

Both sides in Syria abuse human rights - U.N. report
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GENEVA/BEIRUT (Reuters) - A U.N. investigation on Thursday said both sides in the Syrian conflict had committed serious human rights abuses, with government forces executing entire families in their homes and rebels torturing and killing soldiers and government supporters.

The United Nations report into the 14-month uprising against President Bashar al-Assad said government forces routinely drew up lists of wanted people and their families before blockading then attacking a village or neighbourhood.

"Entire families were executed in their homes - usually the family members of those opposing the government such as the family members of Colonel Riad al-Asaad," it said, referring to relatives of the head of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

The rebels, who are increasingly armed and well-organised, have executed or tortured soldiers and government supporters, said the U.N., whose investigators were not allowed into Syria and relied on interviews of victims and witnesses.

Violence has raged despite a U.N.-brokered agreement on April 12 aimed at halting the bloodshed in Syria, where Assad is confronting an uprising which began with peaceful protests but has become increasingly militarised.

Opposition activists reported fighting in several regions on Thursday. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Syrian forces executed four people taken from their homes and killed four others during clashes in northern Idlib province.

A woman and four of her children who disappeared two days ago near Hama also were found dead, the group said, and at least six soldiers were killed in clashes with armed defectors in Damascus, Deir al-Zor, Homs and Idlib provinces.

There was no independent confirmation of the account from Syria, which has limited journalist access in the uprising.

In Damascus, Assad told a visiting Iranian minister that Syria would recover from the unrest.

"Syria was able to overcome pressure and threats which it was exposed to for years, and with the steadfastness of its people and their adherence to unity and independence it will be able to come through the present crisis," he told Iranian Telecommunications Minister Reza Taqipour. Assad's soldiers and security forces have killed more than 9,000 people in a campaign to quell the uprising, according to previous U.N. reports. The government says rebels have killed more than 2,600 military and security personnel.

The latest investigation by the United Nations, which documented 207 deaths since March, said children were frequent casualties of attacks on protests and the bombardment of towns and villages by state forces.

Investigators said rebels had also abducted civilians in an apparent bid to secure prison exchanges or ransoms. They also had multiple reports of insurgents executing suspected collaborators and captured government troops.

HOSTAGES

A Syrian Islamist cleric said he was trying to broker the release of Lebanese Shi'ites kidnapped by Sunni insurgents fighting Assad's forces, the latest strand of Syria's conflict to entangle its smaller neighbour.

Sheikh Ibrahim al-Zoaby, head of the Free People of Syria group, said in a statement later that two of the men would be released on Friday.

The United Nations, Syria's close ally Russia and Saudi Arabia, which has called for Assad's departure, have all expressed concern the Syrian conflict will draw in Lebanon and tip its delicate sect-based politics into civil war.

The latest hint of spill over came with the abduction this week of 13 Shi'ite Muslim pilgrims in northern Syria.

"They are well and safe, we are trying to secure their release, but the Syrian army shelling of the area has been blocking it so far," Zoaby told Reuters.

He said the kidnapers want to hand the men to the Lebanese authorities.

The head of Hezbollah, the Shi'ite Muslim guerrilla and political movement that is Syria's most powerful Lebanese ally, has appealed for calm over the kidnappings, which provoked protests in largely Shi'ite districts of Beirut, which has seen its worst unrest since 2008 this week.

Sunni Muslim factions opposed and loyal to Assad fought street battles with machineguns and rocket-propelled grenades that left at least two people dead, after the killing of an anti-Assad cleric in northern Lebanon by Lebanese troops ignited violent protests that spread to Beirut.

North Lebanon, a stronghold of conservative Sunnis who back the revolt against Assad, saw his Lebanese Islamist foes clash with Lebanese troops earlier this month after the arrest of an anti-Assad Islamist.

That fighting later expanded to include members of the minority Alawite sect to which Syria's rulers belong, and killed nine people before Lebanese judicial authorities freed the detained man on bail.

Assad has ruled for 12 years after succeeding his late father Hafez al-Assad. Once seen as potential reformer, he has clung to power in the face of the revolt despite international condemnation of the government crackdown on the opposition and calls for him to step down.