



VIDEO

'If my girl's not dead, who did we bury?'

A mother who thought her daughter dead accuses authorities of using her for propaganda after she turns up alive and well on television

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday October 09 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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A mother who received a decapitated corpse from Syrian authorities and buried it believing it to be her missing daughter, only to see the 18-year-old alive on state-run television, has accused the government of using her daughter's murder for propaganda.

"I've no doubt that the person on TV was my daughter. But I'm sure the regime did this interview before they killed her," said Fatat Malouk, 57, the mother of Zeinab al-Hosni.

"I wish Zeinab were alive, but it's just lies. Why don't they hand her over alive? And if she is not dead, who is the person we buried?"

Zeinab went missing on July 26. She lived with her widowed mother in Bab as-Sabah, in Homs, which for months has been encircled by snipers and tanks.

Her brother, Muhammad, was a protest leader and faced arrest for leading calls to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

On the day she disappeared, Zeinab was out buying medicine for her mother. When she did not return, her family rang her mobile phone and sent text messages. Eventually a voice answered.

“I asked, ‘Is that Zeinab?’ She said ‘yes’ but she sounded like she was suffocating, like she was in prison,” Fatat said. “That was the last time I heard her voice.”

A neighbour said security forces had driven through Bab as-Sabah and opened fire. As residents fled, the soldiers picked up a girl matching Zeinab’s description. The family believe she was abducted to put pressure on her brother to turn himself in, a tactic that has long been used by the Assad regime.

On September 1 Muhammad was shot in the hand by security forces during a raid on an activist safe house. When Fatat was called to the military hospital two days later, her son’s corpse revealed an intensely violent death.

“He had seven bullets in his body: three in the chest, one in the hand, one in the hip, one in the leg and one from where they put the pistol in his mouth,” said Fatat’s older brother Yousef, who filmed the body and posted the video on YouTube. “They broke his neck and his jaw and his back was completely smashed. It was torture.”

Staff at the morgue had further devastating news for Fatat, asking if she knew anything about a missing woman. When she said she did, she was shown a torso. Other body parts were brought in a zippered bag.

“Even though it was burnt I knew it was the body of my daughter,” said Fatat. “It’s a mother’s feeling.”

Before she could leave, Fatat, who is illiterate, had to sign a death certificate with a thumb print saying the girl had been killed by “armed gangs”.

As news of Zeinab’s apparent death in custody began to leak out late last month, Fatat and her family prepared to flee Syria, terrified that the publicity would lead to the death of another loved one. Then, last Tuesday, they were shocked to see Zeinab alive on a pre-recorded news package broadcast on Syrian television.

Zeinab said she had fled from her family. “I ran away because my brother was beating me and torturing me,” she said, asking her mother to forgive her.

If the regime appeared to have scored a propaganda victory, the move backfired.

“We don’t believe the regime’s lies. Who is the person that I buried?” asked Yousef. “Who gave her to us to make a media scoop? Are the souls of people just a doll you play with?”

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'Voice in the sky' spreads panic as Assad's drones spy on Syrian rebels' strongholds

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday November 04 2012, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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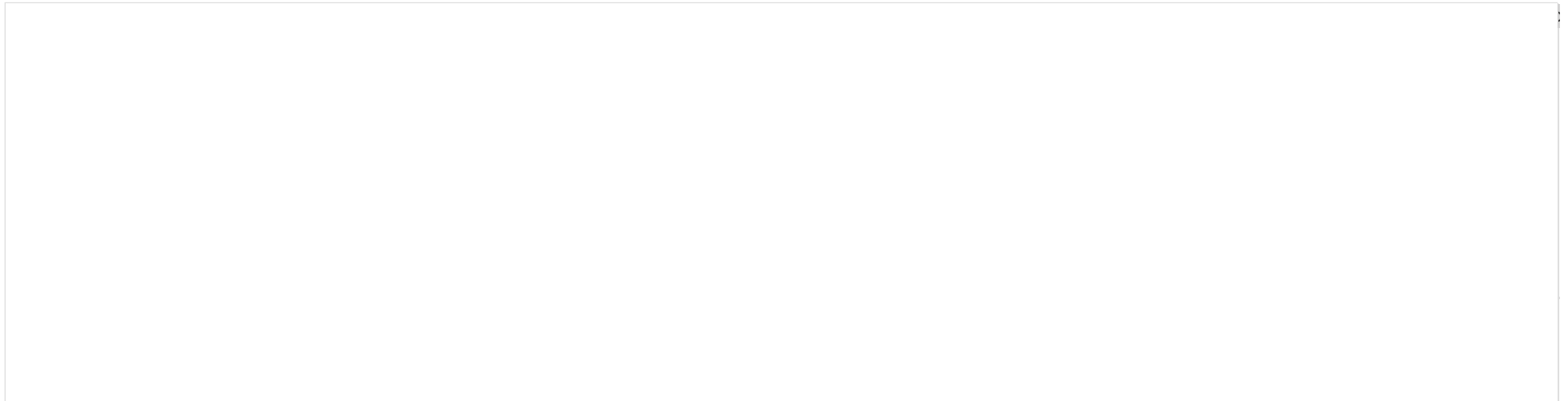
IN ITS relentless campaign to bombard its opponents into submission, President Bashar al-Assad's regime has unleashed a new weapon: a fleet of Iranian drones, supplied in violation of an international arms embargo and used in open warfare for the first time.

It is another step in the air war that was emphasised yesterday when rebel groups launched an offensive aimed at capturing the Taftanaz airbase in the north.

Units of the Free Syrian Army combined with Islamist fighters in the assault that came hours before an opposition summit in Qatar.

The ominous whine of the drones has been reported from rebel strongholds throughout Syria, with fighters and civilians describing how it presages a barrage of bombs and rockets.

“Every few days we hear the sound above us and know we have to scatter before the artillery on the hill hits our position,” said Ibrahim, a fighter with the Baba Amr rebels’ brigade, speaking from the devastated city of Homs.



“We call it the voice in the sky, telling our co-ordinates to the guns, tanks and warplanes. It feels like the regime can always see us.”

With its forces overstretched, and fearing defections should ground troops be sent into urban conflict against the rebels, the Syrian military has grown reliant on its drones.

They are used to co-ordinate long-range artillery and air strikes, including those by indiscriminate cluster bombs and TNT “barrel bombs” dropped from helicopters.

The conflict is estimated to have claimed 32,000 lives over 19 months.

“The increased use of air power shows the waning offensive powers of the regime’s forces. They just don’t have the ground power to dig out the opposition in battlegrounds like Aleppo,” said Jeffrey White, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “Instead of tanks they send artillery and aircraft.”

Weapons experts have no doubt the Iranian drones were supplied to Assad in violation of a 2007 UN security council resolution banning all states from receiving arms from Iran.

“From the videos coming out of Syria, they look like Iranian Ababil and Mohajer systems,” said Douglas Barrie, a specialist at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

“Syria’s first use of drones began with the rebellion. The drones are of Iranian origin and may well be Iranian piloted,” said White. “It seems they use them for surveillance of rebels and for targeting them.”

Speaking to a Sunday Times reporter in Tal Abyad, a rebel-held crossing on the border with Turkey, a commander of the Farouk brigade said convoys in pick-up trucks had been attacked by helicopters and MiG fighter jets several times in recent weeks after hearing the sound of a drone overhead.

“The regime has no presence on the ground and cannot wage a ground offensive against us here,” said the commander, known as Abu Ibrahim. “The only way to bomb us is with artillery or MiGs. The drones are hurting us a lot.”

Drones were used for the first time during the regime’s assault on Baba Amr, a suburb of Homs, in February — during which a drone helped co-ordinate the rocket attack that killed the Sunday Times correspondent Marie Colvin — and rebels in Homs say the use of them has become more sophisticated.

“The drones began flying not just in the day but at night as well,” said Ibrahim of the Baba Amr rebels’ brigade. “When we hear the sound of the drone and see a small white light we know we have to run.”

Additional reporting: Rami Aysha

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Airbase attacks loosen Assad regime's grip on Damascus

Hugh Macleod, Beirut

Sunday December 02 2012, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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REBELS battling to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime have launched their first concerted attacks on airbases around Damascus after a series of stunning military gains in key parts of northern and eastern Syria pitched the conflict into a decisive new phase.

A dawn assault by rebels on a checkpoint leading to Damascus airport on Thursday forced the authorities to shut the country's only international hub for two days, a huge psychological blow to the regime's narrative that it remains in control in the capital.

“We don’t want to destroy Damascus airport, but we wanted to make a scoop,” said Nabeel al-Amir, a spokesman for the rebels.

The authorities pulled the plug on all 84 of Syria’s internet service providers, effectively taking the country offline. The internet remained cut until last night with most mobile and landlines also disrupted. Damascus blamed the shutdown on “terrorists” cutting the cables, an explanation dismissed as impossible by internet monitoring groups.

Abu Yasser Idriss, a rebel fighter, said a force of 200 rebels had ambushed “a bus of militiamen” at a checkpoint on the airport road, which he claimed rebels briefly controlled before being driven back after the regime struck back with warplanes, tanks and troops from the elite Presidential Guard.

The rebels said their strategy in disrupting Damascus airport was to deny the regime a crucial lifeline to its key allies, Iran and Russia.

State television quoted a ministry of information statement saying the airport was open and that the road leading to it was safe. Opposition activists said clashes continued and international flights were cancelled.

Before the airport road attack, the rebels had defeated loyalist forces in a two-day battle for Marj al-Sultan, a helicopter airbase a mile northwest of the airport.

Three Russian Mi-8 military helicopters were destroyed, Amir said, while one fell into rebel hands, giving rebels their first confirmed assault aircraft, although they have no plans to deploy it.

A few hours later, apparently in response, a regime MiG fighter jet dropped cluster bombs on a playground in Deir al-Asafir, near the airbase, killing at least 11 children.

Rebels say that after being expelled from the capital in a regime offensive in July they are now attempting to overrun military bases in the suburbs surrounding Damascus that are opposition strongholds.

Late last month an airbase in Hajar al-Aswad in the southern suburbs was temporarily seized by an Islamist militant group, while the Rahbe air defence battalion in Deir al-Suleiman, east of Damascus, was also overrun by rebels.

Rebels have sought to surround the Mezze military airport, the regime's main supply base in the capital, from positions in Daraya and Madameya, both of which are being flattened by relentless airstrikes.

Activists in Daraya said several people died after inhaling what they described as "poisonous smoke" that "burns through the tarmac on the road". Video footage showed white clouds of smoke reminiscent of phosphorous bombs.

Opposition groups have warned that the communications blackout may be a precursor to a wider government offensive in the capital.

A western diplomat still serving in Damascus said the strength of Assad's forces there and their superior training and firepower meant the rebels had no immediate prospects of toppling the regime.

But with the loss of two strategic bases in northern Syria, another in a key oil-producing region of the east and a hydroelectric dam on the Euphrates, the diplomat said the conflict had entered "a new phase".

"The regime may soon have to abandon the north and the east to the rebels," he said. "It's likely what we have seen in Aleppo will come to Damascus, but with more intense fighting, greater casualties and certainly a higher level of destruction."

After six months in which Assad's air force bombed civilian areas unchallenged, rebels last week scored their first confirmed hit with a shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile bringing down a military helicopter outside Aleppo.

That followed the fall of Base 46, one of the regime's last outposts near its border with Turkey. Rebels made off with more than a dozen tanks, plus artillery guns, mortars and rocket launchers, some of the heaviest weapons to fall into their hands since the start of the 21-month uprising.

Only two infantry bases and one airbase now stand between rebels gaining full control of a sizeable and contiguous stretch of land between Aleppo and the Turkish border, said a spokesman for Liwaa al-Tawhid, an Islamist opposition group in Aleppo. In the past 10 days, he said, there had been a significant drop in government shelling and many families had returned to their homes.

“Rebel gains in recent days give them access to weapons that could tip the military balance in their favour in the north,” said Alison Baily, Middle East analyst at Oxford Analytica, a global analysis firm. “The regime does not have the manpower to reverse these gains.”

The Syrian pound has lost nearly half its value since the uprising began. Economists estimate that more than half the government's \$17bn in hard currency reserves have now been spent propping up the pound.

Egypt in ferment

Opponents of President Mohamed Morsi are calling for an escalation of anti-government demonstrations across Egypt with a campaign of civil disobedience, *writes Sara Hashash in Cairo.*

They are protesting at vastly expanded presidential powers that have allowed Morsi to push through a strongly Islamist-influenced draft constitution.

Eleven national newspapers will not publish on Tuesday and several satellite channels plan to cease broadcasting on Wednesday in protest. Activists are considering a march on the presidential palace.

Morsi's actions have divided the country, with liberals gathering in Cairo's Tahrir Square last week and Islamists holding mass rallies in support of the president yesterday.

The opposition has united in an attempt to stop the draft constitution, written by an Islamist-dominated assembly, from going to a referendum.

The constitution has been criticised for failing to protect key liberties, including freedom of expression, religion and women's rights.

"The constitution is a setback for Egypt's transition," said Heba Morayef of Human Rights Watch.

Morsi said last night that a referendum would be held on December 15.

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Assad accused of sectarian cleansing

Fears are growing of Balkanisation in Syria as its president prepares a breakaway state to protect his sect against the Sunni majority

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday July 15 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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FOLLOWING the latest massacre in Syria, fears are growing that forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad are attempting to carve out a breakaway Alawite state as the regime tries to crush the 16-month nationwide rebellion.

The minority Alawite sect, which dominates Syria's ruling elite, is fighting an increasingly desperate struggle against the majority Sunni population.

A range of regime supporters, insiders and experts say policy in Damascus is now shifting to a "plan B" in an attempt to drive Sunnis away from areas adjacent to Alawite communities.

“On the ground we’re seeing an increasing Balkanisation of the conflict,” said a western diplomat based in Damascus, referring to the wars that fractured the Balkan peninsula into smaller states.

“The opportunity for a political solution is over. That train has left the platform. This will now be fought out militarily.”

After earlier assaults on Sunnis living in the traditional Alawite heartlands of the mountainous west coast of Syria, home to the ports of Latakia and Tartous, Alawite militiamen have recently conducted a series of massacres further east along the plains of the Orontes river. Some claim they are part of a calculated policy of “sectarian cleansing”.

Experts say the regime sees that area as a buffer zone between the mountains, traditionally under Alawite control, and the two Sunni-dominated cities of Homs and Hama, which have been strongholds of the opposition.

“The massacres in the Sunni villages are to clean the west bank of the Orontes from Sunnis and the military operations in the area are to drive Sunnis eastward,” said Haider, a 30-year-old Alawite whose father is a senior security official based near Qardaha, Assad’s home town.

Haider said he had been present as his father recently discussed with friends in the security services the “creation of an Alawite state from Latakia and Tartous to western Hama and Homs”.

Rumours have begun circulating among Alawites of oil and gas wealth along the coastline, said Haider: “These rumours are to tell us Alawites that we will live in a rich state in the future.”

As fighting has intensified between rebels and regime troops, sectarian massacres by Alawite militiamen, known as “shabiha”, have increased.

In the aftermath of a month-long bombardment of Homs’s Baba Amr, shabiha massacred entire families living in Sunni neighbourhoods and in villages west of the city.

Abu Bakr, an activist in Homs, said last week the city was still being shelled and most of the Sunni residents had left, while Alawites remained.

This week shabiha were again accused of killing scores of Sunni villagers in Tremseh, 20 miles northwest of Hama, after fighting in the area.

In Qubair, 12 miles from Hama, 78 people, mainly Sunni women and children, were murdered by shabiha on June 6. In Houla, west of Homs, 108 Sunnis were killed by Alawite militiamen after a military bombardment on May 25. In all cases the regime said the dead were “terrorists”.

Ayman Abdel Nour, a former university friend of Assad and his political adviser before defecting in 2007, said the idea of carving out an Alawite state was not new.

Assad's former tutor Muhammad Nasif, who is now one of the president's closest advisers, had outlined the idea of a breakaway Alawite state, said Abdel Nour, in a conversation with him dating back to 1997.

"At the time I laughed in my heart but now we can see how the regime has pushed the country into civil war. None of these massacres [is] a mistake. They aim to split Syria," said Abdel Nour, who is based in Dubai and edits the political news site All4Syria.

"Many officials now openly discuss the creation of an Alawite state," said a Damascus-based Syria expert, familiar with the regime's thinking.

The mass displacement of Sunnis has even reached the borders of Damascus, the capital. After an intense week-long bombardment of Duma, once home to a mainly Sunni population of half a million, the International Committee of the Red Cross evacuated 26 residents and distributed food aid to 600 others.

The rest of the suburb was reported to have been largely abandoned. As casualties mount on both sides, the struggle between Sunnis, who form 74% of Syria's population, and the minority Alawites, an ancient offshoot of the Shi'ite faith who make up just 13%, is growing increasingly bitter.

“We can’t stand them any more in our country, all these terrorists,” said a woman in her twenties from a village near Latakia, referring to the Sunni opposition. Her brother, an officer in the military, added: “If they want to live under our rule, fine. If not, they can go back to Saudi Arabia or we’re going to wipe them out.”

In a rare split with regime dogma, an official with the ruling Ba’ath party said last week that the massacres around Homs and Hama had been carried out by “fanatic Alawite shabiha” and added: “In the 1980s the fight was between the Ba’athists and the Muslim Brotherhood. Today it is a Sunni-Alawite conflict.”

Fuelling much of the chaos and violence now engulfing Syria, said Abdel Nour, is Assad’s personal conviction that his leadership is beyond rebuke: “He believes he is chosen by God to rule Syria, that he has permission to do whatever he wants, that he is above his people and doesn’t need advice.

“He thinks himself better educated than other Arab leaders, younger and more in touch. That’s why I left, because you need to work with a human, not a god.”

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Assad militia 'goes on execution spree'

As rebel fighters retreat, whole families in Homs are being slaughtered

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday March 04 2012, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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DOZENS of civilians have been shot or stabbed by Syrian forces since they moved into the besieged Baba Amr district of Homs last Thursday, opposition activists said yesterday. They described an “unprecedented” level of violence, including decapitations.

Reports yesterday suggested that children had been killed, males over 11 had been detained in mass arrests and a lorry-load of bodies had been sent out of the city.

A Red Cross aid convoy was barred from entering the devastated suburb yesterday after Syrian authorities said it could not enter until booby traps had been cleared.

The convoy, with seven lorry-loads of food, medicines and blankets, was barred from going into Baba Amr despite having earlier been given permission by the government.

Jakob Kellenberger, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, said: “It is unacceptable that people who have been in need of emergency assistance for weeks have still not received any help.”

Opposition activists claimed the delay was to cover up revenge killings and summary executions in Baba Amr, where Marie Colvin, the Sunday Times war correspondent, and Rémi Ochlik, a French photojournalist, had been killed by shelling the previous week.

The bombardment of Homs resumed yesterday as activists reported killings continuing across the city.

Following the withdrawal of Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters on Thursday after a month-long onslaught that killed an estimated 700 civilians, forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad swept through farms on the outskirts of Baba Amr, killing at least 17 members of three separate families, according to FSA sources and local activists.

The killers were Alawite members of the Shabiha, the pro-Assad militia, said Abu Ammar, a senior FSA leader who fought in Baba Amr but recently crossed into Lebanon.

The Shabiha broke into the homes of farmers and stabbed entire families to death, including six members of a family named Sabouh.

All the corpses were found beheaded or partially beheaded and some had been dismembered, the sources claimed. There was no way to corroborate the allegations.

Abu Fares, a spokesman for Homs's revolutionary council, said at least 12 young civilian men had been executed during raids on homes by security forces hunting for FSA fighters.

“The regime is insisting on pushing people into a sectarian conflict. Every two or three days a group of Shabiha go into a Sunni area and slaughter families with knives,” said Fares.

In a separate incident, at least 10 men were executed outside a state-run co-operative supermarket that has been turned into a prison and military base. Dozens of young men, some as young as 14, were being held and tortured there, according to Abu Bakr, a local rebel. Another activist said gunmen were setting homes on fire.

Wissam Tarif of Avaaz, an international campaign group reporting on human rights abuses in Homs, said: “There is a serious attempt to spread panic and push the

country into a civil war. This level of violence is unprecedented in Syria.”

Every day dozens of dead bodies are sent to or thrown in front of these hospitals. The Revolution Leadership Council of Damascus, another opposition group, reported yesterday that a lorry filled with corpses taken from Baba Amr had been stopped by locals on the highway outside Homs.

A local activist said the lorry had been carrying at least 50 bodies. The army was reported to have cordoned off the area and seized back the vehicle.

Abu Samir, a resident of Baba Amr who fled yesterday with his wife, three-year-old child and his parents, said families who had been driven from their homes were being arrested by security forces and put onto buses.

The men were then being separated from the women, he told a Sunday Times reporter in Damascus, and taken away for interrogation in a prison system in which Human Rights Watch says torture is “systematic”.

“The Assad regime is carrying out revenge killings and crimes,” said Samir. “There were families from Baba Amr who were slaughtered by knives in cold blood and their bodies were sent to Homs’s military and state hospitals.

“Every day dozens of dead bodies are sent to or thrown in front of these hospitals.”

Several sources confirmed that a doctor named Abdel Hameed Mandu had been killed with his wife and three children while trying to escape from Homs through an army checkpoint.

“They can kill anyone just for a word,” said Fares. “When you pass a checkpoint they try and insult you, get a word out of you and then they shoot you.

“I was carrying food into Homs in my car two days ago and the soldiers on the checkpoint said to me: ‘What, are there still some dogs in there to feed?’ ”

Earlier last week, the Shabiha attacked a family home in the Karm al-Sham district of Homs, said local activists, killing all seven members of the Darwish family, including four young women.

“It is a new Hama massacre, repeated before the eyes of the world,” said Abu Bakr, referring to the 1982 assault on the city just north of Homs, when Assad’s father, Hafez, ordered a bombardment and ground assault to put down an armed uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood. Rights groups estimate the assault on Hama killed 20,000 people.

Throughout last week the Syrian authorities appeared determined to put much of the city in a stranglehold. On Sunday night, the regime began to bombard five districts south of Bab Amr with heavy artillery fire. The attack caused an unprecedented number of civilians to flee the neighbourhoods, heading south.

The regime wanted to clear the districts ahead of a ground assault into Bab Amr. According to a senior western official, it wanted to know that the only people left would be armed opposition fighters. Anything that moved, therefore, would be considered hostile.

The Marie Colvin fund

Marie's family has set up a fund that will support charitable organisations in her memory and be administered through the Long Island Community Foundation (LICF).

If you would like to donate, please go to mariecolvin.org and click on Memorial Fund, or send a cheque payable to Marie Colvin Fund at LICF to The Managing Editor's Office, The Sunday Times, 3 Thomas More Square, London E98 1ST.

Syria appeal

News International, publisher of The Sunday Times, is making a contribution to the Syria Crisis Appeal, which the British Red Cross has launched to provide medical care, food and supplies to civilians caught up in the violence highlighted by Marie Colvin and Paul Conroy.

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Assad sacks Hama governor

The Syrian President has fired the governor of Hama following huge anti-government protests in the country's central city

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand

Sunday July 03 2011, 11.33am BST, The Sunday Times

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President Assad sacked the governor of Hama, in northern Syria, yesterday after more than 400,000 protesters flooded the city's central square on Friday calling for the overthrow of the Assad family's 41-year dictatorship, the largest ever protest against the regime.

“Here we are, the germs of Syria,” said a local activist, referring to President Assad's June 20 speech in which he characterised the uprising against his rule as like the spread of “germs.” “But we are big germs in huge numbers,” said the activist.

The sacking of Ahmed Abdul-Aziz, a former professor of International Law at Damascus University, was published on SANA, the state-run news agency, which

gave no reason for his dismissal.

The governor was appointed in late February to a position often held in Syria for decades.

Following the killing of at least 67 protestors in a single day in Hama one month ago, Assad pledged an investigation, a sign of the regime's nervousness over attacks on a city still deeply scarred by the killing in 1982 of between 20,000 and 30,000 civilians, ordered by Assad's father, Hafez, in response to an armed uprising by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

But the sacking of the governor appears to have come in direct response to Friday's massive protest, which had a carnival-like atmosphere centred around Assi Square, renamed by the mainly young protestors Freedom Square.

Surprisingly, the sacking was met with some sorrow among protesters.

“He didn’t believe in killing people and used to go door to door to meet residents,” said a second activist in Hama. “We think he was sacked because the protests are getting larger and larger and now we are afraid they will send a security guy to be governor.”

With security forces withdrawn to the edge of the city for the past fortnight, the protest passed off peacefully, with several videos of the huge crowd showing no sign of weapons nor the bearded Islamist militants the regime claims to be battling.

Instead, protestors carried a giant, homemade Syrian flag that stretched for over a kilometre from one end of the square to the other and on down the main road. The central clock tower was draped in a purple flag reading, “Long live free Syria. Down with Bashar al-Assad.”

“The street is its own representative,” said the first activist, referring to the state-sanctioned opposition meeting in Damascus earlier in the week, which a participant said was heavily monitored by secret police.

“There can be no dialogue or reform unless the constitution is changed to remove the Baath Party’s right to rule. There is no space for any partial solution.”

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Assad's paratroops hit rebel mosque as soldiers defect

An estimated 300 soldiers from the Syrian army are said to have defected and joined the protesters in Dera'a

Hugh Macleod in Beirut

Sunday May 01 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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In a show of strength by the Syrian regime, crack troops stormed a mosque occupied by protesters in the rebel city of Dera'a yesterday, using helicopters to land paratroops on the building's roof.

Troops loyal to President Bashar al-Assad shelled the heart of the city for 90 minutes, backed up by machinegun fire with three military helicopters hovering low overhead.

Officials have claimed that the Omari mosque, a centre of the protest movement, had been used to store weapons.

“Dera’a is completely surrounded by tanks and armed troops. There are snipers on the roofs of all government and tall buildings,” said a witness. “Soldiers are hiding behind water tanks and some are even hiding in the minarets of mosques.”

Another resident said that Karak, a hilltop in the city’s old quarter, had borne the brunt of the shelling. Four civilians were reported to have died in yesterday’s assault, which was the most significant escalation of force since the army went into the city last Monday. A woman and her two daughters were killed when a tank shell hit their home near the mosque.

A resident said soldiers and the mukhabarat secret police had raided the home of Sheikh Ahmad al-Sayasneh, the mosque’s imam. The resident claimed security forces had executed Osama, the imam’s son, after he refused to disclose the whereabouts of his blind father, accused by the regime of inciting the protests and funding terrorism.

At least 100 people have been killed in Dera’a since Assad ordered troops into the city, sending dozens of tanks and thousands of soldiers from the army’s Fourth and Fifth Divisions. The death toll across the country totals more than 560.

The assault on Dera'a is the worst internal violence in Syria since Assad's late father, President Hafez al-Assad, used tanks and artillery to crush a revolt by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982, killing at least 10,000 civilians.

The Fourth Division, led by the president's younger brother Maher al-Assad, is an elite force, fiercely loyal to the regime, with a reputation for brutality against the regime's opponents. Its ranks are drawn from the minority Alawite religious group, to which the president's family belongs.

In contrast to the Fourth, soldiers belonging to the Fifth division are largely conscripts from the majority Sunni population and appear reluctant to obey orders to attack their Sunni co-religionists.

On April 8, when 25 unarmed protesters were killed in the city, the people of Dera'a blamed the Fourth Division for their deaths. "Hey Maher, you coward, take your dogs to the Golan," the crowd shouted, referring to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

A source in the city estimated that about 300 soldiers in the Fifth Division had defected and joined the protesters.

Some of the soldiers who defected had fired at Maher's troops in an attempt to defend civilians but they were fast running out of ammunition, the source claimed.

"Those who have defected are fighting on behalf of the people, helping them with information on the army's movements and trying to protect civilians from attacks,"

the source said.

Another witness said he had watched the defection yesterday of about 20 soldiers from the Fifth Division who abandoned their unit and ran towards civilian houses. “I saw two soldiers gunned down and killed,” he said.

For nearly a week Dera’a, a city of 200,000 close to the Jordanian border, has been under siege. Trapped and terrified inside their homes, families are running low on food and water.

“The city smells really bad because of the bodies rotting in the streets. No one can collect them for fear of being shot,” said a witness. “The humanitarian situation is very bad: There’s no food, no medicine, no electricity. We’re collecting rainwater to drink.”

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VIDEO

Awayday killing: Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'ites turn Syria into proxy war

Warring factions are taking sides in Assad's conflict as a way of settling their own battle

Hugh Macleod, Beirut and A Reporter, Syria

Sunday November 11 2012, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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DRIVEN from their homes by the 2003 war in Iraq, Abu Mohammed and Abu Hamza found refuge for themselves and their families in neighbouring Syria.

Today, nearly a decade later, both men have returned to the country that sheltered them, this time not as refugees but as fighters. One is a Sunni training rebels in Aleppo, the other a Shi'ite battling alongside President Bashar al-Assad's forces in Damascus.

The war in Syria has prompted an extension of the struggle in Iraq between the branches of Islam that followed the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the secular

dictator, by Washington and London.

“People ask me why a Sunni Iraqi is fighting in Syria and I have a simple answer: ‘I am fighting in Syria to liberate my country, Iraq, from the pro-Iranian Shi’ite militia,’” said Abu Mohammed, 46, dressed in military fatigues with a cigarette in one hand and a sniper rifle in the other.

Iraq, said Abu Mohammed, was now “occupied” by Shi’ite militias: the Mahdi Army, led by the Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who has close ties to Iran, the Badr brigade, armed and trained in Iran, and Iran’s own Quds force.

In his eyes the Assad regime led by Alawites, followers of an ancient offshoot of Shi’ite Islam, bolsters Iran’s ambition to dominate the Middle East. Any war against Assad in Syria is thus a war against Iran’s proxies in Iraq, he believes. “If the Syrians finish off the Assad regime, Iraqi Sunnis can get more support from a new Sunni leader in Syria,” he said.

A former captain in Saddam’s security services, Abu Mohammed said he had fled Iraq shortly after the 2003 invasion, travelling through his home province of Anbar, which borders Syria.

He travelled to Aleppo, Syria's largest city, with a majority population of conservative Sunnis. There, he said, he helped Islamist preachers, operating with the consent of the the security apparatus, to smuggle Syrian and foreign jihadist fighters from Syria into Anbar to attack US troops.

His convergence of interests with the Assad regime ended abruptly after the brutal crackdown began on Syria's mainly Sunni-led protest movement last year.

"I saw how those Shi'ite shabiha [pro-regime militiamen] were setting up checkpoints and humiliating Sunni farmers. They put posters of Iran's Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah. So I saw it was a sectarian war in Syria," he said.

After leaving his family in Iraq, Abu Mohammed now uses his years of experience in Saddam's security services to help Syrian rebels in Aleppo root out spies sent into their midst by Assad's security services.

"The intelligence war is very important these days," he said. "If we can destroy the headquarters of the security branches in Aleppo then the whole city will be in our hands in a few days."

Just over 200 miles to the south, Abu Hamza also smoked as he described his role in Syria's civil war. A shaven-headed giant, he dressed in the black robes of a pious Shi'ite.

After being shot in the leg fighting with the Mahdi Army against an American assault on Karbala, an Iraqi city that is holy to Shi'ites, Abu Hamza travelled to the Damascus suburb of Sayeda Zeinab, home to a shrine that Shi'ites believe contains the remains of the Prophet Mohammed's grand-daughter.

It is this shrine that Abu Hamza says he came back to defend from what he called the "Damascene Nawasib," or the "heretic" Sunnis. He claimed an estimated 500 to 600 other Iraqi fighters were involved.

"Four months ago, a leader from the Mahdi Army visited me in Karbala and told me I should travel to Syria to protect our shrines. I accepted it as a religious duty," he said.

Co-ordinating with the so-called popular committees, civilian militia paid and armed by Assad's security forces, Abu Hamza said he had been involved in repeated clashes with Sunni rebels.

"We have experience in this kind of war and how to use heavy weapons," he said. "We got support from the security services and the government army to face the attacks."

But it is not just a religious calling that Abu Hamza and his men are fighting for.

Just as in 2003 when some of Iraq's future Shi'ite leaders such as Nouri al-Maliki, who is now prime minister, were living in Damascus, waiting to see the outcome of

the US-led war in Iraq, so Abu Hamza now sees the fate of Iraq's Shi'ites being decided in Syria.

“If the Sunnis win then Iraqi Sunnis are going to lead Iraq again and be stronger because they will get big support from their Syrian brothers. Iran will be weaker and Hezbollah [the Shi'ite militant group based in Lebanon] will lose its arms and support,” he said.

Video: Inside Aleppo

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Clerics sentence Assad loyalists to death

Syrian rebels are increasingly handing power to Islamic courts, leading to summary trials and revenge killings

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand

Sunday August 26 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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MEMBERS of a pro-regime militia executed by Syrian rebels in Aleppo were sentenced to death by a sharia court composed mainly of Islamic scholars, as members of the armed opposition turn to religious law amid the chaos of the civil war.

Zaino Berri was shot dead with at least three other members of his family late last month after being found guilty of the murder of 15 members of a rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) unit.

Video footage released after his death showed Berri and his relatives stripped to their boxer shorts, bruised and bloodied, being lined up against a school wall before dozens of young men opened fire with automatic weapons.

Anna Neistat of Human Rights Watch, who is in Aleppo investigating the Berri killing, said members of the judicial council claimed to have tried 25 people in a case lasting three hours, acquitting 21 but sentencing four to death.

“It was a very short trial and it’s essentially sharia. Most such judicial councils are made up of sheikhs [Islamic scholars],” she said.

Abu al-Majd, a lawyer turned leader of the FSA’s Liwa al-Tawhid brigade and one of 10 judges on the self-declared religious justice council in Aleppo, said that since its formation in March the court had issued 10 death sentences.

“The opposition judicial system has completely neglected the social values of the Syrian people,” said Wissam Tarif, of the activist group Avaaz.

“From what the Berri videos show we saw no kind of judicial process. Instead the council was used to justify a cheap revenge killing.”

Human rights researchers do not yet have estimates for the number of executions committed by opposition fighters in Syria, but from videos posted on YouTube it

appears the numbers have been rising sharply over the past few months.

In the tribal-run city of Deir Ezzor in Syria's eastern desert, at least six cases of sharia courts imposing death sentences have been documented.

In Homs, scene of some of the worst bombardments by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, rebels claim to have executed several hundred "traitors" over the past year.

Speaking to Germany's Der Spiegel magazine, a 24-year-old executioner for the Farouk battalion, the largest and most heavily armed rebel group fighting in central Syria, described slitting the throat of a prisoner found guilty of killing women in Homs's Baba Amr district.

But Abdul Razzaq Tlass, leader of the Farouk battalion and an officer who defected from the Syrian army, released a statement pledging that his group would abide by the Geneva conventions.

"We are rebelling against a barbarous regime that tortured detainees and killed many of them. We will never adopt the behaviour of the thing we are fighting against," he said.

A recent initiative by the local co-ordination committees, the civil society activists who first led the uprising against Assad's regime, has persuaded several hundred FSA commanders to sign a pledge to abide by the laws of war.

Abu Berri, however, a member of Homs's rebel military council and a hardline Salafist, said that the role of civilians in the uprising, at least in Homs, was now greatly diminished. "Now we are focusing on the military side. There is almost no role for civilians," he said.

From an opposition military council made up of the 16 leaders of the rebel units that followed the Farouk battalion, Berri said all the fighters had now been unified under a council consisting of five Islamic clerics.

"The shura council is now the biggest power in Homs. It decides on military strategy, it receives all the cash and support from outside, it distributes weapons and food. It decides on war and peace," he said.

As well as ruling on cases of life and death, rebel councils are increasingly taking on other functions of the state.

Most FSA units now have their own makeshift prison system, usually just a room guarded by a couple of fighters where captured shabiha, the pro-regime militia, await either trial or a prisoner swap with rebels held in the regime's prison system.

Neistat said she had found evidence of the torture of detainees in FSA prisons, including severe beatings by sticks on the soles of the feet.

In some parts of Syria the civilians are fighting back against the power of the military and religious leaders. In Al-Bab, northeast of Aleppo, local people are

reportedly pushing to form a civilian police force to take over day-to-day security affairs from the FSA.

In Kafr Nabl, in northwest Syria, journalists filmed a locally elected committee whose members have been asked to write a new constitution for the city.

- The largely Sunni town of Daraya on the southwest edge of Damascus came under heavy shelling yesterday as Assad sent planes to bomb rebels, killing at least 109 people in the past four days. Since rebels made gains following the assassination of four of Assad's top security chiefs a month ago, at least 1,047 people have been killed in Damascus, bringing the death toll in the 17-month uprising to more than 20,000, according to rights groups.

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Concrete wall seals off 'dead land' of Syria's crushed rebels

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday April 29 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S forces have built a 10ft concrete wall around the Homs suburb of Baba Amr, the scene of a brutal bombardment by Syrian artillery.

A reporter for The Sunday Times visited the wall on Friday, describing it as so freshly built that it is devoid of graffiti.

Marie Colvin, the Sunday Times correspondent, and Rémi Ochlik, a French photographer, were killed in Baba Amr during the shelling in February.

The suburb, a former hotbed of opposition to the regime that has since endured a wave of sectarian massacres, is now virtually deserted. With most residents having fled, it has become “a dead land for cats and dogs”, in the words of a former resident.

Soldiers and secret policemen guard the two narrow entrances through the wall, arresting all males aged between 13 and 60, said Abu Annas, whose wife and young daughter recently went to check on what remained of their home in Baba Amr.

“They spent half an hour arguing with the security officer who said his men would have to check on them before they passed through. She came back crying, saying, ‘There is no Baba Amr’.”

Those houses not destroyed by the bombardment have been taken over by soldiers, said Abu Annas.

Electricity and phone lines have been cut for months and neither cars nor delivery lorries can enter, meaning the shops have nearly all closed. It was once home to 28,000 people but activists say only about 1,000 still live within the wall.

Other Sunni-majority opposition districts of Homs, such as Karm al-Zeitoune, where whole families were killed in recent sectarian massacres, Deir Balbah and Qarabes have also seen a majority of inhabitants leave, according to the reporter visiting the area last week.

Some activists compared the building of the wall to a tactic used by the Israelis to separate Jewish settlements from Palestinian villagers. "I cannot understand how a national government builds a wall to separate its citizens from each other," said a resident.

The United Nations-Arab League ceasefire plan now appears to be in tatters. At least 462 people have been killed since April 16 when the first UN ceasefire monitors arrived.

State media claimed an explosion that killed nine people outside a mosque in Damascus's Midan district on Friday was the work of a suicide bomber, although it is an opposition hotbed. The bomb coincided with the arrival of news teams from Sky and ITN.

About 300 UN observers are due to arrive in the coming weeks. A small advance team is already there, but seems powerless to stop the Assad regime taking steps to re-exert long-term security control by collectively punishing rebellious communities.

In Dera'a, the first city to rise up against Assad and suffer sustained military assault, a Sunday Times reporter witnessed dozens of tanks deployed in violation of the ceasefire negotiated by Kofi Annan, the Arab League envoy.

Snipers remain in place on rooftops around restive neighbourhoods and the city is encircled by a ring of checkpoints, choking it off and leading to crippling high food prices.

Rebel gunmen in inflatable dinghies attacked a military unit on Syria's Mediterranean coast yesterday.

The night raid near the port of Latakia, 22 miles south of the Turkish border, was the first seaborne assault since the uprising began. Deaths and injuries were reported on both sides.

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Guerrilla campaign to target Damascus

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday March 25 2012, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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FORCED to retreat from their strongholds in the north, Syrian rebel fighters are planning a campaign of guerrilla warfare in Damascus after an audacious operation in the capital's most secure suburb.

A unit from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) launched a pre-dawn firefight in the Mezze district of Damascus on Monday, just yards from the homes of two of the regime's top security chiefs.

The fighting ended with a senior Sunni general, who had made clear that he wished to defect to the FSA, and his family being escorted from their home under the protection of the rebels.

“We had been in contact for several months with a general who wanted to defect and when the zero hour came we sent three units to Mezze to secure him,” said the unit’s commander, known as Abu Louay, speaking from Damascus.

“We wanted to show the regime we are capable of launching operations in the middle of their home, just a few [miles] from the presidential palace. People think nothing is happening in Damascus, but it is boiling.”

Abu Louay said the general would speak in public as soon as the FSA was able to get him and his family to safety.

A former member of Syrian intelligence, now working with the rebels, confirmed that they were planning assassinations and guerrilla attacks in Damascus, having been bombed out of their stronghold in the Baba Amr district of Homs.

Although impossible to verify because independent journalists are banned from Syria, the assault on Mezze represents the most high-profile attack by the FSA in the city.

With embassies, armed guards and gated compounds, Mezze is home to Syria’s wealthy elite and is the capital’s most secure neighbourhood.

Activists say Assef Shawkat, the brother-in-law of President Bashar al-Assad and deputy head of the armed forces, has a home in Mezze Villas West, scene of the most intense fighting.

Ali Mamluk, the head of state security, is said to have two houses in the same street.

Just a few hundred yards up the road is Mezze 86, a purpose-built military compound housing officers and their families.

Abu Louay said two 10-men FSA units were sent to Mezze 86 to escort the defecting general and his family from their home while a third unit clashed with security forces in Mezze Villas West as a diversion.

Witnesses described intense fighting involving heavy machinegun fire and rocket-propelled grenades. A military helicopter with a searchlight flew over the area, said the FSA sources, forcing the rebel fighters to hole up in a nearby flat where at least seven were killed.

“At about midnight there was the sound of two big bombs,” said Mohammed, a 30-year-old living on the street where the fighting took place. “We live in the most secure area of Damascus. This is the first time in my life that I’ve seen shooting.”

The official media reported that three “terrorists” had been killed, while an officer and a plainclothes policeman had also died.

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Homs starves in shadow of snipers

With the streets too dangerous, families must smash through neighbours' walls to get food

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut, and a special correspondent, Homs

Sunday February 12 2012, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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Terrified families desperate for food were scurrying through holes they had cut in the walls of apartment blocks this weekend rather than venture into the perilous streets of Homs, the city in western Syria that has come to symbolise the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

“You cannot walk in the streets because of the snipers, so we knocked holes in the walls between each flat to reach a small shop at the end of the block,” said Abu Yaman, a resident of Inshaat, a southern suburb that has been pounded by tank shells, artillery rounds and mortars for more than a week.

“There are 10 families in the building, and we’ve all moved to the basement flat to use it like a shelter.”

The families live crammed together day and night without electricity, heating oil or medical supplies. Water is dwindling because roof tanks have been hit by shells.

Residents were burning tables, chairs and doors yesterday to keep warm, the smell of wood smoke mingling with the reek of corpses as they struggled to bury them in private gardens.

Opposition activists in Homs estimated yesterday that more than 500 people had been killed since the Syrian army's onslaught began on February 3, with 1,000 people injured. The figures were impossible to verify.

Activists said Syrian tanks had entered the Baba Amr district, close to Inshaat, but their reports could not be confirmed.

More than 5,600 Syrians are believed to have been killed in the country since the crackdown on opposition to the Assad family's 42-year dictatorship began last March.

Yesterday gunmen were reported to have assassinated an army general in the first killing of a high-ranking military officer in Damascus. The state news agency said three men opened fire on Brigadier-General Issa al-Khouli, the head of a military hospital, as he left his home.

In Homs, residents said they felt abandoned by the world when Russia and China vetoed a United Nations security council resolution condemning the Assad regime last weekend.

“No one knows if they are going to live or die from one moment to the next,” said Sami Ibrahim, a human rights activist in Homs. “Where is the free world? Assad will continue killing for as long as the world continues not to care about us.”

For now, Homs continues to be bombarded from afar by artillery and rocket launchers. Scores of tanks and armoured vehicles have been deployed, with sandbags and checkpoints protecting the heavily guarded headquarters of the secret police and ruling Ba’ath party.

Activists in Baba Amr, the district hardest hit by the government’s assault, said they feared a ground assault was imminent, with troops massing nearby.

Activists said the bodies of five members of one family were discovered in their front room, huddled together. They had been shot and stabbed in what opposition sources said was an attack by the Shabiha, Assad’s notorious militia.

Fighting with only Kalashnikov assault rifles and the occasional rocket-propelled grenade, rebel soldiers of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) are hopelessly outgunned. But a rebel commander in Baba Amr claimed his fighters had repelled a ground attack.

“We have prepared a lot of surprises for the regime if they try to storm Homs,” said Captain Ammar al-Wawi. “But we do not have a lot of weapons because no one is supporting us. We appeal to the international community to support the revolt in Homs because there is a massacre going on.”

More than 25 buildings in Baba Amr had been destroyed by shellfire, Wawi said, with many residents buried under the rubble.

Gunmen on rooftops opened fire on two makeshift field clinics set up in homes in Baba Amr, human rights activists said, killing three patients and wounding a doctor so badly that his leg had to be amputated.

Overwhelmed with casualties from the bombardment, doctors made desperate appeals on videos posted on YouTube for medical supplies, which for months the regime has sought to deny the opposition. Thugs loyal to the regime have destroyed pharmacies, ripped up blood bags and arrested and tortured people treating wounded protesters.

Médecins sans Frontières, the medical charity, last week issued a report accusing the regime of blocking drugs and medical equipment as a weapon of war. Scores of injured civilians have died over the past week because doctors lacking bandages and sutures were unable to treat their wounds.

“It’s a disastrous situation. People are losing their minds,” said Ibrahim, the human rights activist. “When the bombing stops we can hear them crying out for help.”

Amid the carnage unleashed by the Assad regime, sectarian faultlines have begun to open across the country, dividing Sunnis from their Alawite neighbours. Concern is mounting that militant fundamentalists could exploit the divide.

Alawites are only a small minority in Syria, but form the backbone of the Assad regime and its security forces, whereas Sunnis constitute three-quarters of the population and the majority of the opposition.

The tension was visible in Homs last week. Haidar, 40, a lawyer, said he had moved out of his once-mixed district after being “advised” by Sunni neighbours to leave because he and his wife, a teacher, are Alawites.

“What is going on in Homs is a real civil war between the government and Alawites on one side, and the Sunnis on the other,” he said. “I don’t think we, as Alawites, have any future here if the Assads go.”

As communities divide along religious lines, a space is opening up for Islamist militants long held in check by Syria’s secular rulers. They sense their hour may have come. “I’m not afraid to say that I support the opposition with money and weapons,” said Abu Annas al-Homsi, a Syrian Salafist fundamentalist, who fought the Americans in Iraq.

“The international community was too weak to protect civilians, so now we’re fighting an open war to liberate our land and defend our religion,” he said.

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I'm an Assad thug: It's the final battle

A member of the militia blamed for Syria's worst atrocities gives a chilling insight into his world of indoctrination, paranoia and mafia crime

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday June 10 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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WITH his massive, tattooed muscles, shaved head, bushy black beard and trademark white trainers, Abu Jaafar, 38, likes to pump iron at the gym before heading for the nightclubs of Latakia, Syria's Mediterranean port.

As a member of the mafia militia, he grew up smuggling commodities, drugs and guns between Syria and civil-war Lebanon at the behest of President Bashar al-Assad's extended family based around Latakia.

So when the mualem, his master, calls, he leaves his wife and children at home and forgoes his drink of local arak. "If I get a call from my boss, my whole day is changed," he said. "I don't know when I'll be back."

Packing up the Kalashnikovs, pistols and grenades he says were given to him “by the government”, Jaafar joins his gang of 100 shabiha — the Alawite militia blamed for the worst atrocities that have brought Syria to the brink of civil war.

In an interview with a Sunday Times reporter in Latakia, Jaafar gave a disturbing insight into the world of the shabiha, a poisonous cocktail of religious indoctrination, minority paranoia and mafia crime.

The Sunni Muslim protesters trying to topple Assad’s regime blame the shabiha for two massacres in less than a fortnight, in which nearly 200 Sunni civilians were killed in cold blood, many of them women and children. The regime blamed both massacres on “terrorists”.

The mass murders in Houla, where at least 100 died, and Qubair in Hama province, where 78 people were shot or hacked to death, caused international revulsion. US officials raised the prospect of military action and analysts described the rise of militias as a “Frankenstein” beyond the control of Assad.

The army is said to have escorted the shabiha to the scene of both massacres. Yesterday at least 18 more people were killed when troops shelled the southern city of Dera’a, where the uprising began in March last year. At least 13,000 have died since then, according to opposition activists.

Like many of Syria's estimated 2.5m Alawites, who make up 12% of the population, Jaafar said he grew up in poverty. "My story is similar to all shabiha: I was born in a small village and didn't finish school. Instead I went to work with my father in our lemon farm."

He was first recruited into the murky world of Syria's security services during military service, where uniformed officers worked with thugs in regime-sanctioned smuggling. "I was bigger than the others so I got picked to be the bodyguard of a senior officer. After military service he asked me to be his man in dealing with some Alawite smugglers."

Through the late 1980s and early 1990s Jaafar and his gang lived the gangster high life, smuggling food, cigarettes and commodities from Latakia into Lebanon at a massive profit, while luxury cars, guns and drugs flowed into the Soviet-style economy set up by Hafez al-Assad, Syria's former dictator.

"They were noted for their brutality and cruelty and their blind devotion to their leaders," said Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a dissident historian. "The shabiha were untouchable and operated with impunity."

That impunity stemmed from the direct links between the shabiha and the Assad family. In May 2011, the European Union imposed sanctions on Assad's first cousins, Fawwaz and Munzir, for their involvement in "the repression against the civilian population as members of the shabiha".

By the mid-1990s the shabiha were beginning to get out of control and Hafez al-Assad ordered his elder son, Bassel, to bring them to heel. He did so but then died in a car crash, catapulting Bashar, an eye doctor, into the presidency.

Jaafar left his gang and opened a liquor store in Latakia. “Last June friends from the shabiha asked me to return to work with them,” he said. “They said we must defend President Assad and his family and keep power for the Alawites.”

Soon, Jaafar’s occasional pay of 1,000 Syrian pounds (about £10) for a day’s thuggery had risen to a steady monthly salary about six times the average wage. “We started by facing the protesters, but when the opposition became armed we attacked them in their villages,” he said. “In addition to our salaries we take whatever we can get during the attacks: TVs, video players, electronics.”

Abu Ahmed, a Houla resident, told a Sunday Times reporter in a nearby village: “Whole families were slaughtered. Women and children were shot from close range or slaughtered with knives. The shabiha did all that.”

Jaafar repeats the regime’s claims, now becoming true, that the armed opposition is receiving support from conservative Sunni Muslim states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

“We got money and arms from our government to fight those Wahabi radicals who will force my wife and daughters to wear the veil and will close all wine shops,” he

said.

Mixed with his fear of religious conservatism is a lethal sense of persecution: Jaafar says Sunnis have held power wrongly for 1,400 years and that the balance was restored only after Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970 and stacked his security services with Alawites.

Analysts now believe Assad can do nothing to halt the escalating violence perpetrated by the shabiha, blunting any hopes for implementation of the UN-Arab League ceasefire plan, let alone a negotiated solution to Syria's crisis.

Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, said: "Bashar is the president but he does not command. In Syria it is not about constitutional authority but about kill or be killed. He's a prisoner of the presidential palace."

Jaafar said: "I know the Sunnis will take revenge for what we've done. I'm fighting to guarantee a good future for my sons and grandsons. So this is the final battle: win, or die."

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Iraq style chaos looms as foreign jihadists pour into Syria

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday May 13 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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UP TO 150 foreign jihadist fighters, many linked to Al-Qaeda, have joined the armed uprising in Syria to oppose the “infidel” regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

The increasing role of foreign fighters in the conflict emerged last week as Syria appealed to the United Nations security council for help in battling terrorism after two lorry bombs in Damascus killed 55 people and injured more than 370.

A shadowy group calling itself the Al-Nusra Front, which is suspected of Al-Qaeda links, claimed responsibility for the blasts in a video released late on Friday. The native-born rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) denied any role in the explosions, saying they had neither the capability nor the motivation for such attacks.

A member of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Lebanon, named after a founding member of Al-Qaeda, told The Sunday Times that his group had sent fighters to Syria.

“What is happening in Syria today is a jihad,” said the man, known as Abu Hamza, who is wanted in Lebanon for sending foreign jihadists to fight with Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the American-led occupation, and for attacks on UN peacekeepers.

The Azzam Brigades, known locally as the Ziad Jarrah Battalion after the only Lebanese member of the 9/11 hijackers, have dispatched “many” fighters to Syria, he claimed. “We are already fighting there and we do not try to hide it,” he said. “We must defend Muslims from being slaughtered by this infidel regime and we believe the time has come to create an Islamic caliphate.”

The group describes itself as Takfiri, meaning that it brands moderate Muslims as infidels. It is the ideology followed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq whose extreme violence, including frequent beheadings, alienated his host community.

In February Ayman Zawahiri, the Al-Qaeda leader, called on militants in countries bordering Syria to join their “brothers” in fighting a “cancerous regime”.

A senior Lebanese security source said: “There’s a new migration of jihadists to Syria. The situation there is chaos and this helps them establish a foothold. We estimate 150 jihadists have already entered Syria through Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.”

The Azzam Brigades in Lebanon consist mainly of former members of Fatah al-Islam, an Al-Qaeda-inspired group that took over a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon in 2007 and fought a five-month battle against the military.

As the armed uprising supplants peaceful protests in Syria, foreign fighters are gradually becoming established. Abu Berri, a prominent Syrian jihadist, said in an interview in north Lebanon — where he was trying to buy weapons including rockets and mortars — that his funding came from Syrian expatriates and sympathisers, mainly in Gulf states.

“The Lebanese government makes it very hard for us. But when you have the source of life,” he said, referring to money, “you can buy anything, even a tank.”

The Lebanese security source said about \$1.2m (£750,000) was being funnelled to Syrians in Lebanon every fortnight from sources in Gulf states such as Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. “It comes as aid to refugees but we know they are buying weapons with it,” the source said.

Some of the foreign fighters are career jihadists whose lives and deaths illustrate the murky nature of the Al-Qaeda threat. On April 20 Abdel Ghani Jawhar, a former member of Fatah al-Islam and one of Lebanon's most wanted terrorists, was killed by a bomb he was making in Qusayr, a rebel stronghold near Homs.

From the beginning of the uprising in March 2011 Syria's official media said security forces were confronting "armed terrorist groups" but jihadist leaders and intelligence sources said foreign fighters had begun to enter the country only in February.

The Lebanese security source warned of a descent into full-blown civil war. "Syria is now like the early days of Iraq," he said. "If the situation continues it will attract more fighters from the region.

"The Syrian rebels will accept them under the slogan of defending Muslims, but sooner or later they will discover that they have their own agenda. Then they will start killing each other."

Last month a video appeared to show Waleed Bustani, a Lebanese former Fatah al-Islam member, being tried by a Free Syrian Army unit in Talkalakh, a Syrian town near the border with north Lebanon.

In the video, an injured Bustani was accused of killing two FSA members, which he denied. Rebel fighters made a phone call while a voice said: "Hopefully his sentence

will be two bullets in the head.” A shot of Bustani being led down a corridor was followed by the sound of gunfire.

Asked who the rebels had consulted, a fighter from nearby Homs said: “The fatwa [ruling] came from a local cleric. The FSA can’t just kill anyone. In any Islamic revolution we have to have the authority of the clerics.”

Additional reporting: Rami Aysha

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Last stand

Time has almost run out for Assad — but he's not giving up yet, write Hugh Macleod in Beirut and our Special Correspondent in Damascus

Hugh Macleod in Beirut, and our Special Correspondent in Damascus

Sunday July 22 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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[Mark Palmer and Paul Wolfowitz: Our dithering plays into Assad's hands](#)

It was the week when war finally came home to the city known to the Assad clan as the “beating heart of Arabism”, for so long the lair of the most intransigent regime in the Middle East.

Safe in its grip, the city had not yet paid a price for the cynical cruelty of its rulers; that was reserved for the war dead in Lebanon and the terrorist victims in Europe and Israel wherever Assad’s minions struck.

Now the regime was staring its own downfall in the face. Artillery boomed from the heights of the mountain that rears above Damascus and the shells crashed in the streets below. People cowered in basements or fled. Dozens of lorries, trucks, taxis and cars streamed out of the city. In district after district, the khaki-clad men of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) appeared, firing light weapons and grenades.

On broad avenues in the government quarters, the army’s Russian-made tanks and armoured vehicles wheeled and circled. They led the charge into streets where the rebels ruled, followed by hundreds of troops from the elite Republican Guard. MiG helicopters darted overhead, firing rockets and machineguns into civilian neighbourhoods.

While the city burnt below, some of its surviving functionaries attended a state funeral on the heights of Mount Qassioun for their comrades, assassinated in a

single moment of violence last Wednesday.

The mourners included the grim-faced Farouq Al-Sharaa, an urbane, English-speaking figure who served as foreign minister for 22 years and who was once talked of as a possible leader if a negotiated transition from the Assads' rule could be arranged. The time for that, Sharaa must have guessed, had long gone.

After 16 months of rebellion, a city that survived conquerors from Alexander the Great to Saladin was being torn apart. The biblical place where St Paul sought out the Street called Straight, the scene of Lawrence of Arabia's fleeting triumph in the first world war, a treasure house of art and architecture from the Romans to the Muslim caliphs, all of it untouched in Syria's wars with Israel, was consumed in a chaos of its own making as hundreds died.

A special correspondent for The Sunday Times, who cannot be named for safety reasons, toured the battle zones to find scenes of mayhem.

The district of Midan, which means "field" in Arabic, was a field of battle. Dozens of cars, minibuses, shops and houses were ablaze. Control seesawed between the rebels and the army. "Time is on our side," a rebel fighter claimed.

"The Assad army attacked all houses and took everything. They are looking to steal expensive things, gold pieces and money, more than fighting the Free Syrian Army,"

lamented Abu Mohammed, 50, a resident of Qaboun, another bitterly contested district.

Its people had no electricity and dared not go out for food. “The land is for the FSA and the sky for the regime’s helicopters and shells,” said Abu Mohammed. Dozens of tanks and armoured vehicles drove into Qaboun as the army tried to take back the initiative.

“Syria is for al-Assad or we will burn the country and not hand it to those radicals and criminals,” said Haidar, 22, a student, whose father is a soldier.

In Rukin Adeen, a poor area inhabited by Kurds — part of Syria’s complex mosaic of peoples and religions — hundreds of soldiers, plainclothes intelligence agents and pro-government militia roamed the streets.

Their foes were regrouping for a new attack. One of them, Abu Omar, a 35-year-old fighter in the FSA, spoke as he gathered with 10 to 15 comrades, gripping a black sniper rifle. “Everyone knows that the battle for Damascus will be the last one,” he said.

From the Kremlin to the Chinese politburo’s compound in Beijing, Assad’s allies were asking: how could it all have happened so fast?

Only a few weeks ago, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, an eye doctor trained in London, had proclaimed its confidence in victory over a few “gangs of terrorists”

sponsored by foreign enemies.

It had every reason to feel strong. For more than four decades, the Assad family dominated Syria, commanding a strategic prize in the Middle East, blackmailing nervous potentates in the Gulf and buying the most sophisticated weapons Moscow would sell.

They led a regime governed by “Hama rules”, named after the city where a Sunni uprising in 1982 was savagely put down with at least 20,000 dead.

Its founder was Hafez al-Assad, a dour air force general who wore down the likes of Henry Kissinger with interminable monologues as a prelude to negotiations that yielded nothing. To the Arab world, he epitomised unflinching resistance to Israel and the West.

But at home Hafez al-Assad had a secret. His family were Alawites, members of a despised minority from the poor coastal mountains. They were an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam, the same variety of the faith practised in Iran.

Alawites were the skivvies and servants of rich Sunni merchants in Damascus and Aleppo. Until the Assad ascendancy, that is.

Now it is coming apart, the weaknesses in Assad's regime are evident. Like Saddam Hussein's clan rule in Iraq, it was a family mafia behind a facade of Ba'athism, a

doctrine of Arab socialism and unity whose principles were borrowed from Nazi Germany. It was equally incapable of reform.

For decades the Syrian people and media feared even to mention the word “Alawite”. When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000 there were faint hopes of a “Damascus spring” but these soon froze.

Bashar, his son, inherited a web of intrigue, not a government, where courtiers vied for profit and menace. Fatally, he proved too weak to lead them. Bit by bit — a suicide, an unexplained flight into exile, a mystery assassination — the Ba’athist monolith broke up.

Few people heard the explosion that decapitated the regime last Wednesday. The state media said the bomb tore through a conference room where some of the highest figures in the regime were meeting.

The dead included Assef Shawkat, married to Assad’s elder sister and one of the most hated men in Syria. Alongside him perished the defence minister, Daoud Rajha, and Hassan Turkmani, a military chief. A fourth man, Hisham Ikhtiyar, the national security chief, later died of his wounds.

The regime reeled. Rebels danced in the streets of battered cities across Syria and seized key border crossings.

Soon the Levantine rumour mill was abuzz: Assad had fled to the coastal city of Latakia and would lead a last stand in an Alawite redoubt; his wife Asma had flown to Moscow; and Vladimir Putin's personal jet was on stand-by in Larnaca, Cyprus, to rescue them all and fly them into exile.

There was no proof for any of it, but confusion soon fed even darker conspiracy theories. Rumours reached Beirut that the bombing was an inside job, arranged by Assad to kill off rivals plotting to compromise with the FSA.

One plain reality is that sectarian break-up is now on the cards. "The state is a figleaf over a large Alawite militia," said a Damascus-based Syria expert.

"We had been looking at next summer as the time for regime collapse but the bomb has certainly shifted the timetable forward," added a western diplomat covering Syria.

For the West, for Israel, for Turkey and for Arab moderates, the rewards could be great even if the risks are high.

Iran's nuclear ambitions, peace between Israel and the Arabs, the balance of power between Sunni and Shi'ite in the Middle East; even the prestige of Russia and China as protectors of dictatorships — all are at stake.

There is also the matter of Syria's stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons. Will Assad be tempted to use them as part of a last stand? Or, worse, might they fall

into the hands of Hezbollah or Al-Qaeda?

Assad's Syria was Iran's only ally in the Middle East. It gave Tehran a bridgehead to Lebanon and to the Shi'ite group Hezbollah. Its end will be a shattering blow to Iranian ambitions. Hezbollah and its patrons in Tehran may wreak havoc in Lebanon and sow terror abroad. But Iran's day in the Levant is probably done.

"No war without Egypt, no peace without Syria," went the old refrain in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Syria was always far more important than Muammar Gaddafi's crackpot regime in Libya. Even a year ago it seemed impossible Syria's adamant rulers would crumble in the face of revolt. Now the guns of July are sounding out their greatest challenge.

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Lebanese troops to storm hostage camp

Hugh Macleod, Nahr al-Bared, north Lebanon

Sunday June 03 2007, 1.00am BST, The Sunday Times

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LEBANESE special forces were poised last night to storm a Palestinian refugee camp in north Lebanon and seize the Al-Qaeda-linked militants holed up inside.

Heavily armed naval special forces troops distinguishable by their red berets were seen punching the air in delight as they moved out from a checkpoint on the highway south of Tripoli and headed towards Nahr al-Bared.

Their deployment suggested that a full-scale assault on the densely built-up camp, where 8,000 civilians remain trapped, could be imminent.

The crack troops, who number several hundred, receive training in the United States and Britain. The equivalent of Britain's Special Boat Service (SBS), they are armed

with American M4 and M16 assault rifles, as well as rocket-propelled grenade launchers and sniper rifles. The unit is also understood to have been supplied with night vision goggles from the United States.

Regular Lebanese troops sustained casualties yesterday in the most intense fighting of a two-week stand-off at Nahr al-Bared. Heavy artillery, tanks and a naval gun boat have pounded rooftops and bases held by militants from Fatah al-Islam.

Black smoke poured from buildings across the camp as troops and militants exchanged machinegun fire, while an army helicopter fired rockets at targets on a coastal boundary.

At least two soldiers died in overnight fighting and one more yesterday morning, bringing the total death toll among fighters and civilians to at least 106.

Fatah al-Islam, which includes many foreigners from the conflict in Iraq, said yesterday that it had lost 31 fighters.

"They may have destroyed the buildings of our base but we are still occupying it," the group's spokesman said by telephone. The militants are believed to have dug tunnels and bunkers under their bases in expectation of an artillery bombardment.

"We will never surrender and the Lebanese army knows they will be massacred if they enter here. If they do, we will call on our brothers across the country to rise up," the spokesman said.

A military intelligence source insisted the army had not yet received the final order to attack and occupy the whole camp.

Exhausted-looking soldiers yesterday helped to evacuate an injured comrade who had been hit in the eye, apparently by a Fatah al-Islam sniper.

Mazen Fakhri, head of the civil defence unit that has been bringing out injured soldiers, said that he had recovered the body of a militant with his hand still on the pin of a grenade strapped to his body.

Another injured militant had been picked up last week and handed to Lebanese intelligence.

"He had three gunshot wounds to his leg but didn't appear in any pain. They must be on drugs or something," he said.

Nineteen Lebanese and one Syrian member of Fatah al-Islam were charged last week with terrorism, a crime that carries the death penalty in Lebanon.

Fatah al-Islam responded to yesterday's onslaught with dozens of rocket attacks on the surrounding area. Yesterday morning a rocket fired from a rooftop inside the

camp narrowly missed a Lebanese naval patrol boat.

Dr Yusef al-Assad, of the Palestine Red Crescent (PRC), the only emergency service that has been bringing out civilians from the camp, said it had received reports that about 100 civilians had been trapped under rubble in an underground bunker after their building was hit.

Since the heavy bombardment began on Friday, the PRC has been unable to gain access to the camp. Aid agencies have also found it impossible to deliver water and food.

"The army has the guts and the morale to do this but lacks specialist training," said Timor Goksel, a long-time adviser to the United Nations forces in Lebanon who has worked with the Lebanese army.

With Al-Qaeda urging other militant groups in Palestinian refugee camps to rise up against the army, some analysts are predicting further chaos.

"The more the government kills and imprisons them, the more likely it is that Al-Qaeda-linked groups in Lebanon will retaliate," said Amal Saad-Ghara-yeb, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Centre in Beirut. "The government has let the genie out of the bottle and now has no way of getting it back in."

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Mourners beat policeman to death at protesters' funeral

Syrian secret policeman discovered among mourners is beaten to death after he allegedly pulled a gun on the crowd

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday June 05 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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Angry crowds at a funeral held yesterday for protesters killed in the central Syrian city of Hama recognised a secret policeman walking among them and beat him to death, hanging his body from the gates of a cemetery.

The killing was the first such reported incident of its kind. It followed one of the worst attacks on unarmed protesters during Syria's three-month uprising. Details have been emerging of chaos and bloodshed on Friday, the largest day of protests so far calling for the overthrow of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

At least 67 people were killed in Hama on Friday, activists have confirmed, after security forces opened fire with machineguns on about 50,000 demonstrators calling for the downfall of the regime.

The latest killings took the death toll since the uprising began to 1,280, with thousands more injured and at least 12,000 imprisoned.

On a video released yesterday a plainclothes secret [policeman is seen firing a Kalashnikov](#) assault rifle at unarmed demonstrators. The injured are shown being rushed from the scene by other protesters. A burning tyre billows thick black smoke across Hama's main street while protesters throw stones at a building believed to be the site where pro-regime thugs had taken refuge after being overwhelmed by the crowd.

At least 30 funerals took place in Hama yesterday, with residents declaring a three-day period of mourning and all businesses closed.

The attack on the secret policeman occurred as a funeral crowd approached the Freheen cemetery. "Someone recognised him and started shouting, this guy is secret service," said a resident. "The guy apparently pulled his gun and the people attacked him."

According to a witness, the crowd bundled him to the ground, found his identity card from the military secret police and beat him to death, leaving his body hanging by its neck at the gates of the cemetery.

“What the hell was he doing there?” asked a resident. “People are in mourning and are so tense when they take their loved ones to the graveyard.”

Hama is a particularly sensitive city for the regime. In 1982 it was the site of the worst massacre in Syria's modern history when Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, ordered a military assault to crush an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood, killing between 10,000 and 30,000 people.

Friday's protest was the largest in Hama since the current uprising began and was met with deadly force. “They [opened fire directly into the crowd](#) of people,” said an onlooker. “The people didn't flee because we thought that our numbers would make them stop shooting. But they didn't.”

Many of the wounded were taken to the privately run al-Hourani hospital, which protesters surrounded to protect the injured from being arrested by the secret police.

An activist claimed that the secret police have threatened doctors in Hama if they treat injured protesters. “I have spoken to two doctors from two different hospitals

who said they have been warned not to treat the wounded from yesterday's protest," he said.

In Homs, another centre of protest, citizens with arms linked have stood guard outside hospitals while in Duma, close to Damascus, residents formed a human shield around the gates of the Hamdan hospital.

After the killings in Hama [protesters carried an effigy of Assad](#) hanging from a make-shift gallows. "This is the trial of Bashar al-Assad," said a voice on a video of the incident.

"We don't love you, leave us alone, you and your party," the protesters chanted. "This is our country and we don't want Bashar al-Assad."

The protests were dubbed Freedom for Children Friday in memory of the 73 or more children killed by security forces since the unrest began.

The torture and killing in custody of 13-year-old Hamza al-Khateeb prompted global media coverage, with Hamza's picture carried on banners by Syrian protesters across the country.

Combined with crowds in the villages around Hama and up to 100,000 people who took to the streets in Maarat an-Numan, a city further north, as well as protests in Dara'a, Lattakia, Homs and Syria's northeast, Friday's protests involved up to 300,000 people, the largest demonstrations since the uprising started.

“The protests are getting bigger than ever and people have started to co-ordinate better,” said Rami Nakhle, an opposition spokesman. “Now the security forces have to disperse the same protest over and over again.”

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My brother tried to kill you – I'm sorry

A Yemeni living in Britain is to apologise to the UK envoy who survived a bomb

Hugh Macleod and [Richard Kerbaj](#)

Sunday May 02 2010, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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Jennifer Steil and Oxford-educated Tim Torlot, and Omar Ali al-Sulawi, inset

The brother of the suicide bomber who tried to kill Britain's ambassador to Yemen in an Al-Qaeda attack last week is a university student in Liverpool.

Abdul Raqib Al-Salwe, 29, who moved to Britain to study in 2004, has now promised to write to Tim Torlot, the diplomat, to say sorry on behalf of his family.

Torlot narrowly escaped a suicide bomb attack in Sanaa, Yemen's capital, by Al-Salwe's brother Othman, 22, who is believed to have been radicalised by Al-Qaeda.

“I feel ashamed about what happened,” said Al-Salwe, who is completing a PhD in computer network security at Liverpool John Moores University. “I love Britain. For me it's like my home — it is my home. And I am even more ashamed because I live in the country of the ambassador who my brother was trying to kill. I will say to him that my family and I are sorry about what happened and that we find it completely unacceptable.”

In Sanaa last week, his father, Ali Al-Salwe, a successful building contractor, struggled to understand what had turned his studious son into a bomber.

“He was like any other child. He was not introverted. He was good with people,” he said after police called on him to identify Othman's severed head, which had landed on the roof of a house near the scene of the attack last Monday. Although the ambassador was unhurt, three people were injured.

The story of how Othman Al-Salwe fell prey to Islamic extremists and was transformed from a polite, pious boy into a lethal extremist has uncanny similarities to that of Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, the Nigerian student trained by Al-Qaeda in Yemen who tried to blow up an American airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day.

Like Abdulmuttalab, Othman was one of 16 children in an affluent, respectable family of multiple wives. He grew up in Asbahi, a well-to-do suburb of Sanaa, and attended the Ibn al-Ameer secondary school, where his classes included maths, science and the history of Yemen. But outweighing all other subjects was religion.

“He used to watch those channels that sing the Koran,” remembered his brother, Issa, 17. “But he also liked ordinary TV shows.” By his mid-teens, Othman had memorised the entire Koran.

“He was religious, but not extreme. He was a very straight person,” said his father. “He didn’t pursue girls, but he didn’t get into a bad crowd of guys either.”

Yemen’s security forces felt otherwise. In 2005 plainclothes officers raided the Ibn Majed high school, which he had moved to and arrested Othman and several of his friends. They were interrogated at Sanaa’s political prison, where Othman was held for the next two years on suspicion of ties to Al-Qaeda.

When he was released in 2007, his father — who says he visited him every week — was concerned that he might have been radicalised by Al-Qaeda members in the jail.

He wanted to get his son as far away as possible from Sanaa so he sent him to finish his schooling in the family's home village of Selou. Othman was under orders to check in daily with the police.

Eager to see him marry and start a family, his father found him a local bride. Like Abdulmuttalab, Othman had never had a girlfriend: he believed it was sinful to mix with the opposite sex before being engaged. He appeared not to like what he found and after five months the engagement was broken off.

Othman was engaged once more, this time to a cousin, but again the relationship broke down after a few months. In December, a third prospect of an engagement failed after the prospective bride's family rejected his proposal.

“Othman was fasting and praying more often and started telling me and his other brothers that we should hold on to religion,” said his brother Izadeen, 21. “But we didn't have any doubts about him.”

Earlier this year, Othman disappeared. “He didn't talk about prison much but when he did, it was always to say that he could never go back there,” said Izadeen, the last family member to see him alive.

His father reported his disappearance to the police but they were unable to track him down before it was too late. Security sources say he travelled to Marib, an ancient temple city in the desert, where Al-Qaeda is known to have active cells.

“I cried when he died,” said Abeer, Othman’s 10-year-old sister. “I wish I could meet him again.”

Othman’s father still cannot understand how his son’s religious beliefs appear to have been channelled by dedicated terrorists into a suicide attack. “What my son did was shameful and I thank God the ambassador is safe,” his father said.

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Rebel Syrian army asks the West to send guns

‘We will not be taken alive’, declare Syrian fighters who are certain of what awaits them, having turned their backs on Bashar al-Assad's regime

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand

Sunday October 23 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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Under cover of darkness a small group of men, wearing the uniform of an army they had deserted, scrambled over the border from Lebanon back into Syria, trying to

avoid detection by the soldiers with whom they had once served.

Each man carried a Kalashnikov assault rifle and a single hand grenade to be used as a last resort.

“We will not be taken alive,” said one of the fighters, certain of the torture that awaits Syrian soldiers who have turned their guns on the regime of Bashar al-Assad. “If they come for us, we will kill ourselves and them.”

Their leader, known to his men as Musab, carried the only rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launcher possessed by this unit of the Free Syrian Army. A fledgling fighting force of deserters and volunteers, it is pleading for weapons as it seeks to replicate the achievements of Libya’s rebels and bring down the Assad family’s 41-year dictatorship.

Musab said their mission was to take medical supplies into Syria and smuggle an injured civilian into Lebanon. “We were spotted and they opened up on us with all they had,” he said as he described the latest clash between Assad’s troops and the rebels.

However, cheering the death of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and flashing V for victory signs at the television screen, they insisted the world must now turn its attention to them, calling on the West to impose a no-fly zone over Syria and provide them with arms and support.

“The more weapons we have, the more progress we can make,” Quteiba said. “We call on the international community, whether it’s the European Union or the Arab League, to provide us with weapons and ammunition. If we have a no-fly zone and a safe area for our base, the collapse of the regime’s army will be swift. This is an army that serves a person and a family, not a country and its citizens.”

The Free Syrian Army was first announced by Colonel Hussein Harmoush, an army defector, in June. But after his home was razed and several family members killed, Harmoush was captured by the security forces and forced to appear on state-run television denouncing the deserters.

Rebel leaders said a second former Syrian army colonel, Riad al-Asaad (no relation to the ruling family), had taken command of the army, which they claim has between 7,000 and 10,000 troops. The majority of these are inside Syria, with commanders based in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

Many of the rebel leaders in north Lebanon defected after long careers inside Assad’s security state. Quteiba spent 29 years working for military intelligence and was at one point the army’s top sniper.

After four hours pinned down by heavy fire, with grenades exploding around him, Musab radioed back to his commander across the border. “I said: forget freedom, just come and get me!” he recalled, drawing a laugh from his assembled men.

The laughter quickly subsided. Lacking ammunition, heavy weapons or even a clear command-and-control structure, the fighters know each mission could be their last.

“Our strategy is to fight a guerrilla war against Assad’s troops,” said Musab’s commander, known to his unit of about 150 men as Quteiba. “We established the Free Syrian Army to protect the protesters until they reach their goal of toppling this regime.”

Quteiba and his men, now holed up in safe houses in north Lebanon, seem at first glance to be little more than a ragtag band of out-of-work soldiers, scraping by on bread and spaghetti in Lebanon’s poorest, most remote region.

It was the sight of a massacre of civilians in Homs, the central industrial city that has been at the sharp end of the seven-month uprising, which pushed Quteiba to defect.

“They used fire engines to wash the blood off the streets and threw the dead bodies into pick-up trucks without even allowing them to be buried,” he said. “That was the saddest moment.”

Abu Ali, the commander of a rebel unit that attacked a military convoy on its way into Qsair near the Lebanese border last week, also worked for military intelligence under the command of Assef Shawkat, Assad’s brother-in-law.

Describing his orders to shoot to kill protesters in Dara’a, a southern town that was the cradle of the uprising, Abu Ali said he had defected after being deployed to Homs, his home town. “I couldn’t shoot my own people,” he said.

As he described his former life inside military intelligence, including colleagues who tortured children and the daily reports he wrote on neighbours and friends, he received a telephone call from one of his men inside Qsair.

Referring to a mission last week, he said they had managed to stop Syrian troops advancing on the city.

“But then reinforcements came and my men had run out of ammunition so they had to retreat,” Abu Ali said.

It was with some bitterness that he added: “How can we win our freedom without ammunition?”

Islamist tops polls

As Rachid Ghannouchi launched his election campaign in the town of Sidi Bouzid, south of Tunis, the leader of Tunisia’s largest pro-Islamic party told his audience: “This revolution, which took place without any mentor, has overcome fear. Now the only fear is of God,” writes Eileen Byrne.

For Ghannouchi, 70, it was a far cry from Acton, west London, where he lived in exile for 20 years before being welcomed home by crowds at Tunis airport in January.

Today, as Tunisian voters go to the polls for the first time since the revolution that overthrew Zine Ben Ali, the despised former president, opinion polls confirm Ghannouchi’s Nahda party as the frontrunner. Voters are being asked to elect a constitutional assembly that will map out the path to democracy.

It is unclear what Ghannouchi’s brand of Islamism will mean in practice.

He has tried to reassure voters that his party will not attack Tunisia’s lucrative tourist industry by attempting to ban alcohol or insisting that women wear the veil.

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Rebels acquire rockets to blast Syrian tanks

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday April 15 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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SYRIA'S ceasefire was breached yesterday hours before the United Nations Security Council unanimously voted to send observers to the country.

Bashar al-Assad's regime resumed shelling opposition-held areas in Homs and was said to have killed at least four people when troops opened fire on a funeral in Aleppo. Backers of the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) revealed they had acquired Grad rockets to attack tanks and heavy armour.

The security council condemned breaches on both sides as it voted to send in unarmed observers after long wrangling to make the resolution acceptable to Russia.

The FSA which has previously relied on assault rifles and rocket propelled grenades was convinced its new weaponry would make a difference. “We believe these weapons will change the current military equation,” said Abu Assaf, a captain who defected and now leads a unit of the rebels’ Farouk Brigade in Rastan, north of Homs.

The weapons include B10 shoulder-launched anti-tank missiles and larger Grad rockets that can be launched individually or stacked together for multiple launch.

The acquisition of Grad rockets was confirmed last week by an opposition member instrumental in helping funnel money to the rebels. He stressed that no more than 10 units had access to such heavier weapons.

Private donations from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia make up the majority of funds received by the FSA so far, he said, though both the Saudi and Qatari governments had pledged official support for arming the rebels.

While most FSA members continue to lament their lack of ammunition, a Lebanese arms dealer said he had been left with a stockpile of unsold Kalashnikovs after rebel fighters across the border had begun seeking out heavier weapons.

But not all FSA units have the rockets they say they need to target the regime's tanks and artillery still deployed in and around several urban centres, including Dara'a in the far south and Homs in the north, in violation of Kofi Annan's United Nations-Arab League-backed ceasefire, which came into force on Thursday.

"The army is still using artillery and tanks against us and if this continues we will be forced to retreat because we don't have the weapons to fight," said Ahmed, a 23-year-old fighter speaking from Khirbet al-Jouz, a village near the border with Turkey.

Gunfire and explosions could be heard in the background from clashes between rebels and Assad's troops.

Youth activists heralded the return of peaceful protests on Friday as tens of thousands of Syrians once again took to the streets to sing, dance and demand the end of the regime.

"Today was a real morale boost," said Rami Jarrah, co-director of a Cairo-based group supporting citizen journalists inside Syria. "We've seen a renewed spirit to demonstrate peacefully and the ceasefire has been generally effective."

At least five people were killed by Assad's security forces on Friday and another death was reported in Homs yesterday. Thousands of soldiers and armed security

men remained on the streets in and around the capital, shooting and beating protesters.

The opposition group Local Co-ordination Committees reported 771 protests on Friday. Far fewer people died than during the previous fortnight where the daily toll, mostly caused by Assad's crackdown on civilians, often exceeded 100.

Since nominally agreeing to the ceasefire on March 26, the regime drastically escalated attacks on rebels and civilians alike, killing 1,403 people up to April 12,

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Rebels close in on Syria's second city

A diplomatic breakthrough on the country's future follows the capture of large areas in the northwest by the rebels

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday July 01 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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IN A dramatic breakthrough Kofi Annan, the United Nations-Arab League envoy, appeared close to brokering a peace deal for Syria last night. The news came as rebels fighting to topple the Assad family's 42-year dictatorship seized control of large swathes of territory along Syria's northwest border with Turkey. The fighters are rapidly acquiring new weapons.

Under the UN-Arab League deal a transitional government, consisting of members of the Assad regime and opposition figures, would be formed by "mutual consent", Annan said. Constitutional reform and free elections would follow.

It was not initially clear what the fate of President Bashar al-Assad would be. Russia, his principal ally, refused to back a provision that called for him to step down. Western diplomats have recently floated the “dacha option” in which he would leave Damascus and reappear in a comfortable suburb of Moscow.

Few expect him to renounce power. A diplomat close to the peace talks in Geneva said last night: “He will fight to the last drop of blood.”

Assad declared the country was “at war” last week as the death toll from his crackdown passed 15,000 following a two-day bombardment of Duma, near Damascus, in which activists said at least 41 people died.





The regime denies the death toll, claiming it is fighting “armed terrorists” sponsored by foreign governments.

Assad’s declaration follows reports that the regime is losing control of large swathes of territory close to the Turkish border. A reporter travelled for The Sunday Times to towns and villages across an area 80 miles long and 25 miles wide north and southwest of Aleppo, Syria’s largest city last week. Dozens of burnt-out tanks, armoured vehicles and abandoned jeeps littered the roads and many villages were devoid of any police or government presence.

Instead, armed rebels patrolled in pick-up trucks, some with mounted machineguns, while many schools in Idlib and Aleppo provinces were flying the green-striped flag of Syria from the days before the ruling Ba’ath party seized power in 1970.

“We have liberated most of Aleppo’s countryside and so our next target will be Aleppo city itself,” said Abu Omar, a commander with the Free Men of the North brigade, a unit allied to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). He was speaking in Daret Ezzah, 20 miles northwest of Aleppo.

“We are close to controlling all the villages and towns along the Turkish-Syrian border, which means we can get more and better weapons.”

Last month a reporter from the American newspaper group McClatchy visited rebels along the plains of the Orontes river, suggesting opposition-held territory extends further south to within 20 miles of Hama.

Fighters from the Free Men of the North took control of a Syrian military base in Daret Ezzah last week, seizing anti-aircraft guns before burning it to the ground. They later broadcast images of a massacre of 25 men, who they claimed were pro-regime militia.

Following the downing of a Turkish jet last weekend, FSA leaders hope that Ankara will relax controls on weapons flowing across Turkey's border into Syria.

“For a long time, Turkey was preventing the delivery of specialist weapons to us, like anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft guns,” said Abu Omar. “FSA leaders in Turkey tell me that has now changed.”

In Armanaz, 40 miles southwest of Aleppo where rebels drove out Assad's forces on June 20, a fighter with the Idlib Martyrs brigade said the opposition had already acquired more sophisticated weapons.

“Over the last week we have got hold of anti-tank missiles and can now destroy the same number of tanks in a few days as we used to in a few months,” said Abu Mohammed, a 25-year-old farmer who joined the rebels after he said his two brothers were killed by Syrian troops.

“The FSA is expanding rapidly in our region,” said Ibrahim, 26, another farmer who joined rebels fighting in Deir Jammal, north of Aleppo. He now plants home-made mines among the olive trees he has farmed his whole life.

“We are now hundreds of fighters, but I’m sure if there is a secure shelter at the Turkish border then thousands of soldiers and secret police will defect,” he said.

Recent US reports say CIA officers are operating secretly in southern Turkey, co-ordinating delivery of arms to Syrian rebels paid for by the Gulf states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Reuters news agency has suggested British special forces could also be involved.

Members of the opposition Syrian national council said Turkish army vehicles had delivered anti-tank weapons to the border, a claim denied by Ankara.

Assad’s forces, incurring serious losses while fighting a highly motivated guerilla insurgency, appear to have given up on imposing effective control over Syria’s rural northwest.

Instead they bombard big cities such as Idlib and Rastan from afar and are turning to airpower to punish opposition-held areas. Assad’s Russian-supplied helicopter gunships pounded Saraqeb, a strategic town on the main highway through Idlib, yesterday.

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Sisters' feud splits Assads

In an exclusive interview, the sister-in-law of Syria's 'thug in chief' calls for the overthrow of the brutal regime

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand

Sunday June 19 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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A bitter family feud that has divided Syria's ruling family culminated yesterday in a demand by the sister-in-law of the country's new strongman for the overthrow of the regime.

Maher al-Assad, 43, has become the most feared man in Syria, leading his elite troops around the country to kill protesters threatening his family's 41-year dictatorship, while President Bashar al-Assad, his elder brother, remains silent.

In her first interview since the Syrian crisis began, Majd al-Jadaan, Maher's sister-in-law, told The Sunday Times that her family had been torn apart by her sister Manal's marriage into the Assad clan.

She said she had fought with the short-tempered Maher, a battle that eventually left her without family or friends after being forced into exile.

“It hurts so much to see innocent people getting killed for demanding freedom and it hurts even more to know the murderers,” she said.

“If I could speak to my sister I’d ask her to open her eyes and heart to see the truth. I’d tell her to stop being brainwashed by the lies and return to her good and loving nature and help stop the bloodshed.”

Jadaan, 48, said she was forced to flee Damascus in August 2008. Maher turned the family against her after years of arguments, she claims. She is now living with her five-year-old son in Washington.

Jadaan said she had been stripped of all her assets, including the Syrian international school she had founded in Damascus, and she had left behind her grown-up daughter and son.

“I’ve never believed a word of what they say,” she said of the Assad family.

Jadaan said Manal, 41, had first met Maher in Damascus when she was 14. He pursued her for years, despite her father’s efforts to keep his daughter from what he feared would be a dangerous match.

“My father did not like this marriage and nor did I,” Jadaan said. “He passed away 10 days after her wedding, which he refused to attend.”

Maher, who has two daughters, appears to have been a moody and difficult character in the years Jadaan knew him. “He was a bad-tempered guy, shy and polite, but at the same time when he got angry he was scary and didn’t make sense,” she said. “He is a very stubborn man and there’s no way to make him change his ideas.”



Majd al-Jadaan says Maher al-Assad is a murderer (Handout)

As commander of the elite Fourth Division, Maher, described as the “thug-in-chief” of the Assad inner circle, is leading the brutal wave of repression across Syria.

“He’s the one doing the regime’s dirty work,” said Radwan Ziadeh, director of the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies.

Since the uprising began in mid-March the president has failed to address the Syrian people directly. He made a televised speech to parliament on March 30, lectured his newly appointed cabinet a few days later and has not been seen in public since.

Instead, Syrians have been receiving Maher's message loud and clear. He has led assaults across the country, most recently in the north, driving thousands of terrified people into Turkey.

The brutality inflicted, according to witness accounts and videos, has been devastating. Bodies have been piled into trucks or left to rot on the streets. Homes and schools have been destroyed and crops burnt.

On Friday security forces again opened fire on protesters, killing at least 19 and taking the death toll in the three-month uprising past 1,600. The regime rejects the figure, saying 500 members of the security forces have been killed in an attempt to crush a rebellion by gangs and religious extremists.

Maher also commands the Republican Guard, responsible for protecting the capital, and according to analysts wields considerable power over Syria's large network of secret police and pro-regime thugs. Family tensions will be further stoked if, as expected, Dayr az Zawr, the sprawling tribal city on the banks of the Euphrates, becomes the next target of Maher's wrath. His wife's family comes from there.

Military forces have been building up around the perimeter of the city, which for the past month has seen huge anti-regime demonstrations with protesters tearing up pictures of Assad.

Jadaan was able to confirm that a chubby man in a recently released video who is standing among uniformed soldiers and taking photographs of dozens of corpses is Maher.

“He was always a mysterious man, the kind that gives you the feeling he would love to hide who he is inside his heart. He never gives you a solid answer about anything and also never shows his real intentions,” she said.

- The Foreign Office yesterday urged all Britons to leave Syria immediately.

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VIDEO

Syria saves harshest torture for children

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday April 08 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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THOUSANDS of Syrians have vanished in secret prisons where not even children are spared torture, according to a forthcoming report by Human Rights Watch.

The report documents at least 20 detention facilities in a network in which several thousand people taken into custody in the past year have gone missing. Many are feared dead.

“The level of torture is not comparable to any other conflict I’ve worked on,” said Anna Neistat of Human Rights Watch. “There are a disproportionate number of children trapped in this system. Children are tortured alongside adults and are even subject to more brutal torture as interrogators believe children could crack faster and give them names.”

Tens of thousands of Syrians have been consigned to prison since protests against President Bashar al-Assad’s regime began in March last year, with “99.9%” suffering degrees of torture, said Neistat. Children are no exception.

The report is being drafted as Assad's forces escalate attacks on rebel forces in the run-up to a United Nations-brokered ceasefire due to come into force on Tuesday.

Since agreeing on March 27 to accept the ceasefire, the regime has intensified its onslaught. At least 74 civilians were killed in renewed shelling of rebel held towns yesterday, according to opposition activists.

In its report, due out this month, Human Rights Watch will say that children "were held in the same facilities and in the same conditions as the adults, and subjected to equally brutal beatings and other forms of abuse".

Hossam, 13, from Talkalakh, a town west of Homs, said that after taking part in early protests, he was tortured by a "terrifying person" wearing "black and black" who drove a screwdriver into his big toenail before ripping it out with pliers. "He was shouting at me, 'You want freedom? You want to topple the regime?' And he beat me. They asked me, 'What is your name? What is your father's name? Where are you from? Why did you join the protest?'

He showed me a video and said, 'Isn't that you?' I said no and he beat me. 'Isn't that you?' No. He beat me. 'Isn't that you?' Yes. He beat me more."

Hossam's nightmare began when he was arrested on his way home from school last May. Blindfolded and beaten by soldiers at a checkpoint, he and his cousin, also 13,

were bundled into a car and taken to a military security building about 45 minutes away.

“In the cell there was me and my cousin and about 50 other people. We were the only children,” said Hossam, who was interviewed in north Lebanon after crossing the border with relatives.

“The cell was really small and smelled like sewage. There were bugs and rats in it.”

Human Rights Watch has calculated, on the basis of interviews with hundreds of survivors as well as defectors from the security services, that up to one in five detainees are minors.

After hearing the screams of the men under interrogation and the prayers of fellow prisoners, Hossam said, he believed he would suffer the same fate as Hamza al-Khateeb, a 13-year-old boy from Dera'a whose death under torture last May became a rallying cry for the opposition.

Hossam said: “I told them, ‘I’m a kid, why are you beating me?’ He said, ‘You’re young? So why are you in a protest?’ I told him, ‘To express my opinion.’”

“They electrocuted me in my leg and in my chest. I passed out for about 15 minutes. Then I felt my soul come back to me and I thanked God I did not die.”

Mohammed, a 16-year-old from Duma, near Damascus, said he was tortured with electric shocks after being arrested by members of Syria's air force intelligence in January and held until early March.

“I was young, so the security men were not very hard with me. But I got my share of torture,” he said. “I was beaten and whipped with cable two or three times a day.

“One time I told the interrogator I wanted a country for all Syrians, not for one family. He reacted very badly and told some soldiers to electrocute me on my chest, hands, legs, neck and on my stomach.”

Navi Pillay, the UN human rights commissioner, said Syrian forces had targeted and tortured children and that Assad “could simply issue an order to stop the killings and the killings would stop”.

She added that the UN security council now had enough reliable information to warrant referring Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity. As Syria is not party to the ICC, a referral can only come through the security council. But any such move is likely to face obstruction from Russia and China, which have twice vetoed resolutions that condemned the Assad regime's crackdown.

Amnesty International recently identified 31 methods of torture used by the regime including the “tyre” – a large one into which the victim is forced and beaten on the

feet, and the “flying carpet”, where the prisoner is strapped face-up on a wooden board that is bent to stretch his spine. Other techniques include a form of crucifixion in which prisoners are hung from a wall by their wrists.

“The biggest lie of the regime is that there are no orders to torture,” said a former member of air force intelligence, now a defector to the rebels. “I saw an old man with a six-year-old girl brought to the interrogation department. Just five minutes of what she saw there, the screams she heard, will surely traumatise her for the rest of

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VIDEO

Syria silences family over tortured teenager's body

A YouTube video showing the mutilated corpse of a 13-year-old boy who was allegedly killed by secret police is causing outrage among Syrians

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand

Sunday May 29 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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The death of a 13-year-old boy whose body was returned horribly mutilated to his parents last week has prompted an outcry in Syria at the widespread use of torture by President Bashar al-Assad's security forces.

Hamza al-Khateeb was arrested on April 29 by secret police during a protest in Saida, a town near the southern city of Dera'a, a centre of anti-government protests, according to activists.

His corpse apparently bore the scars of brutal torture: lacerations, bruises and burns to his feet, elbows, face and knees. The injuries appeared to be consistent with the use of electric shock devices and being whipped with a cable.

His eyes were swollen and black and there were identical bullet wounds where he had been shot through both arms, the activists said.

They alleged that there was a deep, dark burn mark on his chest. His neck was broken and his penis cut off.

In a video of the body uploaded to YouTube, a commentary stated: "A month had passed by with his family not knowing where he is, or if or when he will be released. He was released to his family as a corpse. Upon examining his body, the signs of torture were very clear."

The original clip has since been removed, but a version with Hamza's mutilated genitals blurred was still running last night.

Since the video became public, Hamza's parents have been visited by the secret police and warned not to talk to the press.

Ali al-Khateeb, Hamza's father, was arrested late yesterday, said his wife, after the secret police demanded he tell state media that Hamza was killed by extremist

rebels.

Responding to the video, Syria's only private television station, the pro-regime al-Dunya, broadcast an interview with a forensic pathologist from the Tishreen military hospital in Damascus. Dr Akram al-Shaar, who claimed to have supervised Hamza's autopsy, said he had found no signs of torture.

Yesterday The Sunday Times spoke to an activist in Dera'a who confirmed that Hamza had been among 51 protesters detained on April 29. He said they had formed a human shield to try to prevent the security forces from attacking Saida, three miles east of Dera'a.

"They were all arrested by the anti-terrorism branch of the air force intelligence," he said.

"They were all alive when they went into prison but we received 13 bodies back this week and all had been tortured. The air force intelligence are notorious for torture — they're barbarians. We're expecting another dozen bodies back in the coming days."

By yesterday afternoon a Facebook page dedicated to Hamza already had 15,000 followers, under the title "We are all Hamza al-Khateeb", a deliberate echo of the online campaign on behalf of Khaled Said, the young Egyptian whose death at the hands of the police last year was one of the triggers for mass protests that led to the downfall of Hosni Mubarak.

The severity of Hamza's injuries in custody have shocked Syrians who have seen the video footage. "People here are really furious about what happened to Hamza and this is another sign that the secret police and the authorities are criminals who cannot be trusted to make any reforms," said a local person who travels widely in the Dera'a region.

At least one other body bearing signs of torture was returned to his family in Dera'a last week. On another YouTube video the body of Murshed Aba Zaid, 18, is shown along with what appears to be his military service record book. It includes an official stamp from a military court excusing Murshed from service on the grounds that he is mentally handicapped.

Murshed was shot in the face by security forces outside his home in Izraa, 19 miles north of Dera'a, in the first week of May, but underwent successful surgery, according to testimony given on the video and corroborated by family members.

The secret police broke into Izraa hospital and arrested him. His body was presented to his family last Tuesday.

His neck was broken, as was his nose, according to those who examined the body. His face and neck showed black burn marks, as did the soles of his feet, consistent with electric shock torture. A gaping gunshot wound was visible in his side. A massive scar ran across his belly, which was bound with the crudest of stitches.

Accounts from survivors who have been released from detention also attest to a systematic campaign of brutality and torture by the secret police.

A college student held in a crowded makeshift cell inside a power station at Baniyas, on Syria's Mediterranean coast, recently described his treatment. The station had been converted, along with the local sports stadium, into an overflow jail after mass arrests left the prison full to bursting.

"I was being beaten all over my body with fists and boots and sticks. I was bleeding and I thought I was going to die," he said.

With nothing valuable to tell his torturers, he was released and left to limp along the road back to his village as a warning to local people. He was naked, covered in blood and had a badly broken hand.

Yet despite the regime's campaign of killing and intimidation, with more than 1,000 unarmed protesters shot dead and more than 10,000 citizens thrown into prison, Syria's popular uprising continues. On Friday thousands took to the streets.

Torture in Syrian prisons, long known as some of the worst in the world, is now "rampant" according to a report by Human Rights Watch.

In interviews with 19 Syrian detainees last month, including two women and three teenagers, its researchers found that all but two had been tortured, including being

whipped with cable and stunned with electric-shock devices while drenched in cold water.

Amnesty International has reported cases of detainees forced to lick blood off the floor of a prison and others who drank from a lavatory bowl after being deprived of food and water for three days.

“When you have mass execution and torture it rises to the level of a crime against humanity,” said Ricken Patel, director of Avaaz, which has been documenting human rights abuses in the country.

“This is a campaign of mass terrorism and intimidation, horribly tortured people sent back to communities by a regime not trying to cover up crimes but to advertise them.”

The reopening of the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt will significantly strengthen Hamas, the hardline Islamic party that rules the territory, Israeli officials claim.

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Syrian deserters clash with loyal troops

Government troops came under fire from deserting soldiers who vowed to protect civilians after a high death toll this weekend

Hugh Macleod in Beirut

Sunday May 01 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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Hundreds of Syrian troops yesterday joined opponents of the regime as its forces stormed a rebel mosque. An army division led by the brother of President Bashar al-Assad seized the mosque in the southern city of Dera'a using tanks and helicopters.

Paratroopers landed on the roof of the Omari mosque, which had been occupied by anti-regime protesters, and snipers took up positions on nearby buildings.

The government troops came under fire from deserting soldiers who vowed to protect civilians after the deaths of 66 protesters this weekend. The deserters were said to be from the Syrian army's Fifth Division, largely conscripts from the majority

Sunni population. Their attacks on the elite force, drawn from the minority Alawite population, raised fears of a sectarian conflict that could divide the army.

More than 560 people have died during six weeks of protests and at least 100 have been killed in Dera'a.

Last week the city was sealed off by the army, with electricity, water and telephone lines cut. Another witness reported that soldiers and secret police raided the home of Sheikh Ahmad al-Sayasneh, the imam of the mosque, who is accused of inciting the protests. His son was reported to have been killed after refusing to say where he was.

This weekend Washington imposed sanctions on leading members of Assad's regime. The European Union is pushing for an arms embargo.

Further reading:

[Assad's paratroops hit rebel mosque as soldiers defect](#)

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Syrian police kill marchers protesting over child torture

The savage torture of schoolboys who daubed an uprising slogan on a wall prompted thousands to demand the downfall of President Assad's regime

Hugh Macleod, Beirut and our correspondent in Syria

Sunday May 08 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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It began with an act of savagery. Rounded up by Syrian secret police for daubing the slogan of the Arab spring uprisings on walls in Dera'a — “The people want to topple the regime!” — the boys were taken to the local political security office, which is commanded by a cousin of President Bashar al-Assad.

There, in a gloomy interrogation room, the children, aged between 10 and 15, were beaten and burnt with cigarettes, and had their fingernails pulled out.

The boys' torture in this restive southwestern city lit the spark for nationwide protests that brought tens of thousands of people onto the streets again last week to

demand the downfall of Assad's regime.

In Homs, in the west of the country, at least 15 protesters were killed when police in plain clothes opened fire on a crowd. Two witnesses said they had continued to fire even after protesters hid behind army vehicles. This prompted soldiers to shoot back at the police.

State television said an army officer and four police had been killed in Homs by a "criminal gang". In Hama, 30 miles to the north, where the former president Hafez al-Assad massacred between 10,000 and 30,000 people in 1982, security forces killed six more. The total death toll in the seven-week uprising has passed 600.

Yesterday, having partially lifted its 10-day siege of Dera'a, where at least 364 civilians have been killed, the military launched a fresh assault on Baniyas, a port city on the Mediterranean coast that has been a centre of anti-government protests. Troops and tanks were reported to have entered the city in three places and reports said six people, including three women protesters, had been shot dead.

As well as being met with live fire on the streets, Syrian protesters are facing mass arrests, torture, forced disappearances and hostage-taking as one of the world's most repressive regimes demonstrates the lengths to which it will go to stay in power.

At least 7,000 Syrians have been arbitrarily arrested in a nationwide crackdown, according to Insan, a Syrian human-rights watchdog. In Dera'a alone, state news reported that 500 people were arrested in one day, with security forces going from door to door and seizing any male aged between 15 and 40.

The regime has also begun arresting family and friends of leading activists, holding them hostage in an attempt to persuade opposition members to turn themselves in.

In the coastal city of Jabla, security forces raided the house and threatened the wife of Dr Zakraiya al-Akkad, who went on the run after giving interviews about civilian deaths in the city.

Detainees face what Human Rights Watch described recently as “rampant torture”. Ali, who was caught during a protest in Mezze, a suburb of Damascus, was taken to the notorious air force security branch in Bab Touma, a stone's throw away from the Old City.

His interrogator had video footage showing Ali chanting for freedom. “He got up and walked behind me, grabbed my hair and slammed my face into the table,” said Ali. “He was really angry.”

His hands were tied behind his back while he was punched in the face repeatedly. “He told me to confess I was there,” he said.

He was blindfolded and driven to another prison, where, still unable to see, he was beaten, pushed down stairs and had cigarettes stubbed out on his back.

After eight days in a windowless 6ft by 6ft underground dungeon, Ali was freed without charge.

“The worst is you don’t know what will happen. You and your family have no idea what is going on,” he said.

“I’ve seen personally the real face of security, and it is much uglier than I thought. I will protest again because now I really realise what freedom means. If we give up now we will all be arrested again anyway.”

Reem Haddad, of the Syrian information ministry, denied any protesters had been killed on Friday and said the government welcomed a planned visit by United Nations human-rights officials. “The Syrian government is not worried, because there is nothing wrong,” she told the Al Jazeera news network.

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Syrian resistance musters for Assad showdown

A movement including rebel soldiers who have defected and armed civilians is now stepping up its attacks on Syria's security forces

Hugh Macleod in North Lebanon

Sunday November 27 2011, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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Appalled by orders to shoot unarmed civilians protesting against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Syria's president, First Lieutenant Abu Yazan Ayati resolved to defect.

But before he could act, he faced one last battle — against the group he wanted to join: the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

“They were protecting protesters when we clashed, and after that I couldn't take it any more,” said Abu Yazan. “People used to fear me and hate me, but after I defected, people liked me. I became a hope for them.”

Abu Yazan, speaking at a safe house in northern Lebanon where he is recovering from his wounds, said he fought for a month and 10 days with the FSA's Khalid bin al-Walid brigade, which is named after a shrine in his home city of Homs to the historical companion of the prophet Muhammad.

Once they have made their intentions clear, defecting soldiers such as Abu Yazan are often sheltered by the local co-ordination committees that have been organising protests and monitoring the bloody crackdown since the uprising against the Assad regime began eight months ago. It is then arranged for them to join the FSA.

The organisation, a growing rebel movement of soldiers who have defected and armed civilians, is now stepping up attacks on the regime's security forces. It is convinced that with more than 6,000 people killed — the huge majority of them civilians — the Assad regime can be toppled only by force. The regime says 1,100 members of its security forces have been killed by “armed gangs” or “terrorist groups”.

In its most audacious attack to date, about 30 FSA members recently stormed the headquarters of air force intelligence in Harasta, a restive suburb of Damascus, killing guards, assassinating officers and occupying the building for several hours before burning it down and beating a tactical retreat.

“Air force intelligence is well known as the worst of all security branches. It is one of Assad’s dens and yet we showed we could successfully target it,” said Abu Ali, an FSA commander, speaking from Syria. He said the operation had been aided by soldiers at the base sympathetic to the FSA. It was members of air force intelligence — led by Jamil Hassan, a member of the Alawite sect and part of the Assad family’s inner circle — who activists say tortured 13-year-old Hamza al-Khateeb. The teenager’s death in May, which was reported by The Sunday Times, helped expose the brutality of Assad’s crackdown.

The resort to armed protest is deeply troubling to Syria’s intellectual opposition, however. Louay Hussein, a leading opponent of the government, travelled to Beirut last week to tell journalists that despite all the regime’s broken promises of reform, a transition with it is better than the civil war he fears has already begun.

Riad al-Asaad, the head of the FSA, rejected fears of sectarian violence between majority Sunnis and the minority ruling Alawites.

“It is our right to defend the Syrian people and our families,” said Asaad in an interview from his base in southern Turkey. “There will be no military revolution in Syria and there will not be a civil war.”

Abu Yazan also insisted there was no problem between the Sunnis in Homs and its Alawites — an offshoot of Shi’te Islam — despite several reports of sectarian lynchings over the past few months. But he said the FSA had no qualms about killing

members of the security services and the shabiha — pro-Assad and mainly Alawite armed thugs.

Abu Yazan said he and 14 other FSA members used rocket-propelled grenades to disable four tanks at a base used to shell Bab Amr, a neighbourhood under siege in Homs, before gunning down several shabiha.

Though impossible to verify because of a ban on journalists working freely in Syria, such attacks are consistent with YouTube footage showing tanks on fire in Homs, a tough industrial city. More protesters and security forces have been killed there than anywhere else during the uprising against the Assad family's 41-year dictatorship.

“The orders from our superior officers were to shoot to kill because we were told the protesters in the street were terrorists,” said Abu Yazan, who led 14 troops for five months in Homs before defecting in August.

“We saw that people were protesting peacefully for freedom. We didn't kill any of them, but I knew soldiers who had no problem killing the protesters. As soon as we got our first break, I told my men to leave and not to come back.”

Paul Moreira, a French journalist who spent two weeks under cover with the FSA, likened the group to the French resistance of the 1940s — short on command and control but long on purpose.

“There are different groups led by different commanders that may not agree on strategy and tactics or the degree of fighting, but they are all aiming in the same direction, with the same political purpose, and they will all come together if they one day march on Damascus,” he said.

Moreira said the unit of about 250 FSA members that he was with consisted of soldiers and civilians, and enjoyed widespread support from locals.

The FSA would attack Assad’s troops on a daily basis, said Moreira: “In some places in northwest Syria the FSA really seemed to be in control, at least in some villages for some days, before the army comes to chase them out.”

The FSA number between 8,000 and 15,000, and possess only light arms.

“We were on the street to protect the protesters when we saw a helicopter above us. A few minutes later the shells landed. We were nine people. Seven were killed. One had both his legs amputated and I got shrapnel in my shins,” said Abu Yazan. “But as soon as it’s healed, I’m going back to Syria, back to Homs.”

An Arab states’ plan to cut commercial ties with Syria and freeze its assets under sanctions is to be discussed by the Arab League today.

Additional reporting: Annasofie Flamand and Rami Aysha



Pregnant Mona al-Gharib has been abducted in Egypt (Thaer al-Nashef)



Activist's wife abducted

The 25-year-old wife of a Syrian opposition activist was kidnapped in Cairo on Friday by Syrian intelligence agents, her husband claimed yesterday.

Thaer al-Nashef, a Syrian dissident based in Egypt, said his wife, Mona al-Gharib, right, who is six months pregnant, went missing while on her way to visit her parents. The Syrian embassy in Egypt denied the claim.

Nashef later received an anonymous text message from an Egyptian phone number saying: "We have your wife and we are going to sexually assault her so that you learn not to insult your masters again." He also received threats to kill her and throw her body in the Nile if he did not stop talking to the press.

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VIDEO

Syrian troops defect as shelling drives thousands to Turkey

There is further evidence that the regime's policy of killing peaceful demonstrators is deepening cracks within Syria's military

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand

Sunday June 12 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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Unlike most Syrian soldiers, Sergeant-Major Ali Hassan Satouf volunteered to join the army. He believed that he was protecting Syria from enemies abroad, primarily Israel.

When he was sent to the port refinery of Baniyas to fight “terrorist armed groups” he did not hesitate — until he realised that he had been deceived.

“We didn’t find any terrorist groups,” he said in a video released last week. “We found only peaceful demonstrations.”

Satouf looks every bit the professional soldier: well-built, confident, steely-eyed. The video, shot by Syrian activists sheltering him, is one of five recent accounts of defection by members of Syria’s security forces.

The sergeant-major describes how soldiers broke into homes in a village and stole private property before arresting dozens of men, prompting women to pelt them with stones.

“In response to the stone-throwing, we were ordered to open fire ... and we had a massacre. Four women were killed.”

Satouf’s mind was made up: “I have defected from the army,” he says.

His testimony is further evidence that the regime’s policy of killing peaceful demonstrators is deepening cracks within Syria’s military that first appeared in April during the siege of the southern town of Dera’a.

Yesterday, the military broadened its offensive in the northwest, using attack helicopters and tanks to pound Jisr al-Shughour and Ma’arrat al-Numan, where there have been large anti-regime protests over the past week.

Activists said at least 23 people had been killed by shelling in Ma'arrat al-Numan. There were no confirmed casualties among Jisr al-Shughour's 50,000 residents, most of whom fled before the assault.



Syrian security forces attacking protesters in the city of Homs

The regime deployed dozens of tanks and thousands of troops to the northwest after claiming that 120 security officers had been killed in Jisr al-Shughour by “armed gangs” and that residents were pleading for the army to intervene. Residents contacted by telephone told a different story.

“They have burnt down all the crops and the villagers are fleeing,” said a man who escaped on Friday to the Turkish border with four injured companions. He said the army had opened fire on departing villagers.

A senior Turkish official said 4,300 Syrians had crossed into Turkey. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, accused the Syrian president, Bashar a-Assad,

whom he once described as a brother, of “savagery”.

“All the accusations of residents sheltering gangs are false,” said the man from Jisr al-Shughour. “And we never asked the army for help or to enter our town. It is them firing on us.”

Several residents said the assault began after clashes between members of the military secret police, some of whom refused to open fire on protesters.

SANA, the state news agency, said that gunmen in military uniform were responsible for the killing of the 120 security personnel in Jisr al-Shughour. The uniforms, it said, had been stolen.

The regime has sought to play down a video that shows Syrian soldiers beating shackled prisoners and placing weapons on corpses which appear to have been shot at point blank range.

Residents also reported attacks on Al Serminiyye, a village three miles south of Jisr al-Shughour, and on Ariha, 18 miles to the east.

After a large anti-regime demonstration in Binnish, in the northwest, state television said the town was sheltering 100 armed men. “We fear that they will use this as an excuse to attack Binnish like they did Jisr al-Shughour,” said an activist in the town.



A demonstrator flees security forces in Jisr al-Shughour

The military deployment in the northwest was reminiscent of 1982 when the government ordered an assault against the Muslim Brotherhood, killing between 10,000 and 30,000 people in Hama.

The White House condemned the military assault last week as “an outrageous use of violence”.

The military escalation came amid ever widening protests against the Assad family dictatorship that has held power for four decades.

Tens of thousands took to streets across Syria on Friday, burning images of Assad, calling for the downfall of his regime and denouncing Russia and China for blocking a United Nations resolution condemning the violence.

Rights activists say at least 1,590 people have been killed in the crackdown on prodemocracy protests since mid-March. The regime rejects the figures, saying

instead that about 500 members of the security forces have died.

On Friday the largest number of demonstrations yet was held in and around Damascus, the capital. A resident of Qaboun, in the west of the city, said troops from the Republican Guard, an elite division under the command of Maher al-Assad, the president's brother, had opened fire on protesters, killing at least four and injuring 50.

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Syrian who filmed Colvin attack is held

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand , Beirut

Sunday April 01 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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A SYRIAN opposition activist who filmed the army assault on Homs in which Marie Colvin, The Sunday Times correspondent, was killed has been arrested and may have been tortured, according to colleagues.

Ali Mahmoud Othman, 34, was detained in Syria's northern city of Aleppo last week. He had worked alongside Colvin and Paul Conroy, this newspaper's photographer, under bombardment in the besieged district of Baba Amr in February.

"Ali is very popular — whenever he walks into a room he becomes a focus," said Conroy, who was injured after the media centre in which he and Colvin were staying took a direct hit from a rocket on February 22. Colvin died with Rémi Ochlik, a French photographer.

“Ali is pretty fearless, always on the go. He speaks great English and he seems to have found his calling in citizen journalism,” said Conroy, who is recovering in London from his injuries.

William Hague, the foreign secretary, denounced Othman’s arrest and reports of his torture yesterday. “I call on the Syrian authorities to release Mr Othman and other political prisoners immediately,” he said. “The Syrian regime will be held responsible for Mr Othman’s safety and his treatment.”

Friends said Othman had been arrested after he tried to organise a media centre and protest movement in Aleppo, Syria’s second city. Security forces seized his mobile phone and laptop, prompting fears that more opposition activists could be identified and arrested.

In one of Othman’s video clips showing the shelling of Baba Amr last October, he is heard shouting above intense explosions and gunfire: “Here are the troops of Assad. Look with your bare eyes. Here is Baba Amr being shelled.”

In another clip in mid- February, Othman carried on filming as a rocket hit the top of the building he was in. The camera shuddered as a huge explosion sent rubble falling from the roof and smoke pouring from the windows.

“Bombing the media centre in Baba Amr!” he shouted. A week later Colvin was killed when a rocket slammed into the ground floor of the building, where she and five other foreign journalists were staying.

Othman reported live from Baba Amr for overseas broadcasters, describing the humanitarian conditions inside the city as President Bashar al-Assad’s troops rained down fire for more than a month, killing at least 700 people and injuring thousands of others.

Recalling working closely with Othman while reporting from Homs in December, Monica Prieto, a Spanish journalist, said: “He had no background in journalism and learnt by watching others. But he knew from the beginning how important it is to document events.”

Described as a man of great courage from humble origins, Othman worked as a greengrocer before the uprising. Prieto said he was determined the regime would not be able to kill with the same impunity as when the former president, Hafez al-Assad, bombarded nearby Hama in 1982 to put down an uprising. Up to 20,000 people died.

“He was always the first in and the last to leave,” said Prieto. “He was one of those who took the greatest risks. On the last day in Homs when everybody left, he stayed. He said that if there are people who cannot leave, I have to stay. So he stayed in Homs during the invasion at great risk and continued to document events.”

Several activists from Baba Amr escaped after the withdrawal of the opposition Free Syrian Army but the regime now appears to be systematically hunting them down.

A week ago Jassim Khaled Diab, an activist who helped trapped and wounded civilians to escape Baba Amr, was detained outside the village of Nazariya, 25 miles southwest of Homs, near the border with Lebanon.

Diab, 35, was arrested while trying to take an injured person across the border for medical treatment.

Several of his companions were able to escape and helped the injured man reach safety but Diab, who is credited with saving more than a dozen lives and with smuggling vital medical supplies into Baba Amr during the assault, was captured.

Jihad Makdessi, the Syrian foreign ministry spokesman, made it clear yesterday that the regime would defy a call from Kofi Annan, the United Nations-Arab League envoy, to pull its troops out of the cities it had occupied.

Makdessi told state television that the military was staying in those cities “in a state of self-defence and protecting civilians”.

“The Syrian army is not happy to be present in residential areas,” Makdessi said.

“Once peace and security prevail in these areas, the army will not stay nor wait for Kofi Annan to leave. This is a Syrian matter.”

A friend of Othman said that despite his detention and possible torture he would not despair. “He’s always optimistic. He’s the guy we’d go to when we lost hope, and he would give us hope back. A guy like that never loses hope even when detained in a place like Syria.”

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Syrians unite under fire from Assad clan's 'ghost' militia

Activists have documented the killing by security forces of more than 150 Syrians during the wave of protests against the regime

Hugh Macleod and a special correspondent in Damascus

Sunday April 03 2011, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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They are known to the inhabitants of Latakia on Syria's Mediterranean coast as *al-shabeha* (the ghosts), black-clad figures terrorising the local population.

In a port city dominated by majority Sunni Muslims and surrounded by mountain villages that are home to Alawites, the minority that has ruled the country for 40 years, these armed thugs have turned peaceful demonstrations into deadly chaos by firing on protesters from rooftops.

President Bashar al-Assad claimed last week that such gangs were part of a "huge conspiracy by foreign elements" seeking to drive a wedge between Syria's ethnic

communities.

But residents and witnesses in Latakia suggest that the shabeha are almost exclusively Alawites from the region who, reliable sources say, are a militia that owes its allegiance to the Assad family.

The claims emerged after another group of plainclothes security men was accused of shooting from rooftops last Friday into a large crowd of unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators in the Damascus suburb of Duma, where at least four people were killed. Three other protesters died in violence across the country.

The spectre of sectarian strife looms large in Syria's national psyche. "The president has said Latakia is a sectarian problem, firstly to get carte blanche to quell it, secondly to frighten minorities — Alawites, Christians and Druse — with fear of life under a Sunni majority," said a local political analyst.

Yet witnesses say the protests that have gained momentum in the past fortnight began with Sunnis and Alawites calling for change together. "The protesters were chanting, 'Freedom, freedom,' and, 'No Sunni and Alawites, we are all Syrians'," said Hiam Gamil, a youth activist.

One witness, an Alawite, said snipers on rooftops shot indiscriminately at anti- and pro-regime demonstrators. He said Latakia was now “in a state of terror ... The excuse of sectarian conflict succeeded, unfortunately”.

A local journalist who has spoken to 10 residents of Latakia over the past week said they had all delivered the same message about the agitators: “All of them are saying one thing, ‘They are shabeha’.”

Begun in the 1970s, when Hafez al-Assad, the president’s father, took power, the shabeha are nothing new to many Syrians but remain largely unknown outside the country. With easy access to arms through their close ties to Syria’s military and security forces, the shabeha, according to a number of experts, hail from the mountain stronghold of Qardaha, which overlooks Latakia, and answer to the Assad family elders.

Activists have documented the killing by security forces of more than 150 Syrians during the wave of protests against the regime. President Assad is said to be torn between his British-born wife and his siblings over how to deal with it.

According to western intelligence sources, his wife, Asma, a former banker, and his businessman cousin, Rami Makhlouf, favour reforms.

Their desire for compromise is opposed by the president’s sister, Bushra, and her husband, General Assef Shawkat, the deputy army commander, together with the

president's younger brother, Maher, commander of the Presidential Guard.

They believe the protesters should be crushed in the way that Hafez al-Assad dealt with a Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the town of Hama in 1982, when thousands were killed.

Differences over the demonstrations are said to reflect a long-running feud between Asma and Bushra, who at first tried to prevent the president's London-born wife from using the title of first lady and is said to have barred state-run media from reporting on Asma's western-style social activities.

Asma is said to have urged her husband to lift emergency laws imposed in 1963 as a step towards reform. But in a broadcast last week, much to the disappointment of protesters, he failed to do so and instead condemned "foreign agitators".

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Syrians unleash new weapon against Assad – a builders' strike

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, Beirut

Sunday September 02 2012, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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AS SHELLS slammed into the breeze-block homes of Damascus's rundown suburbs last week, tearing two children to pieces in Hajar al-Aswad and sending smoke billowing across the capital, a builder explained why he and his workmates were on unofficial strike.

Ahmed, who is employed by a state-run construction company, said: “If we help the regime it will use the money to buy new arms to kill our families.”

He was forced to flee Duma, five miles from Damascus, after weeks of bombardment. Building materials are in short supply, the road into work is unsafe and taxis there and back would cost him more than his £150 monthly salary.

A demand for the company to send minibuses to pick workers up was ignored, said Ahmed. The company's fleet of minibuses and pick-up trucks has been turned over to the security forces and used to ferry troops and plainclothes militia around the restive suburbs.

“We're on strike but we don't announce it publicly. We say instead we can't reach work,” he said. Despite being threatened with the sack for not turning up for the past two months, Ahmed said he still received his monthly salary.



13th-century citadel – a Unesco world heritage site – is now a nest of regime snipers.

The Syrian government yesterday claimed to have repelled a rebel attack on an airbase outside Aleppo. About 100 people died in fighting on Friday. Rebels have attacked several airbases in an attempt to disrupt bombing of the areas they hold.

Abu Rami, 50, said the textile factory where he worked in Sbeneh, seven miles south of the capital, Damascus, had been closed since mid-July when the regime began bombarding the area after rebels established bases nearby.

“I worked in that factory for 30 years and I don’t think I can learn a new job,” he said. The 80 employees were given a final two weeks’ salary of £90 and the owner has left for Egypt.

The government recently estimated the damage caused by the 17-month uprising at £1.39 billion. The opposition Syrian National Council put the figure higher, saying Syria would need £7.5 billion in aid in the six months after the fall of President Bashar al-Assad.

Yazigi forecasts a decline in Syria's economy of about 20% this year, and a fall of 50% by the end of 2013 from its level before the outbreak of the uprising in March last year.

Assad described the civil war as a “global battle” that would take “some time” to resolve. He was speaking to Al Dunia television in his first interview since the assassination on July 18 of General Dawoud Rajha, the defence minister, and Rajha's deputy, General Assef Shawkat, who was Assad's brother-in law.

“The enemy has moved to within,” he said, referring to the opposition. “You may tell me that they're Syrians and I tell you that any Syrian who carries out a foreign and hostile plan becomes an enemy and is no longer Syrian.”

Despite daily death tolls that regularly exceed 200, western leaders continue to struggle for concrete proposals to lessen the violence, having ruled out directly arming the rebels.

Turkey, after temporarily closing its border to the huge numbers of Syrians fleeing to safety, held talks on French proposals to send aid to “liberated zones” in northern

Syria to prevent a further influx.

“Maybe in these liberated zones Syrians who want to flee the regime will find refuge, which [will] make it less necessary to cross the border,” said the French foreign minister Laurent Fabius last week.

But the reality of life in the northern communities does not bode well for the proposal. A regime airstrike on the town square in Kafr Nabel, a small farming community in northwest Syria, killed at least 15 people last week.

Meanwhile, a commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard has claimed for the first time that, in contrast to western non-involvement, Iran is fighting in Syria.

“Today we are involved in fighting every aspect of a war, a military one in Syria, as well as a cultural one,” said General Salar Abnoush, in a speech reported by Iran’s pro-Assad Daneshjoo news agency.

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UN turns screw on Syria over assassination riddle

Marie Colvin and Hugh Macleod, Damascus

Sunday October 30 2005, 1.00am BST, The Sunday Times

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Under the terms of a resolution being hammered out this weekend at UN headquarters, Syria would be required to turn over suspects to international justice or face the possible use of force.

Tape recordings of Syrian and Lebanese officials discussing the car bomb attack that killed Hariri were being cited by diplomats this weekend to put teeth into the draft resolution.

Last week Russia and China, two of the five permanent members of the 15-member security council, said they would vote against sanctions. As the permanent members hold the power of veto, that could have put paid to a punitive resolution, but their opposition appeared to be crumbling yesterday.

Discussions were under way about whether any people identified in the inquiry by Detlev Mehlis, the UN prosecutor investigating the affair, should be subject to a travel ban and should have their assets seized.

“The blood of Rafiq Hariri is not up for sale,” said Saad Hariri, his son, also a Lebanese politician, from Saudi Arabia yesterday.

“It is too early to talk about sanctions while the United Nations is acting to bring individuals to justice for my father’s murder. (But) if there is no other way to ensure co-operation with the investigation, we will not oppose sanctions.”

The tough stance will put Bashar al-Assad, the young Syrian president who inherited a closed, paranoid regime from his father, further on the defensive. He is already

under pressure from Washington to stop Islamic fighters crossing from Syria into Iraq.

Assad will now have to weigh the UN demands against the pressures on him in a country that his father ruled with an iron fist but whose inner circle of power he does not seem to have managed to dominate.

Two of the president's immediate family, Assef Shawkat, his brother-in-law and head of military intelligence, and Mahar Assad, his younger brother and head of the powerful Republican Guards, were named in a leaked version of the report by Mehlis as having planned Hariri's assassination.

Both names were deleted from Mehlis's final report to Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general, but they are expected to be pursued in any prosecution. Also identified in the inquiry was Rustom Ghazali, the head of Syria's security services in Lebanon at the time of Hariri's killing.

The report said that Ghazali planned the political downfall of Hariri with an unnamed "prominent Lebanese official". Another senior Syrian official who was expected to be named allegedly shot himself in the head rather than face UN censure.

Assad has promised the UN security council that any Syrian proved "by concrete evidence" to have played a role in the assassination will be brought to trial.

Yesterday his officials announced that a judicial committee was being set up to investigate the Syrians who had been implicated.

Damascus tried to fight back last week by organising a series of protests, but they fell rather flat. Billed in the state-controlled media as a spontaneous outpouring of national pride by hundreds of thousands, television could not hide the fact that fewer than 10,000 people, mostly state employees or members of the Ba'ath party students' union, took to the streets.

The protest was anything but spontaneous. "I am here to stand for my country against US pressure," said Lara Ali, a young sociology student and Ba'ath party member. Like other users of Syriatel, the mobile network owned by Rami Makhoulouf, the president's first cousin, she admitted that she had received a text message urging her to participate in "a demonstration supporting the national attitude".

Other demonstrators had an even more ambivalent attitude. "We hate America! We hate America!" shouted a fellow student, before he realised that the television footage might be shown in the West. "I love America! I love America!" he then shouted, to laughs from friends. With that kind of support from supposed regime stalwarts, Assad has a tough week ahead.

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War crime inquiry into Colvin's death

The government has ordered an investigation into the killing of our reporter, write Dipesh Gadhher and Hugh Macleod

[Dipesh Gadhher](#) and Hugh Macleod

Sunday March 11 2012, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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WAR crimes investigators are to examine whether Marie Colvin, the Sunday Times foreign correspondent, was deliberately killed in Syria by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

The British government believes it is “entirely possible” that Colvin and other western journalists were targeted in an attack on a makeshift media centre in Homs, the city where a popular uprising has been ruthlessly quelled.

William Hague, the foreign secretary, has ordered officials to gather evidence about the incident as part of a wider effort to build a case against Assad for humanitarian crimes.

Hague has spoken to Paul Conroy, the Sunday Times photographer injured in the attack, and made clear his willingness to pursue a prosecution to ensure “a day of reckoning”.

Today Conroy provides the most detailed account yet of the Syrian army assault on the media facility in which Colvin, 56, and Rémi Ochlik, 28, a French photojournalist, were killed.

Backed up by other testimony from witnesses, The Sunday Times has established that:

Conroy, who was involved in a dramatic escape from the Baba Amr district of Homs with three other journalists, believes the media centre was targeted to silence criticism of Assad's crackdown. He will be questioned by a team of Foreign Office investigators who are currently close to the Syrian-Lebanon border gathering evidence of atrocities.

Any subsequent prosecution — which would examine the chain of command behind the attacks — could either take place at the International Criminal Court in The Hague or in Syria if Assad's regime eventually falls.

Conroy, 47, also spoke on the telephone to David Cameron last week and was visited in hospital by Ed Llewellyn, the prime minister's chief of staff. "What happened to us is just one of many war crimes [also committed at] civilian level," said Conroy, a former soldier in the Royal Artillery.

Colvin's funeral will take place tomorrow in Oyster Bay, her family home in New York.

She was killed on February 22, the morning after she had broadcast live, via Skype, from the media centre to the BBC, Channel 4 and CNN. The building, a three-storey house, had been used by journalists for more than a month and had been hit by shelling at least once previously, destroying its roof.

Conroy said that the day before Colvin's death, shelling in the area had been "phenomenally intense", but of a "random and indiscriminate" nature. Going on air that evening meant that their "profile was incredibly raised", he admitted.

"It takes no leap of the imagination to realise that as well as the activists watching [the broadcasts], the regime has people in Damascus and in London who monitor," he said.

After a pause at night, shelling resumed the next day at 6.30am. Conroy said he heard the distinctive sound of a drone overhead — “buzzing like a mosquito” — about an hour later. Such devices were “just a fact of life” during the siege of Homs, he recalled.

Conroy and Colvin had woken early to try to visit casualties at a nearby field hospital. Ochlik and three other western journalists in the building were still asleep.

At about 7.55am, Conroy heard a shell land very close outside. It was followed within 20 seconds by another explosion. “Then there were another two near-misses, but this time even closer, which is when I thought ‘Shit, maybe they’re bracketing in on us’ because they were starting to close in,” Conroy said.



Paul Conroy will be questioned about the fatal attack in Homs (Paul Conroy)

Bracketing is a technique that involves simultaneously shelling from two points and zeroing in on a target. Conroy believes the circling drone was used by the Syrian

army for “locating and correcting”. “It’s called corrective fire,” he said.

The first four shells landed within about two minutes. A minute later the first of four further missiles came in, each hitting the building. The last one shattered the entrance, killing Colvin and Ochlik.

Conroy, who was wounded in the leg, fled the media centre with the surviving journalists, but recalls two or three more shells falling outside in the road.

“I guess the drone had seen people come out of the building,” he said. “So, you have got four ‘targeting’ rounds; you have got four rounds fired for effect — fired to do damage; and then all of a sudden you have got rounds landing in the street. Almost without doubt, it was watched from above.”

Conroy, who served in the British Army from 1980-6, believes the attack was carried out by Katyusha rockets or field artillery because — unlike mortar fire — such munitions are normally silent at launch or when falling from the sky and the impact is much bigger.

Javier Espinosa, a reporter from the Spanish newspaper El Mundo, who survived the assault, also recalled the building taking four direct hits and then further shelling in the street. Speaking from Beirut, Espinosa said he had “no idea” if the media centre had been targeted by the Syrians. However, he believes the shelling started that morning with their safe house and then moved on.

Espinosa also drew attention to overhead surveillance. "There is some kind of link between the shelling and the drones," he said. "They start the shelling as soon as the drones start. And they stop shelling at night when the drones have gone."

Edith Bouvier, a French reporter for Le Figaro who was seriously injured in the bombardment, highlighted the drones in an article about Baba Amr last week. William Daniels, another French survivor, told the BBC's Newsnight programme: "Our apartment was targeted for sure."

A British official said the government was aware that Syria had bought spy planes from Iran in the past. A Lebanese security source added: "There are definitely Iranian drones flying over Syrian territory. We have monitored them and drawn a map of their flight paths."

The brutal assault on Homs and other rebel cities has been masterminded by Maher al-Assad, the Syrian president's younger brother and commander of the army's elite 4th Division. This weekend, testimony from rebel activists in the Free Syrian Army and human rights observers, suggested that Jassim, the army's chief of staff, is the "man on the ground" who oversaw the attack on the Baba Amr media centre. Jassim is among more than 100 Syrians blacklisted for sanctions by the European Union.

Yesterday, President Assad snubbed calls for a ceasefire at a meeting in Damascus with Kofi Annan, the former United Nations secretary-general.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office said: “We are deeply concerned at suggestions the media centre was deliberately targeted by the regime. We don’t have any evidence at present, but it is entirely possible given the intentional shelling of civilian areas and continued attempts to prevent the truth coming out of Syria.

“We have been in constant contact with Mr Conroy since his return to the UK to discuss the circumstances surrounding the attack. The UK’s expert human rights team is on the ground gathering evidence of atrocities in Syria and will meet Mr Conroy on its return to document what happened and collect any evidence he has. We will use this to help ensure there is a day of reckoning for anyone guilty of any crimes.”

Additional reporting: Annasofie Flamand

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We beat, raped and shot for the highest god, Assad

For the first time, a former Syrian military intelligence officer tells of the torture used to crush the uprising

Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand

Sunday December 18 2011, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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Abu Ali's eyes are empty of emotion, his voice as steady as his hands, as he describes without elaboration or outward regret the torture, murder and rape that he witnessed as an officer in Syria's feared military intelligence.

"They have no problem torturing a child to death," said Abu Ali. "All they know is he is not from their sect. The regime has planted sectarianism inside them since the 1970s to make sure they are loyal only to the regime, to the highest god."

Abu Ali, who defected and fled across the border into Lebanon, was still wearing the trademark leather jacket and plain trousers favoured by the enforcers of the Assad

family's 41-year dictatorship.

“I was living with the thugs and the security men,” he said. “Some of them are my friends and I know what kind of hatreds they carry.”

Like Abu Ali, three-quarters of Syria's population are Sunni Muslims. The regime, and particularly its security services, are drawn largely from the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam.

“The torturers have only one problem with what they do: the person tortured to death only has one soul. They wish that a second soul could return to the body so they could continue their torture and satisfy their hatred,” he said.

Speaking freely to a newspaper for the first time in his life, Abu Ali said he was now seeking the downfall of a regime under which torture is routine.

“There's electric shocks, beating the face, stripping nails, pulling hair out from the face, from eyebrows or the head or the eyelashes,” he said, listing torture methods that have been practised in Syria since the 1970s when President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, was first in power.

“We used to give thirsty prisoners salty water to drink, one time, two times, three times, then give them pure water. When they wanted to urinate we put a rubber

band around the penis so they couldn't. So whatever we wanted, they would be ready to confess.”

For a decade Abu Ali served in military intelligence under Assad's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat. When the Syrian uprising was triggered in March in the border city of Dera'a by the arrest and torture of children for scrawling anti-regime graffiti, Abu Ali was sent south to put it down.

“We saw the peaceful demonstrations and we shot and gave orders to the army and the shabiha [militia thugs] to shoot.”

Abu Ali described how security forces stormed the main Omari mosque of Dera'a and planted weapons, filming them in the hope the West would believe the Assads were fighting terrorists.

“The regime knows how the West thinks: that mosques are places for terrorists,” he said.

“We demolished Dera'a. Every man we could find we killed or arrested or injured. We took mothers, daughters and wives hostage. We surrounded hospitals and stopped doctors treating injured protesters. We even destroyed pharmacies. Despite all that it was too early to talk about defection.”

For Abu Ali, the breaking point came when he was redeployed to put down protests in his home town of Homs, an industrial city in northern Syria that for the past few

months has been the focus for the regime's rage.

“When protests broke out in Baba Amr [a district of Homs] we received orders to crush it. We were authorised to do whatever we wanted. The orders came from the leader, Bashar.

“It was like a genocide against the people and I was part of it. The army went to the streets and shelled houses with tanks. We shelled the civilians and the demonstrations.”

In April, Abu Ali said, the orders for a crackdown in Homs's Clock Square had come directly from Major-General Jamil Hassan, an Assad insider. Hassan was one of 74 commanders and officials named in a report by Human Rights Watch last week as responsible for the torture and killings.





“We received orders to make Homs an example to other cities. We fired on the protesters for about 15 minutes, then military vehicles and forklift trucks smashed through the area, crushing a lot of people. The general informed Jamil Hassan that we had crushed the protest and Hassan asked if there were any people left. The general told him, ‘There are around 60 people’, so Hassan shouted at him, ‘Kill them and get rid of them’.”

Abu Ali said dozens of bodies had been taken by forklifts and vans and dumped in mass graves, an account corroborated by a second member of military intelligence who witnessed the scene.

Later a fire engine arrived to hose the blood off the street.

In another report last month Human Rights Watch said the onslaught in Homs, including systematic torture, constituted crimes against humanity.

A senior western diplomat said a sectarian war in Homs is under way. Last week 14 Sunnis, including six women, were reported to have been kidnapped as they travelled by bus near an Alawite district.

Assad has denied all responsibility for the killing of protesters, insisting in an interview with the US network ABC that Syria's security forces "are not my forces", although he is the commander-in-chief.

The United Nations estimates that more than 5,000 Syrians have been killed since the crackdown began in mid-March. Avaaz, a human rights group that has researchers inside Syria, says it has recorded more than 6,500 deaths, with at least 20,000 arrested or disappeared.

The regime says 1,100 members of its security forces have been killed by "armed gangs" or "terrorist groups".

Abu Ali said that during the early months of the uprising the security forces met no armed resistance. But divided as they were into 17 rival agencies, they managed to shoot each other by mistake. The regime then sought to use these deaths as propaganda.

Abu Ali said defecting from Assad's security forces had not been easy. "We were all keeping an eye on each other," he said. He was helped by opposition supporters who provided safe houses in Homs.

"The way was hard and it was a long walk but in the end they managed to deliver us to Lebanon," said Abu Ali, who went on to become a commander in the fledgling Free Syrian Army that is now leading an armed insurgency against Assad's troops.

Before he travelled back to Syria to fight those he had once served, Abu Ali came face to face with one of the survivors of the torture he and his colleagues had inflicted.

In a Lebanese village he met Mohammed, a 30-year-old farmer from the countryside south of Homs who had endured a month of suffering at the hands of forces Abu Ali had once helped to command.

Mohammed's account from inside Assad's dungeons has none of Abu Ali's clinical detachment but rather comes pouring forth from behind clouds of cigarette smoke.

Although he never learnt to read or write, Mohammed — who for his own security wished to use a pseudonym — gave an impassioned and eloquent account of the Kafkaesque nightmare of relentless and unanswerable interrogation, punctuated by bouts of intense violence, that awaits those unfortunate enough to be imprisoned in Assad's Syria.

“They say you are taking weapons from the Hariri family [powerful Lebanese Sunnis] and transporting them to Syria. You are linked to terrorist organisations. You are the biggest terrorist. I tell them, ‘I’m a shepherd, I’m a farmer. Ask the village chief about me. If I did these things, arrest me’. You have to confess.”

Arrested by security forces in early August during a dawn raid on his village, where he insisted no anti-regime protests had taken place, Mohammed was imprisoned for

a month in a 2 x 1.5 metre cell designed for solitary confinement but which he said held six or seven men at a time.

“The cell is underground. The moment you smell it, you gag. There are rats scuttling in and out of the cell. You can hardly breathe. It’s like a grave.”

Blindfolded and beaten in one interrogation after another, Mohammed said the questions had differed little: “Who was at the protest? Who’s smuggling weapons? Who’s supporting the rebels from Lebanon? Who’s arming the terrorist groups?”

“I said, ‘I swear to God I don’t know.’ They said, ‘Here there is no God. Here there’s only Bashar.’ And they beat you.”

The only thing that changed was the pain.

“He took the electricity stick and jabbed it into me. I felt my head burning and I fell to the ground. He got a bottle of water and threw it over me, shouting, ‘Will you confess or not?’ I said, ‘Sir, I don’t know anything to confess. If I knew, I would have told you.’ He threw water on me again and electrocuted me again. I smelt the burning flesh and the hair on my head stood up.”

Mohammed cannot remember the exact number of times he was stripped down to his boxer shorts and given electric shocks. Most of the times he would pass out and wake up being whipped with cable on his back. On one occasion his leg and hand were left paralysed for several hours.

He will never forget the time his jailor used electricity on his genitals, however: “He came back with the electricity stick and jabbed it into my testicles saying, ‘This is to cull your race.’ The sectarianism is obvious. They hear from the way you speak that you’re not an Alawite. It’s a kind of revenge.”

Although he has taken medicine for months, Mohammed still passes blood in his urine and is unable to enjoy sex with his wife. He is not ashamed to show the scars left on his genitals. He says he will not return to Syria until the regime has gone.

Sometimes in those cells, crammed in among the men, are children. The Sunday Times also interviewed a 13-year-old boy, arrested on his way home from school, who was beaten, given electric shocks and had his big toenail ripped out with pliers.

From the words of the officer who served on the inside of the Assad family’s terror state it appears clear that healing in Syria could take generations.

“There are some prisoners who have strong bodies and can tolerate this kind of torture,” said Abu Ali.

“So they used to bring his wife or his daughter or his mother, or any of his relatives, and torture them in front of him. And sometimes they are ready to rape the women, his wife, his mother, his daughter, in front of him. Just to make him confess.”

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We have conditions too, say Iran and Syria

By Richard Beeston, Diplomatic Editor and Hugh Macleod in Damascus

Wednesday November 15 2006, 12.00am GMT, The Times

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IRAN and Syria signalled that they were ready to resume dialogue with the United States, but both regimes insisted that the situation in the region would only improve if Washington changed its policies.

Responding to overtures by Tony Blair and American mediators, President Ahmadinejad said that Tehran had always been ready to talk to America if certain conditions were met. “The conditions concern the attitude of the American Government. If they correct their behaviour, we will talk to them like others,” he said.

He did not elaborate, but in the past Iran has demanded that the United States unfreeze Iranian assets held by the US Government, withdraw forces from Iraq, drop its support for Israel and stop its efforts to halt Tehran's nuclear programme.

The Iranian leader said that he would explain in an open letter to the American people. But any hopes of a rapprochement with the West seemed doomed. Mr Ahmadinejad repeated his determination to press ahead with uranium enrichment work, which some fear is a cover to make fissile material needed for an atomic bomb.

Mr Ahmadinejad predicted that Iran would soon master the nuclear fuel cycle. "I am very hopeful that we will be able to hold the big celebration of Iran's full nuclearisation in the current year," he said, referring to the Persian calendar year, which ends in March.

The move would put paid to any significant improvement of relations with the US and Britain, who are pushing for sanctions against Iran unless it drops its nuclear ambitions.

Experts on the region suspect there is more room for progress with Syria. Yesterday *Tishrin*, the government daily newspaper, said: "Syria is ready for dialogue with the

United States to achieve security and stability . . . and extends its hands sincerely as always waiting for a response. The ball is in their court.”

But Syrian analysts believe that it is Washington and London who need to be “brought in from the cold”, not a regime once labelled a central spoke in the “Axis of Evil”.

Elias Murad, the Editor of *al-Baath* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the ruling Baath party, told *The Times*: “Syria can bring stability to the Middle East, and Bush and Blair now know that. We have good relations with the resistance in Iraq, in Lebanon and in Palestine and we can therefore offer stability.”

The question being asked by some of Syria’s political classes, however, is, why should we help? Ayman Abdel Nour, an economist and key reformer in the Baath party, said: “What can Britain offer Syria? It has followed America’s policy of isolating Syria, but has discovered it did not work. The Gulf States are flush with oil money and have been investing heav-ily in Syria, meaning economic sanctions have not worked.”

The US imposed trade sanctions on Syria in 2004 over its alliance with the militant groups Hezbollah and Hamas, over interference in Lebanon and for alleged support for foreign fighters crossing its border to fight US troops in Iraq.

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