

Syria crisis: March was 'conflict's deadliest month'
BBC
1 April 2013

More than 6,000 people died in Syria in March, the deadliest month since protests against the government began two years ago, activists say.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based activist group, said it recorded 6,005 deaths last month.

It said victims included at least 291 women, 298 children, 1,486 rebel fighters and army defectors, and 1,464 government troops.

The other casualties were unidentified civilians and fighters, it added.

The anti-government group, which monitors human rights violations on both sides of the conflict via a network of contacts across Syria, said the total toll was much higher than the 62,554 deaths it has documented.

"We estimate it is actually around 120,000 people," Rami Abdelrahman, the head of the group, told Reuters news agency.

"Many death tolls are more difficult to document so we are not officially including them yet."

The UN says more than 70,000 people have been killed in Syria since the uprising began.

West's leverage

The movement of foreign media and independent human rights organisations has been severely curtailed within the country, making the verification of casualty figures almost impossible.

At the beginning of the uprising two years ago, the Assad regime blamed a conspiracy by foreign elements, including al-Qaeda.

Since the protests turned into a civil war, foreign jihadists in small but significant numbers have entered Syria to join the fight against it.

Syria's government now routinely insists it is fighting against "armed terrorist gangs".

As the fighting drags on, the UK, France and the US are getting closer to supporting the rebels with weapons and military training, says BBC Middle East editor Jeremy Bowen.

The UK estimates that Mr Assad's main allies Iran and Russia have increased their levels of military and financial support to the regime since late last year.

The belief that Mr Assad's men are getting a sharper military edge over the armed opposition is one of the reasons why Britain and France are pressing their European Union partners to lift their arms embargo to Syria, says our editor.

The prospect of aid, both military and "non-lethal", gives the West some leverage, he adds. Diplomatic sources say they want to change the military culture in rebel groups, to produce fighters who respect the laws of war and human rights.

Synagogue damaged

Sectarian tensions have mounted as the fighting continues, with Sunni Muslims largely supporting the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-led regime.

The unrest has also spilled into neighbouring Lebanon.

On Monday gunmen attacked a bus and beat up its driver, before kidnapping eight Syrian Alawites as they crossed into northern Lebanon, residents in the frontier town of Wadi Khaled said.

The gunmen were apparently seeking to secure the release of a Sunni man, Mohammed Hussein al-Ahmad, believed captured by Syrian forces, in exchange for their hostages.

Meanwhile, a 2,000-year-old synagogue in Damascus has been damaged and looted during the ongoing fighting, reports say.

The Jobar Synagogue, built in honour of the prophet Elijah, is now on the front line of fighting between rebels and government troops, and the extent of the damage is hard to ascertain - videos posted online show shattered windows, rubble-strewn hallways and a hole in a neighbouring building's roof.

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