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Dozens more bodies found at Syria massacre site

At least 320 people have been killed in Dariya, a suburb of Damascus, an opposition group says. The opposition and government blame each other for the deaths.

By Patrick J. McDonnell, Los Angeles Times

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BEIRUT — Bloodied bodies lay strewn in the streets, in basements and even in the cemetery in the besieged Damascus suburb of Dariya, site of what may be the largest mass killing to date in more than 17 months of fighting in Syria, according to opposition and pro-government accounts Sunday.

Video posted Sunday on the Internet purported to show groups of victims in Dariya being buried in a mass grave, a deep trench several yards long.

"We are finding bodies everywhere. What has happened in Dariya is the most appalling of what has happened in the revolution till now, what has happened in Syria till now," said an opposition activist who goes by the name Abu Kinan for security reasons. "The smell of death is everywhere."

At least 320 people have been killed in Dariya, a working-class town southwest of the capital, since the military launched an assault on the suburb five days ago, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based group opposed to President Bashar Assad.

The killings reported in Dariya contributed to a death toll Saturday that topped 400 throughout Syria, according to the Local Coordination Committees, an opposition umbrella coalition. It appears to be the largest single-day death toll reported to date in the conflict. The group reported more than 200 people killed Sunday.

The numbers could not be independently confirmed. The government has accused the opposition of exaggerating death tolls and inventing massacres in a bid to discredit the armed forces.

According to United Nations figures, at least 17,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed in Syria since antigovernment protests broke out in March 2011. The opposition puts the death toll at more than 20,000.

Verifying casualty counts in Syria has become more difficult with the departure of United Nations monitors, who had visited some previous massacre sites and provided confirmation of the numbers killed and injured. With the U.N. monitoring mission over, there was little prospect Sunday of any independent investigation into the killings in Dariya. The Syrian government places severe restrictions on media coverage.

Opposition advocates blamed government troops and plainclothes militiamen for the killings. The government blamed "terrorists," its usual term for armed rebels.

The opposition says many victims in Dariya, previously a stronghold of rebels seeking to oust Assad, were executed after pro-government forces entered the town Friday. Others were killed in shelling or shot by snipers, the opposition says.

Opposition activists said many victims were taken prisoner by government forces and executed in basements. In one grisly discovery Saturday, more than 120 bodies were found in one basement, activists said.

According to opposition activists, more than 100 additional bodies were discovered Sunday as government forces withdrew to the town's outskirts and residents were able to begin searching more thoroughly.

Most victims were men, but many women and children were also among the dead, the opposition said.

Even the pro-government Syrian TV channel Addounia showed images of residents who had apparently been killed in the midst of seemingly routine daily activities. The station aired footage of a girl killed on a street, a man fallen from his motorcycle, and several bodies at a cemetery.

"As we have become accustomed, every time we enter an area that has terrorists, they have committed crimes and killings in the name of freedom," the Addounia reporter said in her report.

As the camera scanned behind her and got closer on a man shot to death in the driver's seat of a blue pickup truck, she added, "This is their doctrine and this is how they think."

The Addounia footage from Dariya that aired Sunday showed bloodied bodies on streets, in homes and scattered in a cemetery. Many victims appeared to be women and children. The members of one entire family executed in their home were shot because they didn't support the "terrorists," a soldier told the station's reporter.

On Sunday, the army returned to some Dariya neighborhoods that had been raided the day before, leading to the deaths of additional residents, said Abu Kinan, the opposition activist.

The government onslaught against Dariya began last week when regime forces began shelling from tanks, helicopters and fighter jets, according to opposition activists. It was the latest in what the opposition calls a methodical attempt to retake and punish rebel-held neighborhoods in Damascus and surrounding suburbs. The assault on Dariya and other suburbs followed an uprising last month that saw intense combat in many parts of the city.

The Syrian military eventually crushed the rebellion in the capital districts. The army then moved its focus to outlying areas such as Dariya.

After fighters with the Free Syrian Army, the rebel umbrella group, withdrew from the town Friday night, soldiers accompanied by *shabiha* militia members stormed in, opposition groups said. They raided homes and arrested many, taking prisoners to the basements of empty buildings where they were shot execution-style, according to opposition accounts.

Before Dariya, the opposition said, dozens were killed in Moadamyeh al-Sham, another Damascus suburb, and on Sunday military forces were reported to be moving toward the nearby town of Ajdaideh, the opposition said.

The pro-government Addounia channel, reporting on the violence in the Damascus suburbs, aired a surreal sequence in which a reporter, standing in the cemetery where fresh corpses were tossed about, announced the discovery of a woman shot but "clinging to life." The camera cut to a woman lying on the ground, her head resting on a shattered stone grave marker, her hands bloody from her wound.

"I was heading to Damascus with my husband and children and suddenly I found myself like this," explained the wounded woman, who said that her husband worked for state security and that she didn't know what had happened to him or her three children.

"Who hit you, ma'am? Tell us," the reporter said.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't remember anything, I don't remember, except that I was shot."

Once the brief interview was over, army soldiers arrived and took the wounded woman away on a stretcher.

A Times staff writer in Beirut and special correspondent Rima Marrouch in Antakya, Turkey, contributed to this report.

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