

Car Bomb in Damascus Kills Dozens, Opposition Says
By Christine Hauser, The New York Times
21 February 2013

In renewed violence reaching the center of the Syrian capital, a car bomb exploded in Damascus on Thursday near the headquarters of President Bashar al-Assad's ruling party, killing more than two dozen people, mainly civilians but also some security forces, according to opposition sources.

The violence coincided with renewed talks among Mr. Assad's adversaries who met in Cairo on Thursday to discuss the terms on which the opposition Syrian National Coalition is prepared to talk about a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

Reuters quoted a draft communiqué under discussion by the group as saying it was prepared to negotiate, but Mr. Assad and his security force commanders were "not part of any political solution in Syria."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an anti-Assad group based in Britain that has a network of contacts in Syria, reported that at least 31 people were killed by the bomb which exploded in the neighborhood of Mazraa.

Syrian state television said two children were wounded, while Al Ikhbariya, a pro-government television channel, showed footage of two dead bodies and body parts in a park.

The area where the bomb exploded was near the headquarters of Mr. Assad's ruling Baath Party and the Russian Embassy. State television and the Syrian Observatory also said that mortar shells exploded near the Syrian Army General Command in the center of the capital, but there were no reported casualties.

The strikes were the latest to extend to the heart of the Syrian capital.

Reports this week appeared to show that rebel shells have reached new areas in Damascus.

State media and opposition activists reported on Wednesday that mortar rounds had hit the Tishreen sports stadium in the downtown neighborhood of Baramkeh. The state news agency, SANA, said the explosion killed an athlete from the Homs-based soccer team Al Wathba as he was practicing.

Government forces hit a rebel command center in a suburb east of the capital on Wednesday, injuring a founder of the Liwaa al-Islam brigade, Sheik Zahran Alloush, the brigade said in a statement.

On Tuesday, activists reported that up to seven mortar rounds had been fired by fighters of the Free Syrian Army toward Mr. Assad's Tishreen Palace in Damascus.

There were no immediate reports of casualties, and it was not known whether Mr. Assad was there at the time. The palace, surrounded by a park, is in a wealthy area that has largely been insulated from the insurgency and it lies less than a mile from the main presidential palace.

Syrian rebels are entrenched in suburbs south and east of the capital, but they have been unable to push far into the center, although they strike the area with occasional mortars and increasingly frequent car bombs.

Such indiscriminate attacks, however, risk killing passers-by, exposing the rebels to charges that they are careless with civilian life and property. Many Damascus residents are undecided in the civil war and fear their ancient city will be ravaged like Aleppo and other urban centers to the north.

At the same time, the government has decimated pro-rebel suburbs with airstrikes and artillery, leaving vast areas depopulated or terrorized.

Fighting continued also for control of the main civilian airport in Aleppo on Wednesday.

© New York Times, 2013