham interrompido a missão para que os 22 países da organização avaliassem o seu primeiro relatório.

O governador de Damasco, Hussein Makhoul, disse aos observadores que tinham sido iniciados contactos com a oposição para um cessar-fogo, relatou a Reuters. A notícia não foi confirmada pela outra parte.

O conteúdo do relatório dos observadores não é conhecido. Porém, na sua sequência, a Liga emitiu um roteiro para a transição de regime na Síria que prevê a saída de Assad do poder e a criação de um governo de transição. O regime de Damasco recusou este plano e os países da Liga fizeram saber que iriam recorrer às Nações Unidas para o aplicar.

O presidente da Liga Árabe, o egípcio Nabil al-Arabi, confirmou à Reuters que viaja no sábado para Nova Iorque com o primeiro-ministro do Qatar, xeique Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, que detém a presidência rotativa da organização. Na segunda-feira, informou a Al-Arabi, terão “uma reunião no Conselho de Segurança para conseguirem a ratificação da decisão da Liga”.

A Rússia, porém, vai apresentar o seu próprio documento sobre a Síria ao Conselho de Segurança (onde tem direito de veto, anunciou em Moscovo o porta-voz do ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Alexander Lukashевич).

O Governo de Moscovo tem-se declarado contrário à deposição de Assad e defendido negociações para solucionar o conflito na Síria, onde a população continua nas ruas a exigir a queda do Presidente.

“A Rússia apresenta a sua própria resolução, que teve em conta considerações de outros países ocidentais”, disse o porta-voz.



TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP

Protesto nos EUA contra o apoio da Rússia ao regime de Assad

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

Clashes Hit Closer to Home in Damascus

By NOUR MALAS
AND BILL SPINDLE

DAMASCUS—In a country roiled by protests and violence, Syria's capital remains an island of determination to go about life as always. But the country's 11-month old uprising now is lapping up against Syria's biggest and most-important city.

Armed clashes in the eastern suburbs of Damascus have jolted many in the capital into acknowledging a conflict that—until last week—had swept through suburbs but otherwise remained as much a YouTube phenomenon for them as for outside observers.

On Thursday, defected troops in two suburbs of eastern Damascus—no farther than seven kilometers from the old city—held their ground for hours after fighting government forces. Activists said the military stormed Douma, another close suburb, after the armed opposition temporarily took over the town last week.

In a hotel lobby, businessmen fielded phone calls appearing to describe a government counteroffensive in Douma after the military had lost control. "Empty words," one of them said, dismissing the news as a myth.

But as the protest movement edges closer to the capital, the violence on both sides becomes more difficult to ignore. Activists said government forces have killed more than 120 people in protests across the country this week.

The unrest has penetrated households far from the protest hubs. Many neighborhoods now experience regular power cuts, with the government saying it is unable to transport fuel to power plants amid clashes and sabotage. Hotels are closing. Those still open accept only cash.

Once-bustling restaurants that booked reservations weeks in advance now welcome walk-in diners. International schools, the military first choice for many of Syria's elite families, are closing as expatriates and, increasingly, the locals themselves, pick up and leave.

The economy, along with confidence, has gone into free fall, despite a nearly continuous succession of emergency meetings between government and business leaders to save it.

"How long can we cope? It's hard to know," said Nabil Sukkar, an



Syrian soldiers patrol the streets of Damascus suburb Ain Tarma on Thursday, as armed conflict with protesters and defected troops edges closer to the capital.

economist who recently moved his consulting business into the basement of his home to reduce costs.

The fate of Damascus, along with the country's second-largest city Aleppo, is critical to the fortunes of Syria's beleaguered ruling family. The two cities, Aleppo in the north and Damascus south of the center, are home to business interests that have underpinned the four-decade rule of President Bashar al-Assad and his father before him. And they harbor the most important contingent of what regime supporters refer to as "the gray," a silent majority they say still supports the president.

Such supporters clearly exist. The welcoming expression of a housewife in her living room in Damascus's old city drained away as she took note of prolonged negotiations between the military and armed regime opponents who last week wrestled control of Zabadani, a resort town a half-hour drive from the capital.

The president was being patient and reasonable, to a fault, in dealing

with the outlaws, as she sees them. "Do you think he couldn't have them all in coffins in a week?" she said.

Inside a nearby church, scribbles over dozens of pages in a prayer book reflect a city anxious about the future. "Oh Jesus, our nation is pain," a recent entry reads. "Help save our leader, save our precious country Syria."

But the most hardened battle line in Damascus isn't between the Sunni-majority protest movement and minorities like the Christian population. For many, the critical political position—stripped bare of arguments on the pace of change and how necessary the government's military campaign against opponents is—is loyalty to President Assad.

Rumors of secret and planned defections among business leaders abound. But in private, and some more public conversations, many at the very least remain resigned to supporting the regime as the best way to avoid chaos. Many are vehemently committed to President As-

sad, even some who readily admit frustrations with the lack of change over the decade since he succeeded his father.

"We want reforms, drastic reforms," said Fares Al-Shehabi, chairman of the Aleppo Chamber of Industry. "People don't like the [ruling] Baath Party. They don't like the government. But they are with the president."

Others, though, have developed deeper doubts.

One merchant in the restive district of Midan described how he joined openly defiant crowds: On a Friday a few months back, he allowed a handful of protesters inside his shop to escape the thick clouds of tear gas unleashed by riot police. He said he helped a teenager stumbling around with a bloodied face wipe up and sit down until he could safely walk down the street.

Within days, he found himself detained by security services for assisting the demonstrators. Outraged, he joined the protests the next Friday, he said.

Other merchants in the neighborhood described a similar dilemma.

Regime opponents pressure them to close their stores in solidarity with the protests. If they do, security services break down the doors and force them to open, they said.

"Either way it's bad for business," said Omar, another shopkeeper, who shut his copper workshop in a suburb where the opposition has called several general strikes. He said he pre-emptively built an iron gate around his home, three streets away from Midan. "It's chaos there already. Everyone is afraid [of] what comes next."

The newly unemployed drink tea on sidewalks and discuss "the security situation," another common description for the violence roiling many of the country's other cities.

The business elite are moving abroad. They are critical of what one young entrepreneur—a former supporter of the president who now says "you can't wipe away blood with reforms"—called "the chaos in the decision making."

Los Angeles Times (USA)

Dozens reported killed in Syria

The violence comes as the Arab League prepares to seek U.N. censure of Assad.

PATRICK J. McDONNELL
REPORTING FROM BEIRUT

Dozens of people were reported killed Thursday as violence raged across Syria, and Arab League officials who are calling on President Bashar Assad to relinquish power prepared to take their case to the United Nations.

The two sides gave conflicting accounts of the latest spasm of bloodshed since large-scale protests against Assad's rule broke out 10 months ago, pushing the nation toward civil war.

Pro-Assad demonstrators gathered in Damascus and other cities, the state-owned Syrian Arab News Agency said, even as anti-government protests and attacks on security forces continued.

Heavy fighting was reported in several Damascus suburbs, but an opposition group reported that the highest death toll was in the troubled western cities of Homs and Hama, where 54 were killed by government security forces, according to the Local Coordination Committees, an activist coalition that seeks Assad's ouster. Nationwide, the coalition said, security forces had killed 65 people.

Activists reported that Homs, which has seen the heaviest fighting during the uprising, was again facing a full-fledged government offensive with armored vehicles. Government officials have acknowledged that much of the city has slipped from their control.

The government reported that three security officers, including an army colonel, were killed by "terrorist" groups in Homs. Rocket-propelled grenades in Homs killed four civilians, including two women, and injured 20, the state-run news agency reported.

The regime lays blame for the violence on terrorists, including Islamic militants, armed and supported by other nations. Opposition groups say the government's brutal crackdown on peaceful protests has led to an armed rebellion by Syrians seeking justice and freedom from Assad's police state.

The differing accounts of the casualties Thursday could not be independently verified.

A reduced corps of Arab League monitors has resumed its work, seeking to determine whether Damascus is taking steps to end the violence. Absent were 55 Persian Gulf monitors who left Syria after six gulf nations, led by Saudi Arabia, questioned Assad's commitment to peace.

Arab League officials, meanwhile, were preparing to head to New York in a bid to persuade the U.N. Security Council to condemn Assad's regime. The Arab League is said to be working with Western nations, including the United States, on a draft resolution denouncing the Syrian government. But Russia, a Security Council member with veto power, has voiced opposition to any U.N. sanctions of

Syrian troops fight rebels near Damascus

Gov't forces detain at least 200 in Douma

• By MARIAM KAROUNY

HARASTA (Reuters) – Syrian troops battled rebels in a town just north of Damascus on Thursday and a provincial governor spoke of negotiating local cease-fires as a 10-month-old revolt against President Bashar Assad crept close to the capital.

A Syrian officer told Reuters clashes had been under way in Douma since the morning. Security forces were searching houses for arms and wanted suspects. Reporters were shown homemade grenades among other seized weapons.

The officer was speaking in the tense suburb of Harasta nearby, where troops were deployed in strength.

The opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said security forces had detained 200 people in Douma, a hotbed of protests and rebellion against Assad.

Gunfire was close enough to be heard from central Damascus during the night.

"Many of them [in the opposition] have been misled. They will eventually come back to the right way," Hussein Makhoul, governor of the Damascus countryside, told Arab League monitors before they headed for some of the capital's troubled suburbs.

"We have started a dialogue with them, including some armed groups that are controlling positions there," Makhoul said.

He told the observers that the authorities were using "the same approach as in Zabadani, so the same scenario will happen." This month the military withdrew armored vehicles encircling the rebel-held town of Zabadani, near the border with Lebanon, after negotiating a truce with its defenders.

Arab observers stopped at an entrance to the Damascus suburb of Irbin, where a dozen soldiers stood guard. Beyond them a crowd of about 100 anti-Assad protesters shouted "Allah akbar"

and another person they said had been killed in the morning.

The Arab observers soon drove away from the scene without going into the town.

The monitors, now without 55 Gulf Arab colleagues withdrawn by their governments this week in protest at continued bloodshed, were resuming work after a one-week gap during which the Arab League prolonged its mission by another month.

One monitor said he was confused about the extension. "The report has been written and the [League] decisions have been taken, so another month to do what? We are not sure," he said.

Syrian opposition groups have accused the observer mission, which deployed on December 26, of giving Assad diplomatic cover to pursue a crackdown on protesters and rebels in which more than 5,000 people have been killed since March, by a UN tally.

The Arab League called on Sunday for Assad to quit as part of a transition plan for which it is seeking UN support.

Western and Arab diplomats are working on a draft Security Council resolution on Syria. Russia said it would continue to promote its own text, but did not rule out a compromise.

"For now... Russia has its own draft and will actively promote it within the framework of the Security Council," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said.

Russia, one of Syria's few remaining allies along with Iran, has rejected sanctions or military action against Assad.

The Security Council could vote as early as next week on a Western-Arab draft resolution, council diplomats said.

Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby urged Damascus to end military operations against "defenseless civilians."

In a statement, he voiced concern about "the continued killing and violence in Syria that has claimed more inno-

cently by army deserters and other rebels has increasingly eclipsed peaceful protests against more than four decades of rule by the Assad family.

Activists said the army deployment and clashes in townships around Damascus were a response to insurgents' growing strength.

"The Free Syrian Army [FSA] has almost complete control of some areas of the Damascus countryside and some control in Douma and Harasta," an activist who gave his name as Hussein told Reuters by telephone from Harasta.

Other activists in Douma, Harasta and Irbin said security forces had gathered in their towns after rebels retreated because they could not fight pitched battles with the army.

"Assad's army has armored vehicles and anti-aircraft guns while we only have rifles and rocket-propelled grenades," said an FSA fighter who calls himself Abu Thaeer.

France voiced concern over the situation in Hama where it said Syrian security forces had launched a major offensive.

"Facing the bloody and relentless repression of the Syrian regime, it's vital that the international community faces its responsibilities by adopting a Security Council resolution that condemns the violence committed by the Damascus government against its people," a French Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

The US State Department's top human rights official said Washington was keen to work with the Arab League to end the bloodshed in Syria and he called for Assad to go.

"We are desirous of working in partnership with them and there is certainly a hope and expectation that we can proceed to the Security Council soon for the issue to be raised," Michael Posner told reporters in Cairo.

The Arab League has suspended Syria and called for Assad to hand over to his deputy, pending the formation of an unity government

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Une mission de la Ligue arabe demain à l'ONU pour discuter du dossier syrien

Révolte Après Hama, les forces de sécurité lancent une offensive à Homs et Douma ; au moins 62 morts hier.

Le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe a indiqué hier vouloir se rendre demain au siège de l'ONU afin de solliciter le soutien du Conseil de sécurité sur le plan de sortie de crise arabe pour la Syrie. Une réunion est également prévue lundi à New York avec le Conseil de sécurité pour lui « demander de ratifier » ce plan, a indiqué Nabil el-Arabi, qui a dans le même temps sommé le gouvernement syrien de mettre fin aux opérations militaires contre « des civils sans défense ».

Néanmoins, le Conseil reste divisé. Européens et pays arabes travaillent à mettre au point un projet de résolution basé sur l'initiative arabe qui prévoit un transfert des pouvoirs du président Bachar el-Assad à son vice-président ainsi qu'un départ « pacifique » du chef de l'État contesté. Ils se heurtent cependant à l'intransigeance de la Russie, proche alliée de Damas et opposée à toute décision hostile au pouvoir syrien. Un opposant syrien résidant en France, Hâtham Manaa, a même appelé la Ligue arabe à consulter la Russie avant de se rendre à l'ONU, estimant que « la Russie pourra appuyer cette initiative si elle sent qu'elle en fait partie. Mais si elle est marginalisée, elle s'y opposera ».

Les observateurs de la Ligue reprennent leur mission

Toujours au niveau diplomatique, le ministre tunisien des Affaires étrangères Rafik Abdesslem a déclaré hier que le régime syrien « doit écouter son peuple » qui aspire à la démocratie, ajoutant que « les observateurs tunisiens faisant partie de la mission de la Ligue arabe restent en Syrie ». Les autorités syriennes ont donné leur accord à une prolongation d'un mois de cette mission en l'absence des observateurs des monarchies arabes du Golfe qui ont quitté Damas.



La communauté internationale a vivement condamné le meurtre du responsable du Croissant-Rouge syrien Abdelrazak Jbeiro, enterré hier à Idleb. Photo: YouTube

Ceux encore présents en Syrie ont d'ailleurs repris hier leur mission malgré les doutes exprimés jusque dans les rangs de l'organisation quant à leur utilité, la répression n'ayant pas faibli depuis leur déploiement le 26 décembre.

Par ailleurs, les Nations unies, la Croix-Rouge et la France ont condamné le meurtre mercredi d'un responsable du Croissant-Rouge syrien, Abdelrazak Jbeiro. De son côté, le secrétaire général de l'ONU Ban Ki-moon a demandé au gouvernement syrien « d'enquêter sur ce crime » dont le pouvoir et les rebelles se rejettent la responsabilité. Parallèlement, le ministère français des Affaires étrangères a déclaré que la France « est vivement préoccupée par la détérioration de la situation à Hama », cible d'une « offensive de grande ampleur » des forces syrien-

nes, réclamant aussi la sécurité pour les humanitaires.

Triplic offensive sur Homs, Hama et Douma

Profitant des divisions de la communauté internationale, le régime a poursuivi hier ses opérations militaires contre la révolte qui ne faiblit pas. Selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH), 49 personnes ont été tuées hier : 34 civils, huit soldats et sept militaires dissidents. La chaîne al-Jazira affirmait néanmoins que 62 personnes avaient été tuées, citant des opposants.

À Homs, l'armée syrienne a lancé une offensive, et 26 civils dont neuf enfants ont été tués, indique l'organisation basée en Grande-Bretagne. Dans la province de Deraa, un adolescent a par ailleurs été tué par des tirailleurs des forces de sécurité sur une manifestation étudiante dans la ville de

Nawa, selon l'Observatoire qui cite des habitants. L'OSDH a en outre fait état d'accrochages violents entre militaires dissidents et soldats dans cette région, faisant « quatre morts et cinq blessés dont un officier » parmi les forces régulières. De plus, quatre civils ont péri dans la ville de Hama, où près de 600 personnes ont été arrêtées. Deux personnes ont en outre péri dans la banlieue

de Damas et une autre dans la province d'Idleb. Les forces syriennes ont également lancé une offensive contre Douma, à 20 km de la capitale, et y affrontaient la résistance de soldats insoumis, qui avaient brièvement pris cette ville le 21 janvier, a indiqué l'OSDH, précisant que plus de 200 personnes y ont été arrêtées.

Malgré l'acharnement du régime, les militants prodé-

mocratie ont poursuivi leurs manifestations et ont appelé à des rassemblements aujourd'hui pour « le droit à l'autodéfense » face à la répression, sur leur page Facebook « Syrian Revolution 2011 ».

Des dizaines de milliers de Syriens ont par ailleurs manifesté à travers le pays, selon les médias officiels, pour apporter leur soutien au régime qui se targue de l'appui de son peuple pour en finir avec la crise. Les manifestants, brandissant des drapeaux de la Syrie et des portraits de M. Assad, ont exprimé leur refus de toute ingérence étrangère, selon les médias. « Jamais un peuple dirigé par Bachar ne sera vaincu » ou encore « nous sommes tous Bachar, tous des révolutionnaires », criaient les protestataires à Damas.

Par ailleurs, onze pèlerins iraniens ont été enlevés en Syrie, d'après le porte-parole du ministère iranien des Affaires étrangères, Ramtin Mehmanparast, qui a demandé au gouvernement syrien d'intervenir pour les libérer, a rapporté hier l'agence IRNA.

Signalons finalement que l'Irak a indiqué avoir renforcé la sécurité aux abords de la longue frontière qu'il partage avec la Syrie afin de « prévenir tout trafic » et « empêcher des éléments terroristes » de la traverser.

(Sources : agences et rédaction)

Assad regroupe ses armes en zone alaouite, affirme Khaddam

L'ancien vice-président syrien Abdal Halim Khaddam, aujourd'hui réfugié à Paris, a affirmé hier dans un entretien au journal Le Figaro que Bachar al-Assad rassemblerait ses armes dans les régions alaouites. « Les missiles et les armes stratégiques ont déjà intégralement été transfé-

rés. Les tanks et l'artillerie, on partira seulement, car le régime a besoin d'en garder pour assurer la répression contre les manifestants dans les villes. Bachar a également prévu d'envoyer ses avions de chasse sur l'aéroport de Lattaquié », a-t-il ajouté. Toujours selon lui, M. Assad applique

aujourd'hui un plan « qui vise à créer une guerre de religion, une guerre interconfessionnelle », affirmant que « la force ayant échoué, il ne lui reste donc plus qu'à mettre en place son plan de déstabilisation et de partition de la Syrie, qui entraînerait la destruction du pays ».

The Daily Star (Liban / Lebanon)

After talks with Lavrov, Jumblatt calls for political solution in Syria

BEIRUT: Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt renewed his call Thursday for a political solution to end the 10-month unrest in Syria, but accused Damascus of starting the violence against pro-democracy protesters demanding the ouster of President Bashar Assad.

Jumblatt, who is on a visit to Moscow, spoke to LBCITV after holding talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the Syrian crisis.

The PSP, which has criticized the Syrian regime over its brutal crackdown on protesters, stressed the need to reach a political solution to end the turmoil, where more than 5,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed since the popular uprising began in March last year, according to the United Nations.

"This political solution should be based on the Arab peace plan," Jumblatt told LBCI. "The Syrian regime is the one that started the violence in Syria."

The PSP leader added that his talks with Lavrov had not touched on the issue of Assad stepping down and handing over power.

Speaking to reporters after meeting Lavrov, Jumblatt said there was no alternative to a political solution based on the Arab initiative to end the bloodshed in Syria. He urged Russia to prod the Syrian regime into halting the violence against protesters.

The Arab League's call for Assad to step down in favor of a unity government was rebuffed by Syria Monday as a "conspiracy."

The latest Arab initiative was endorsed at a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo last Sunday.

During a short visit to Qatar last week, Jumblatt urged Iran and Turkey to play a role in helping end the crisis in Lebanon's neighbor.

Syria and its allies have maintained that the uprising in the country is part of a conspiracy aimed at targeting Assad's rule. Assad has vowed to continue his crackdown against who he describes as "terrorists." The regime has repeatedly blamed "armed gangs" for the violence in the country.

Meanwhile, Aley MP Akram Chehayeb, a PSP official, said Jumblatt's expected participation at a commemoration for assassinated ex-Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's next month does not mean his bloc would rejoin the March 14 coalition.

"The National Struggle Front will not rejoin March 14," Chehayeb said in remarks published Thursday.

"However, Feb. 14 is a very dear occasion and it cannot pass without our participation," he added.

Hariri was assassinated on Feb. 14, 2005. — *The Daily Star*

Sectarian kidnapping trade booms in Syria's protest hub Homs

BEIRUT: When he got in the taxi, the Syrian worker unwittingly walked into the hands of kidnapers. Dumped blindfolded in a graveyard eight days later, he was glad to be alive.

Residents say police write reports but never take action.

There is no one to complain to. There's no law. You either sit and wait for God's mercy, or you kidnap too. Homs is now in the hands of hoodlums. Rationality is gone," said Jamal, 30, an Alawite driver held for five days.

Stories like his are hard to verify, as government restrictions and the ongoing violence curb media access. But rights groups and the government itself have chronicled dozens of kidnapping cases. All of those interviewed spoke by Skype to avoid the telephone monitoring of security services.

In Homs, near-empty streets are patrolled by jittery soldiers hiding behind stacked sandbags. Residents shut themselves inside by dusk to avoid kidnapers waiting under the cover of darkness.

Evening out into the daytime is risky now, Jamal was kidnapped at noon. "I was driving out of the market. Four men with Kalashnikovs waved me down. I sped away because I knew what would happen."

So far, sectarian violence and killing are rarely the goals of the abductions. But the kidnapping trend in the city of 1 million people, Syria's third largest, has taken on a logic of its own.

Some seize people for money in Homs, where the bloody turmoil para-

ending. There has been more than one incident of a group of Sunni or Alawite bodies dumped in the street, mutilated. Some worry this foreshadows greater sectarian strife to come.

Gunmen dragged 30-year-old Zainab off a bus screaming, picking her out as an Alawite because she was not wearing the Muslim headscarf worn by many Sunni women in Syria.

Her brother Hadi said she pleaded with her captors. "Why kidnap me? Kidnap Bashar, I don't have anything to do with this! People on the bus just stared, terrified, they didn't say a word," Hadi said.

But Zainab told her brother that her kidnappers were polite once she was taken to her abductor's home. He called her 'my daughter' and promised not to hurt her.

"She called and said she'd been kidnapped, that they were kind to her but that we needed to get these five Sunni men released in exchange for her," her brother Hadi said.

Abu Ahmad faced worse. His captors ridiculed him, kicked him in the face and interrogated him about his neighborhood, a Sunni area that has become a stronghold of armed revolt.

He believes the men were either police or pro-Assad Alawite gunmen, known as "shabbas," who help the police. Shabbas are widely feared by Syrian protesters, who say they are more brutal because of their anonymity.

"They wanted to know the names of who declared rebels were in my neighborhood, they wanted to know who specialized in filming and uploading protest videos, as well as where the protest leader Omar al-Telawi lives."

Abu Ahmad tried to plead ignorance but said he was so afraid he eventually caved in and told them where Telawi lived, assuming the activist was already in hiding. "As for the rebels, I gave them names of men who were already martyred [killed]," he said.

Jamal, stuck with "the Frowner," worried that his family could not afford the 300,000 lira for his car on top of his 150,000 ransom.

"They asked their neighbors holding Sunnis hostages 'just in case' to give them one captive, but the men demanded a large fee," he said.

His mother even asked a Sunni clerk to help but he too failed to secure Jamal's freedom. She finally called the Frowner. "Maybe she cried, maybe she shamed him. I don't know. But he agreed to free me for just the 150,000," Jamal said.

He walked home barefoot. "The kidnappers told me where to find my car, but they kept my shoes."

Zainab was finally released when her family, through the help of Sunni and Alawite sheikhs, found the five men her captors wanted freed. Each side dropped off their hostages at a speed-upon security checkpoints and sped away.

Her relatives point out that women hostages fetch a higher price. A kidnapped man usually guarantees the release of only one man in exchange.

"We've created a first in Islamic history," her brother joked. "Inheritance laws in the Koran say a man is worth two women. In Homs, a girl is worth five guys."

Abu Ahmad was released seven days after his interrogation. His kidnappers used his phone to find a friend who arranged to release an Alawite hostage in exchange for Abu Ahmad's freedom.

Abu Ahmad was stuffed in a car and driven away blindfolded, then dumped from the car. He could hear traffic in the distance.

"I stood there blindfolded, afraid to move. Suddenly I heard my friend's voice. He said take off the blindfold, you're free. That was when I realized I was in a graveyard," he said.

"I couldn't believe it. I wanted to cry. I thought I was finished. My captors had left me to pick up a hostage my friend left for them at another graveyard, just across the street."

Once a pacifist, Abu Ahmad has now joined the Free Syrian Army, whose clashes with state forces have begun to overshadow what began as a peaceful protest movement in March. "We are in need of arms to defend ourselves and get rid of this regime, this is all their fault," he said. "I joined the rebellion so we can put an end to this nightmare." —Reuters

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Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

Clashes closer to Damascus

ARAB LEAGUE RENEWS PEACE CALL AS TROOPS CONDUCT HOUSE-TO-HOUSE RAIDS IN SUBURB

BY DURAID AL BAIK
UAE Editor

Dubai The Syrian regime yesterday heavily attacked a suburb of Damascus as observers say the regime is getting more “nervous” as fighting has reached its doorstep in the capital.

Syrian troops rounded up Douma residents in house-to-house raids. Just days before, the Free Syria army pushed its way closer to the capital.

“Many defecting soldiers joined protesters, but yesterday the situation changed when scores of tanks came from the capital to squash the protests,” Douma resident Ali Al Doumani said.

Just 16 kilometres away in downtown Damascus, thousands of people waved Syrian flags and shouted support for Syrian President Bashar Al Assad. However, the situation in the restive city of Homs was grim yesterday as the pro-regime Shabiha militia looted and burned homes.

Sources from Syria said it was not possible to give figures for people killed or injured yesterday because communications were lost with many in the troubled area.

“It is clear that the number of killed people is way over 50,” a source in the London-based Syrian

“Syrians are not different from Tunisians or Egyptians. It’s a real revolution. The Syrians want real political reforms, real democracy.”

Rafik Abdul Salem
Tunisia’s foreign minister

Revolution office told *Gulf News*.

“It is the scorched earth policy adopted by the regime in the 11th month of the revolution,” Hadi Al Abdullah, spokesman of the Coordination Committee of Syrian Revolution told *Gulf News*.

UN intervention

The United Nations meanwhile has said it could no longer keep track of the death toll as they have no access to certain closed off areas in the country. Arab League chief Nabeel Al Arabi urged Damascus yesterday to immediately end military operations against “defenceless civilians” saying the continued violence was claiming innocent victims.

Al Arabi along with Qa-

tari Prime Minister Shaikh Hamad Bin Jassem Al Thani will go to UN headquarters in New York tomorrow to push the Syria issue.

Meanwhile, politicians backed Arab League calls to resolve the crisis.

Lebanese Druze leader and MP Walid Junblatt stressed yesterday that the Arab League deal was the only solution available after holding talks in Moscow with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

“Russia must understand the demands of the Syrian people,” he said.

Speaking in Davos, Tunisia’s Foreign Minister Rafik Abdul Salem urged the Syrian regime to “listen to its people.”

“Syrians are not different from Tunisians or Egyptians. It’s a real revolution. The Syrians want real political reforms, real democracy,” he said.

Meanwhile, Russia said it will continue to promote its own draft resolution on Syria in the UN Security Council, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said yesterday. The remarks indicated that a western-Arab draft resolution supporting a plan for Al Assad to step aside will be a tough sell for Russia, a veto-wielding council member, but he did not rule out a compromise.

See also Page 10

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

Al Assad urged not to ignore people's voice

Tunisian foreign minister calls on regime to immediately end military operations against 'defenceless civilians'

Gulf News Report

Dubai Tunisia's foreign minister yesterday urged the Syrian regime to "listen to its people," saying that Damascus has no other choice but to accept the Arab League's proposals.

"The Syrian people want a democratic system that preserves their dignity," Rafik Abdul Salem told AFP on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum.

"The Syrian regime should listen to its people, the people in the streets. Syrians are not different from Tunisians or Egyptians," he said, referring to the popular revolts that led to the resignation of presidents Zine Al Abidine Bin Ali and Hosni Mubarak.

"It's a real revolution. The Syrians want real political reforms, real democracy.

DEATH TOLL

CAN'T KEEP TRACK, UN SAYS

The UN said it cannot keep track of the death toll in Syria's months-long unrest that has already cost more than 5,400 lives, as government forces targeted the protest hub of Hama with a major assault.

The admission came as European and Arab nations worked on a UN Security Council resolution condemning President Bashar Al Assad's government for its continuing deadly crackdown on protesters.

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay gave a toll of more than 5,000 dead when she spoke to the UN Security Council in early December, but has not updated it. After meeting Security Council ambassadors again, Pillay said the toll had risen but added: "We are experiencing difficulties because of the fragmentation on the ground. Some areas are totally closed such as parts of Homs, so we are unable to update that figure but in my view 5,000 and more is a huge figure and should really shock the international community into taking action," she told reporters.

— AFP

"We are working hard with the Arab League to push the Syrian regime to listen to the voice of the people but we also need time," he stressed. Arab League chief Nabeel Al

Arabi will be visiting the UN in New York next week with Qatar Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jaseem Bin Jaber Al Thani to hold talks on Syria.

Efforts are also under way to remove Syria from the Unesco's Committee on Conventions and Recommendations.

Human rights

The committee deals with multiple issues, but has a strong human rights component. Syria was named to the committee in November by the Arab group at Unesco.

Now, a number of countries, from the United States and Britain to Qatar and Kuwait, are mounting a campaign to remove Syria from the committee by putting the issue on the agenda of the next executive board. The board

meets from February 27 until March 10. The US ambassador to Unesco, David Killion, said he "strongly objects" to the reappointment in November of Syria on the committee. "The Syrian regime's actions are an affront to the dignity and human rights of the Syrian people, and it is not fit to sit on this body," he said.

Meanwhile, Russia said it will continue to promote its own draft resolution on Syria in the UN Security Council, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashевич said yesterday.

The remarks indicated that a Western-Arab draft resolution supporting a plan for Syrian President Bashar Al Assad to step aside will be a tough sell for Russia, a veto-wielding council member, but he did not rule out a compromise.

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Arabs will take Syria crisis to UN council

DAMASCUS — An Arab League team is to take the 10-month-old crisis in Syria to the UN Security Council, as activists said security forces launched an assault on a protest hub near the Syrian capital on Thursday.

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay, meanwhile, said the UN could not keep track of the death toll in Syria's unrest that has already cost more than 5,400 lives.

At the Cairo-based Arab League, the organisation's chief Nabil Al Arabi said he and Qatari Prime Minister Shaikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani were to head to New York on Saturday to seek support for an Arab plan on Syria.

They are to "hold a meeting with the UN Security Council on Monday to seek ratification of the Arab League decision on Syria," for President Bashar Al Assad to hand power to his deputy, Arabi said.

Arab League ministers last week urged Assad to delegate powers to his vice president and clear the way for a national unity government within two months, a plan which Damascus has ruled out as interference in its internal affairs.

On Thursday, there was no let-up in violence on the ground with activists reporting that troops were pressing a major assault on

the central city of Hama, long a hotbed of resistance against the Assad regime.

Just north of Damascus, security forces attacked the town of Douma that activists say was in the hands of rebel troops last week before a withdrawal.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said there were also clashes between the army and deserters in Daraa province, south of the capital, cradle of the uprising against Assad's regime.

It said at least four civilians, including a 14-year-old boy and a 58-year-old woman, both shot dead by security forces, and four soldiers were killed in violence across the country on Thursday.

"Violent clashes pitted security forces against groups of deserters at the Misraba bridge near the town of Douma, which was rocked by strong explosions," the Observatory said. It said more than 200 arrests were made in the town during the assault, although there was no independent confirmation of the reports as foreign media are restricted in their coverage of Syria's unrest which erupted in mid-March. — *AFP*

SEE ALSO PAGE 8

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Arab Red Crescent official shot dead in Syrian town

ICRC in shock as Jbero was travelling in a vehicle with emblem

BEIRUT — The head of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent branch in the northern town of Idlib has been shot dead, the International Committee of the Red Cross said as activists reported deadly clashes elsewhere between government forces and army defectors.

Abdulrazak Jbero was on his way from Damascus to Idlib when he was shot, Hicham Hassan, an ICRC spokesman in Geneva said on Wednesday. An ICRC statement said he was riding in a "vehicle clearly marked with a Red Crescent emblem" and expressed shock at the killing.

Syria's state-run media blamed "terrorists" for the attack.

President Bashar Al Assad's regime claims terrorists acting out a foreign conspiracy are behind the country's 10-month-old uprising, not protesters seeking change in one of the region's most autocratic states.

The Syrian revolt, which began 10 months ago with largely peaceful protests, has grown increasingly militarised in recent months, as frustrated regime opponents and army defectors arm themselves and fight back against government forces.

Also on Wednesday, government forces clashed with army defectors and stormed rebellious districts in central Syria, firing mortars and deploying snipers in violence that killed at least seven people, including a mother and her 5-year-old child, activists said.

Pressure on Syria to end 10 months of bloodshed has so far produced few results. Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia have pulled out of the Arab League's observers mission, asking the UN Security Council to intervene. Decisive action from the UN appeared unlikely, however, as Russia, a strong Syrian ally, has opposed moves like sanctions.

While Syria has approved exten-



Syrian soldiers who defected to join the Free Syrian Army pose in Duma, near Damascus. — Reuters

sion of the observers' presence for another month, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al Moallem signaled on Tuesday that the crackdown on protests will continue, insisting that Syria will solve its own problems.

The Arab strategy to solve the crisis appears to be collapsing. After announcing their pullout from the observers mission, Gulf Arab countries urged the UN Security Council to take all "necessary measures" to force the country to implement a League peace plan announced on Sunday to create a national unity government in two months.

Damascus has rejected the plan as a violation of national sovereignty.

The US, the European Union, the Arab League and Turkey all have introduced sanctions against Damascus in response to Assad's

crackdown, but Russia threatens to veto such measures.

Syria informed the Arab League Wednesday that it had agreed to extend the observer mission one month, until February 24, said Adnan al-Khudeir, head of Cairo operations room that handles reports by the monitors.

He also said the League has put together a new group of observers to replace the 55 GCC monitors, who were leaving Wednesday. They consist of 15 Mauritians, 10 Palestinians and six Egyptians, and they will head to Syria within a week, he said.

Defectors clashed with government soldiers on Wednesday in northern Syria's Idlib province, activists said. Soldiers siding with a group of anti-regime army defectors known as the Free Syrian Army are also known to be active in Hama, and some in the city said

they were the target of the current government assault.

Residents near Hama reported hearing loud explosions throughout the night and on Wednesday and said phone lines to the targeted areas were down. "They are trying to storm the Bab Qebli, Hamidiyeh and Malaab districts because defectors are there," said Ahmad al-Jimejmi, an activist who spoke by telephone from a town several miles away.

A Jordanian man of Palestinian origin accused pro-regime forces of kidnapping and killing his 27-year old son in Hama.

Hafez Abu Osbeh said his son, Ahmed, 27, was kidnapped last Friday, and his body was left outside his mother's residence three days later with gunshot wounds to his head. He said a description of the kidnappers' vehicle pointed to government loyalists. — AP

Nations in bid to oust Syria from Unesco rights panel

PARIS — A group of Unesco member states is trying to remove Syria from a committee with a human rights mandate, a panel it quietly rejoined despite its deadly crackdown on protesters.

UN Watch, a Geneva-based NGO, diplomats and others said Wednesday that a growing group of countries — western and Arab — want to unseat Syria from the Committee on Conventions and Recommendations. The committee deals with multiple issues, but has a strong human rights component.

Syria was named to the committee in November by the Arab group at Unesco. Now, a number of countries, from the United States and Britain to Qatar and Kuwait, are mounting a campaign to remove Syria from the committee by putting the issue on the agenda of the next executive board. The board meets from February 27 until March 10.

The US ambassador to Unesco, David Killion, said he "strongly objects" to the reappointment in November of Syria on the committee.

"We should not allow the Syrian regime to stand as a judge of other countries' human rights record while it systematically violates the human rights of its citizens," according to a statement by Killion. "The Syrian regime's actions are an affront to the dignity and human rights of the Syrian people, and it is not fit to sit on this body."

About 5,400 Syrians have been killed in an uprising that began in March by protesters seeking to topple the regime of President Bashar Assad. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned Syria for human rights abuses.

"Stop killing your people," Ban said in a keynote address to a January 16 conference in Beirut on democracy in the Arab world. — AP