

**UN: Syrian forces, opposition committing crime**  
**By Zeina Karam and John Heilprin Associated Press**  
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The Syrian regime and an increasingly organized rebel force are carrying out illegal killings and torturing their opponents, but government forces are still responsible for most of the violence stemming from the country's uprising, a U.N. panel said Thursday.

The findings were released in Geneva by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, which said the conflict has become "increasingly militarized." The report is based on hundreds of interviews since March with victims and witnesses who fled the country.

"Fighters in anti-government armed groups were killed after being captured or wounded," the report said. "In some particularly grave instances, entire families were executed in their homes - usually the family members of those opposing the government."

Children, including boys as young as 10, have said they are "tortured to admit that older male members of their family are Free Syrian Army soldiers or supporters," the report said. The Free Syrian Army is the rebel force trying to topple the government.

The U.N. panel also said there is a growing list of abuses committed by anti-government armed groups, including executions of military forces and suspected informers. Anti-government armed groups have increasingly resorted to roadside bombs, and have abducted civilians and government forces apparently for prisoner exchanges or ransom, according to the report.

Despite the country's spiraling violence, President Bashar Assad said Thursday that Syria would emerge from the crisis "thanks to the steadfastness of its people."

Assad spoke during a meeting with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's special envoy, Telecommunications Minister Reza Taqipour. Iran is one of Syria's strongest allies.

The Syrian government denies that the 15-month-old revolt that has engulfed the country is being driven by a popular uprising against Assad's rule, instead arguing that terrorists are behind the unrest.

The opposition denies that, saying they were forced to take up arms after government forces fired on peaceful protesters. A string of suicide attacks this year has raised fears among some observers that extremists are trying to exploit the chaos in Syria.

The U.N. estimated in March that more than 9,000 people have been killed in the revolt, and the death toll rises every day.

More than 250 U.N. observers are now based in cities around Syria to monitor a peace plan brokered by international envoy Kofi Annan, but the cease-fire is violated every day by both sides in the conflict.

On Thursday, opposition groups said government forces shelled the rebel-held town of Rastan on Thursday, killing at least three people. Also Thursday, the state-run news agency said an armed group assassinated a lieutenant, shooting him and his 13-year-old son outside Damascus.

The violence in Syria has spilled over into Lebanon, where deadly clashes linked to the conflict next door have killed at least 10 people in the past two weeks.

Lebanese and Syrian officials have said armed gunmen in Syria kidnapped 11 Lebanese Shiite pilgrims on Tuesday, setting off protests in Beirut's Shiite-dominated southern suburbs where residents burned tires and blocked roads.

The U.S. Embassy in Beirut on Thursday condemned the kidnapping and called for the men's immediate release. "The kidnapping of people, particularly targeting along sectarian lines, is unacceptable," the embassy said in a statement published on its Twitter account.

Syria's main opposition council, meanwhile, said it has accepted the resignation of its Paris-based president who earlier offered to step down amid mounting criticism of his leadership.

The executive committee of the Syrian National Council asked Burhan Ghalioun to pursue his duties until a new president is elected at a meeting on June 9 and 10.

The SNC has been plagued by infighting and divisions since its inception in September, complicating Western efforts to bolster the opposition. Ghalioun's offer to resign came just days after he was re-elected for a third, three month term in a controversial vote in Rome.