

Syria eyewitness: Homs refugees tell of 'slaughter'
By Paul Wood, BBC
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The car headlights picked out a ragged group of men, women and children walking up the road towards us. Night had just fallen. There was a bitterly cold wind.

They had endured a month of bombardment in Baba Amr then fled, panicking, before ground troops arrived.

"We're homeless," a woman shouted. "Why? Because we asked for freedom?"

She said they had been walking for three days. Their journey was so long because they walked across fields and through orchards to avoid the army checkpoints.

A terrible fear has seized people here about what the government forces are doing now that they are back in control. In a nearby house we sat with six women and their 17 children. They had arrived that day. There were no men.

"We were walking out altogether until we reached the checkpoint," said one of the women, Um Abdo.

"Then they separated us from the men. They put hoods on their heads and took them away."

Where do you think they are now, I asked. The women replied all at once: "They will be slaughtered."

'Massacre'

Wild stories were circulating of mutilated bodies in the orchards outside Homs; of men being killed in groups there; of a truck full of bodies taken away by the army. Was this fear talking?

We met the Ibrahim family by chance while filming an aid delivery of cooking oil. They told us that on Friday, in the Jobar district of Homs, they had witnessed a massacre.

Ahmed Ibrahim told me that 36 men and boys were taken away. Among them were four members of his own family including his 12-year-old son, Hozafa. All were dead now, he said.

He said he had seen everything, lying flat behind some trees.

He told me: "There is a major checkpoint near our house. Reinforcements arrived there. They brought Shabiha (the "ghosts" or paramilitaries). They began arresting all the men in the area so I crouched down in the orchards just beside my house.

"They started beating them up. Then they moved them into a street next to a school. They killed them all. I saw it. I was 50 to 100 metres away. Their hands were tied behind their backs. A soldier held each one still on the ground with his boot; another soldier came to cut their throats. I could hear their screams."

He said the victims included his son, two brothers and a nephew. He thought he could count 36 bodies in the street - the number of men and boys who had been detained.

"The army took the bodies. They are afraid that ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] would come in so they destroyed the evidence."

His wife was inside the house when the soldiers came. She said: "They knocked on the door and said if we didn't open up they would shoot through the walls. So we let them in and they took all males aged 12 and older.

"I went out to ask about my son but they shot at me. After they had killed them, they came back and searched us for mobile phones [looking for any video]. They threatened us. They said: 'We can come back at any time.' I felt that we were all going to die.

"Other families came to ask for their men and I told them that they had been slaughtered. I wish I had never gone out to witness that scene. We fled as fast as we could, leaving everything behind."

Their niece, 16-year-old Noor, was in another house. Her father - one of Ahmed Ibrahim's brothers - was killed.

She said: "My father went to open the door. I told him: 'Don't. Run away.' He said 'Why? I haven't done anything wrong.' He opened the door. They took him. I was clinging on to him but they took him anyway.

"As well as my father, they took my uncle, my cousin and my brother. I went outside and saw them pushing them to the ground. Then they killed them. I heard my father shout 'God is great' as he died. The others, too. The soldiers shoved us back inside with their guns."

We do not know, yet, the truth of such allegations. But one former soldier involved in the Baba Amr operation told us that prisoners were routinely murdered. He said he had witnessed one summary execution.

"Ali" had been a sergeant in an elite unit, the Republican Guards.

Aged 21, he showed me his army identity card, dog tags, and a leave permit with the Republic Guards' stamp. He had defected only last week.

He described how an old man, "about 60 years old", was brought into his base. The man had been arrested in a raid on a house.

"The other soldiers starting beating him and cursing him and saying 'This is for freedom'," he told me.

"An officer came. He said the same thing - 'This is for freedom'. He made the man kneel, put a gun to his head and shot him. He emptied the whole magazine into his body. Afterwards he started stamping on the body. He got his men to film that."

Ali was the first member of the "Free Army" I had met who was Alawite, the sect from which Syria's ruling elite is drawn. He was so angered and disgusted by what he had seen in the government army, he said, he had to desert.

He was in an artillery battalion, firing 120mm mortars at Baba Amr. He left with a friend, another sergeant, "Mohammed". He told me that no-one was in any doubt that civilians were being killed in the bombardment.

"The lieutenant gave us the order, handed down from the colonel," he said. "He said that in this operation, shoot at anything that moves: civilian or military, you shoot at it."

After a month of shelling, the Free Army decided to withdraw from Baba Amr. We met what we were told was the very last group of fighters to leave.

It was 02:30 and 20 men ran through sheeting rain, crouching low and carrying their rifles, past the last government checkpoint outside Homs.

One of their officers told me that retreating was the only way to bring the shelling to an end and prevent further loss of innocent life. That is the official line but the Free Army is divided over the decision to leave Baba Amr. And some of its residents are furious with them.

'Betrayed'

A phone call to a friend in Baba Amr revealed the depths of the bitterness.

"They betrayed Baba Amr," he said.

"Those who took the decision to withdraw are cowards. Now they are drinking tea and chit-chatting in Qusayr [a nearby town] and watching Baba Amr being destroyed."

He went on: "Why didn't they do something to protect us? They could have attacked the artillery positions from behind. They waited until after 30 days of bombardment to withdraw. They could have left on the first day if that's what they were going to do."

On Monday afternoon the Free Army pulled back again, hurriedly leaving the village just outside Homs where we had been staying.

They believe the government will now press its advantage, closing in on the last territory "held" by the rebel fighters. We left with them on the back of a truck.

Most of the displaced people we spoke to over the past days had already gone. They did not feel safe so close to the government's tanks and artillery.

A rebel commander told me he thought that some of the men who had been detained were being interrogated; some were being held to extract money from their families; and some had been killed.

The outside world will wait for proof of that, although the people of Baba Amr are in no doubt they are victims of a crime perpetrated by the regime.

Many women and children moved on still not knowing where husbands and fathers might be or if they would ever see them again.

They left behind two unanswered questions: how many men from Baba Amr are missing - and what has happened to them?

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