

Blast Kills Core Syrian Security Officials

By: Neil MacFarquhar & Dalal Mawad, The New York Times

18 July 2012

BEIRUT, Lebanon — A lethal bomb attack in Damascus struck at the heart of President Bashar al-Assad's inner circle Wednesday, killing at least three of his most senior aides, including his minister of defense and brother-in-law, in the most audacious challenge to Mr. Assad's grip on power since the Syria uprising began 17 months ago.

By hitting the very military structure that has been directing the harsh repression by government forces, the Syrian opposition struck a serious blow not only to Mr. Assad's brain trust, but also to whatever psychological advantage his overwhelmingly superior military has provided in trying to preserve the loyalty of his forces and other top lieutenants.

The assassinations were the first of such high-ranking members of the elite since the revolt began and could represent a turning point in the conflict, analysts said. The nature and target of the attack strengthened the opposition's claims that its forces have been marshaling strength to strike at the close-knit centers of state power.

State television reported that the explosion was caused by a suicide bomber while a commander in the Free Syrian Army, the main armed opposition group, said the attack was from planted explosive devices detonated remotely.

President Assad made no public statement about the attack and his whereabouts was not immediately clear.

The attack, after three days of fighting in the capital, seemed to heighten tensions between government soldiers and the opposition, with fierce clashes reported in several Damascus neighborhoods. There was also a rash of reported defections from the government side.

According to state television, the dead included the defense minister, Daoud Rajha; Asef Shawkat, the president's brother-in-law who was the deputy chief of staff of the Syrian military; and Hassan Turkmani, a former minister of defense and military adviser to Vice President Farouk Sharaa.

But the television report rejected claims by Arab satellite channels that the minister of the interior, Mohamed Sha'ar, also was killed, saying he was injured and in stable condition.

General Rajha was appointed minister of defense in August. A Christian, he was one of the prominent minority figures used by the Assad government to put a face of pluralism on the military and security services dominated by the president's Alawite sect.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an anti-Assad activist organization, said all the members of the crisis group set up by President Assad to try to put down the revolt were either dead or injured. State television said that besides the three dead and the injured interior minister, the only other injured was Hisham Ikhtiar, head of the general security bureau.

The government moved rapidly to project an image of control, naming Gen. Fahed Jassem al-Freij, the military chief of staff and a man once assigned to subdue restive Idlib province in the north, as the new minister of defense. In a statement read by General Freij on state television, he said the military would not be deterred from "cutting off every hand that harms the security of the homeland and citizens."

At the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta said that situation in Syria "is rapidly spinning out of control" and warned Mr. Assad's government to safeguard its large stockpile of chemical weapons. "It's obvious what is happening in Syria is a real escalation of the fighting," he said at a joint news conference with the British defense minister, Philip Hammond.

The attack came as diplomatic maneuvers to seek a cease-fire remained deadlocked by differences between Syria's international adversaries and sponsors, principally Russia, ahead of a United Nations Security Council vote on a Western-sponsored resolution that would threaten Mr. Assad's government with economic sanctions if it does not implement a peace plan negotiated by the special envoy Kofi Annan more than three months ago. The resolution, which Russia has threatened to veto, would also extend the mission of 300 unarmed United Nations monitors, whose work has been suspended because of the violence.

Diplomats at the United Nations said that Security Council members had agreed to delay the vote, originally scheduled for Wednesday, until Thursday at Mr. Annan's request, to allow more time for them to resolve their differences over the resolution's wording.

But in Moscow, Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov, offering Russia's first official commentary on the Damascus bombing, said via his Twitter account that the attack had put consensus between members of the Security Council even farther out of reach.

"A dangerous logic: While discussions on settling the Syrian crisis are being held in the U.N. Security Council, militants intensify terrorist attacks, frustrating all attempts," he wrote.

Mr. Assad's opponents claimed a major victory.

"The Syrian regime has started to collapse," said the activist who heads the Syrian Observatory, who goes by the pseudonym Rami Abdul-Rahman for reasons of personal safety. "There was fighting for three days inside Damascus, it was not just a gun battle, and now someone has killed or injured all these important people."

Rumors swirled around Damascus that the bomber was bodyguard for a minister or top official of President Assad's Baath Party, and there were reports of a second bomb in the street that had shattered nearby windows.

The attack came despite a huge security presence to isolate embattled neighborhoods of the capital.

The casualties were from the core team trying to enforce a security solution to the uprising in Syria, and in such a tense, suspicious climate, it was not clear who Mr. Assad might find to replace them.

"If a bodyguard blew himself up, then there was a major internal security breach," said Elias Hanna, a retired Lebanese military officer and a military analyst knowledgeable about Syria.

"Who will replace these people?" Mr. Hanna said. "They are irreplaceable at this stage, it's hard to find loyal people now that doubt is sowed everywhere. Whoever can get to Asef Shawkat can get to Assad."

"Everyone, even those close to the inner circle, will now be under suspicion," he said.

An Army statement quoted by state television said in part: "This terrorist act will only increase our insistence to purge this country from the criminal terrorist thugs and to protect the dignity of Syria and its sovereignty."

The information minister, Omran al-Zoubi, also went on a talk show to reject claims by those calling it the beginning of the end.

"The morale of our people is very high and our armed forces are at their highest level," he said.

Activists reached in Damascus said the city appeared deserted, aside from the security cordon thrown up around the leafy, well-to-do neighborhood where the explosion took place — just down the road from the

American ambassador's residence, which has been vacant for months. The area is dotted with embassies and government offices.

"All the stores and shops are closed," said an activist in Damascus reached via Skype. "Some people are scared and some are happy, you can hear people firing off gunshots in many places."

The injured from the explosion were evacuated to the al-Shami hospital, an elite medical facility used to treat the Assad family, ministers and other senior officials. Security forces threw up a cordon around the facility.

Since the uprising began in March, 2011, Syria has been run by an ever tighter circle of army and security officials close to the president. The killings represented as much a psychological blow as a physical one, emboldening the opposition, analysts said, and challenging Mr. Assad to demonstrate quickly that his forces can still confront the rebels.

"Can they demonstrate the ability to put down this challenge and show that they are on the way to survival?" said an analyst with long experience in Damascus, speaking in return for anonymity because he still works there. "The opposition cannot defeat the regime militarily but they can defeat it through psychology."

Even as state media reported the attack, the country's Russian-armed military was reported to have suffered further defections among its top ranks, with two brigadier generals among 600 Syrians who fled to Turkey overnight, Reuters reported.

Their action brought to 20 the number of such high-ranking figures, who include a onetime close associate of Mr. Assad, Gen. Manaf Tlass, the son of a former defense minister.

Copyright © 2012, The New York Times