

Beat: News

Syrian offensive kills scores in Aleppo before Swiss talks

Syria - Aleppo

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USPA NEWS - Syria's military backed by Russian warplanes have killed more than 150 people in eastern Aleppo this week, rescue workers said, part of a renewed bombardment supporting an offensive to seize the city's shattered rebel-held sector.

As air strikes and shelling of the city's east intensified since Tuesday after a brief period of relative calm, Syria's government approved a U.N. plan to allow aid convoys into most besieged areas of Syria, with the exception of Aleppo.

Rising casualties in Aleppo, where buildings have been reduced to rubble or are lacking roofs or walls, have prompted an international outcry and a renewed diplomatic push, with talks between the United States and Russia planned for Saturday.

Now in its sixth year, Syria's civil war has killed 300,000 people and made millions homeless while dragging in regional and global powers as well as inspiring jihadist attacks abroad.

President Bashar al-Assad is backed by the Russian air force, Iran's Revolutionary Guards and an array of Shi'ite militias from Arab neighbours, while Sunni rebels seeking to oust him are backed by Turkey, the United States and Gulf monarchies.

Air strikes killed 13 people on Thursday in the rebel-held Aleppo districts of al-Kalaseh, Bustan al-Qasr and al-Sakhour according to a civil defence official, while European Union foreign ministers drafted a statement accusing Syria and its allies of violence that "may amount to war crimes".

"Since the beginning of the offensive by the (Syrian) regime and its allies, the intensity and scale of aerial bombardment of eastern Aleppo is clearly disproportionate," a draft of their statement seen by Reuters said.

Syrian military officials could not immediately be reached for comment on the situation in Aleppo. The Syrian and Russian governments say they target only militants.

To the south, hundreds of insurgents and their families have left two rebel-held towns on the northern outskirts of Damascus, residents and fighters said, under a deal with the government which is pushing its opponents to rebel areas further from the capital.

The evacuation happened after the army gave community leaders in Qudsiya and Al-Hama - which had enjoyed relative calm under local truces - an ultimatum to get several hundred fighters out of their towns or face a widescale assault.

"They gave us little option: leave or all hell breaks loose," said Yousef al Hasnawi, a resident on the local rebel council. The government says such amnesties are a "workable model to bring security and peace" but its opponents say forcing Sunni Muslim fighters and their families from their home towns could create new demographic frontiers and worsen sectarian tensions.

OBAMA TO REVIEW OPTIONS

U.S. President Barack Obama and his senior foreign policy advisers are expected to meet on Friday to consider military and other options in Syria, U.S. officials told Reuters.

Some officials argue the United States must act more forcefully in Syria or risk losing what influence it still has over moderate rebels and its Arab, Kurdish and Turkish allies in the fight against Islamic State.

U.S. officials said they consider it unlikely that Obama will order U.S. air strikes on Syrian government targets, and they stressed that he may not make any decisions at the planned meeting of his National Security Council.

Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov are due to meet in Switzerland on Saturday to resume their effort to find a diplomatic solution along with counterparts from some Middle East states.

Moscow called on Thursday on regional states not to supply portable anti-aircraft missiles to Syrian rebel groups, warning that any unfriendly actions against Russian forces would draw an appropriate response.

Speaking to a Russian newspaper, Assad said Syria's only hope was that Moscow could persuade Turkey to end its support of the rebellion, a move that would cut insurgents off from their main external supply route.

"IT'S GOING ON NOW"

Air strikes against rebel-held areas of eastern Aleppo had tapered off over the weekend after the Syrian army announced it would reduce raids for what it described as humanitarian reasons, but they have intensified since Tuesday.

"The bombing started at 2 a.m. and it's going on until now," Ibrahim Abu Laith, an official at the civil defence rescue organisation in Aleppo, told Reuters from Aleppo. Rescue workers said 154 people had been killed in recent days. Reuters could not independently verify the death toll.

Aleppo has been divided between government- and rebel-controlled areas for years. More than 250,000 people are believed to be trapped in eastern Aleppo,

The rebels' most important urban stronghold, facing shortages of food, fuel and medicine.

In Geneva, the United Nations said Damascus had partially approved its aid plan for October, giving the green light for convoys to 25 of 29 besieged and hard-to-reach areas across Syria, which are also deprived of some vital supplies.

However, the Syrian government did not give approval for either eastern Aleppo or three districts near Damascus, Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy, the United Nation's deputy special envoy to Syria said on Thursday, describing the situation as "dire".

The war has badly affected government-held regions of Syria too and on Thursday Damascus and Moscow struck a deal to import one million tonnes of Russian wheat, enough to cover the needs of those areas for a year, at cheap prices.

In a government-held area of western Aleppo, at least four children were killed and 10 wounded on Thursday when shells landed near a school, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

Syrian state news agency SANA said the school in the al-Suleimaniya area had been targeted in what it described as a terrorist attack.

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<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-9517/syrian-offensive-kills-scores-in-aleppo-before-swiss-talks.html>

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