

Syria Permits U.N. Visits, but Escalates Its Attacks
By Rick Gladstone, The New York Times
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Syria's government made diplomatic gestures on Monday toward seeking an end to the uprising that has convulsed the country, agreeing for the first time to allow visits by the top United Nations relief official and by the newly designated envoy who represents the United Nations and the Arab League.

But activists said Syrian security forces widened their ferocious campaign to crush opposition in the most restive areas, sending troops into Dara'a, the southern town where the protests began a year ago. Troops also bombarded the town of Rastan in central Syria, not far from Homs, a center of the uprising that has been devastated by more than a month of shelling and gunfire.

The developments came as the tone turned increasingly hawkish in Washington. Senator John McCain, a leader among Republicans on military matters, called on the United States on Monday to conduct an extensive air bombardment of Syrian targets, with Arab League permission, to protect anti-government fighters and civilians there.

Mr. McCain, an early advocate of armed intervention in Libya, said in a speech on the Senate floor that if Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, managed to retain power in defiance of world pressure to stop the crackdown and leave office, that would be a "strategic and moral defeat for the United States."

The Obama administration, which has worked to isolate Mr. Assad diplomatically and has called for him to step down, reacted tepidly to Mr. McCain's call. A senior Defense Department official said the senator's remarks "could very well exacerbate problems inside the country." Nonetheless, administration officials have expressed deep frustration at Mr. Assad's intransigence and have not ruled anything out.

There was no immediate reaction from Syria's critics in the Arab League.

Valerie Amos, the United Nations under secretary general for humanitarian affairs, said in a statement that Mr. Assad's government had given her permission to visit Syria for three days starting Wednesday. The Syrian government had refused for a month to allow Ms. Amos to visit.

At the same time, Kofi Annan, the former United Nations secretary general who was appointed last week as a special representative to Syria for the United Nations and the Arab League, announced that he, too, would visit Damascus, starting on Saturday. His mission, he said, was "to seek an urgent end to all violence and human rights violations, and to initiate the effort to promote a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis." The Syrian Arab News Agency, the state-run news service, said Syria "welcomes the visit."

China, one of the Syrian government's few remaining international supporters, announced on Monday that it was sending its own special representative to Damascus in the hope of halting the conflict, which has caused a new rift between China and the Arab countries that have been pushing for stronger action against Mr. Assad.

Thousands of Syrians, mostly civilians, have been killed by security forces since the uprising started last March as a peaceful protest against Mr. Assad's autocratic rule, energized by the Arab Spring democracy revolts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Since then, the uprising has come to resemble a civil war, with armed opponents of Mr. Assad, many of them defectors from the army, organizing to fight back. Mr. Assad's opponents remain a fractious group and lack a cohesive leadership, further hampering their efforts.

Mr. Assad has rejected criticism of his tactics and vowed to crush the protesters, whom he has described as terrorist gangs financed by hostile foreign powers. His attempts to defeat them escalated sharply a month ago, when an Arab League peace proposal to the Security Council that called on him to step aside

was vetoed by Russia and China. Mr. Assad appeared to interpret that veto as a green light to use more lethal force.

Much of the military's campaign had focused on Homs in the center of the country, where rights activists had said hundreds of people have been killed in one neighborhood alone. Although rebel fighters vacated the neighborhood, Baba Amr, last Thursday, the government has refused to allow Red Cross relief teams in.

The government's expansion of military assaults elsewhere was reflected in a report by the Local Coordination Committees, a Syrian activist group that has sought to document civilian casualties in the conflict, which said that security forces had assaulted some Dara'a neighborhoods in the middle of the night and that at least two people were killed. Reuters quoted a Dara'a resident as saying by telephone that hundreds of soldiers and security operatives had begun fanning out in Dara'a on a scale not seen for months.

In Rastan, at least seven people were killed by Syrian artillery on Sunday and Monday, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an activist group based in London with a network of contacts inside Syria. The casualty tolls are impossible to corroborate because the Syrian government has restricted press access in much of the country.

Conflicting reports emerged Monday about Syrian civilians fleeing toward neighboring Lebanon. The United Nations refugee agency said on Sunday that 2,000 Syrian refugees were headed for the border, but by Monday evening there was still no official count of how many might have crossed. Western reporters who visited northern Lebanon near the Syrian border on Monday found the usual trickle of refugee arrivals but no indication of a flood.

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