

Red Cross convoy arrives in Homs bringing Baba Amr aid
By BBC
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A Red Cross convoy has arrived in the Syrian city of Homs and is set to deliver supplies to the Baba Amr district after a month-long siege.

The Red Cross and Syrian Red Crescent have organised the seven-lorry aid convoy, and are also planning to evacuate the wounded.

The area has suffered heavy bombardment by government forces in recent weeks.

The rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) said on Thursday it was leaving the district in a "tactical withdrawal".

Of the 100,000 people who normally live in Baba Amr only a few thousand remain, with the FSA saying it had pulled back to save those still there from an all-out assault.

Meanwhile, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said it had received reports of "a particularly grisly set of summary executions" in Homs.

Also on Friday, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said France was closing its embassy in Damascus.

'No obstacle'

Syrian Red Crescent operations chief Khaled Erksoussi told Agence France-Presse news agency the convoy was "carrying food, medicines, blankets, milk for babies and other equipment".

It has been snowing heavily in Homs, and the lorries' journey from Damascus was slow.

Red Crescent volunteers and ambulances in Homs will join the convoy as it heads into Baba Amr.

The head of the Syrian Red Crescent told the BBC the convoy had been given permission to go into Baba Amr but was still finalising the details.

Many of those still in the district are without power and running low on basic supplies. The ICRC said it feared there could be many people seriously wounded.

But Sean Maguire, a spokesman for the ICRC, said: "If the fighting has truly died down, in theory there should be no obstacle to us going in there and staying there on a day-to-day basis.

"Our colleagues from the Syrian Red Crescent have been distributing food and assistance in other areas of Homs on a daily basis, and we hope to be able to do the same in Baba Amr."

Two French journalists, Edith Bouvier and William Daniels, who had been trapped in Homs and escaped to Lebanon, have now left on a plane for France, according to officials.

Ms Bouvier was badly injured in the bombardment of a makeshift media centre last week, in which two journalists were killed.

Syrian authorities say the bodies of the two, Marie Colvin of Britain's Sunday Times and French photojournalist Remi Ochlik, have been found and will be taken to Damascus to be identified and returned home.

Two other journalists, Spaniard Javier Espinosa and Briton Paul Conroy, also escaped to Lebanon.

'Day of reckoning'

A spokesman for the UN human rights office, Rupert Colville, said on Friday it had received reports of "a particularly grisly set of summary executions" involving 17 people in Baba Amr.

Although Mr Colville said the reports were unconfirmed, he said the UN was appealing to Syrian authorities and rebels to desist from all forms of reprisal.

An ambulance convoy carrying Bouvier and Daniels arrives at Beirut's Hotel Dieu de France hospital
In a unanimous statement on Thursday, the UN Security Council had expressed its "disappointment" that UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos had not been granted authorisation to visit Syria, and demanded immediate access for her.

Russia and China, who vetoed two previous Security Council resolutions on Syria, also backed the call.

The council's 15 member countries also said that they "deplored" the deteriorating situation.

The members urged Syrian authorities to grant "immediate, full and unimpeded access" to aid agencies.

The BBC's Jim Muir in neighbouring Beirut says that because the statement isolated the humanitarian issue, it was very much more difficult for Russia and China to take a different stand - it was the lowest common denominator on which they could all agree.

But he says beyond that there is a fundamental difference, with the West calling for regime change and Russia and China continuing to insist there must be no such foreign intervention.

Nicolas Sarkozy announced on Friday that France was closing its Syrian embassy in protest at the "scandalous" repression by President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron called for the "criminal" Syrian government to be held to account, saying there would be "a day of reckoning for this dreadful regime".

But Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin criticised the West for backing the Syrian opposition.

"Instead of encouraging parties to the conflict, it's necessary to force them to sit down for talks and begin political procedures and political reforms that would be acceptable for all participants in the conflict," he said.

But Mr Putin insisted Russia had "no special relationship" with the Syrian government.

The UN estimates more than 7,500 people have died in an 11-month anti-government uprising in Syria.