

**U.N. resolution slams Syria, urges aid**  
**By Joe Sterling, CNN**  
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The U.N. Human Rights Council adopted a resolution Thursday condemning Syria's "widespread and systematic violations of human rights" and called on the regime to permit aid groups in to distribute relief.

Thirty-seven of the nations meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, voted for the resolution, including the United States and several Arab countries. China, Russia and Cuba opposed it and India, the Philippines and Ecuador abstained.

"The international community sends yet another unequivocal call to the Syrian authorities to stop human rights violations against its population and to address urgent humanitarian needs," said the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton. "The situation in Syria must remain at the center of the world's attention and every possible lever must be pulled to stop the violence and the killing of civilians."

The resolution deplors "the brutal actions of the Syrian regime over the past 11 months, such as its use of heavy artillery and tanks to attack residential areas of cities and towns, which have led to the death of thousands of innocents civilians, caused widespread destruction, forced tens of thousands of Syrians to flee their homes and created widespread suffering among the Syrian people, resulting in a humanitarian crisis."

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It calls for "the effective delivery of assistance" and "safe access to medical treatment." It wants "free and unimpeded access by the United Nations and humanitarian agencies to carry out a full assessment of needs in Homs and other areas, and to permit humanitarian agencies to deliver vital relief goods and services" to Homs, Daraa, Zabadani and other areas that have been under siege.

The resolution comes as President Bashar al-Assad's forces clobber pockets of resistance and opposition across the country, particularly in the besieged city of Homs, and the international community works to bring aid to civilians. The Homs neighborhood of Baba Amr has been pummeled by Syrian forces for more than three weeks.

The Free Syrian Army, the anti-government resistance force, on Thursday said it had decided to strategically withdraw for the sake of the civilians remaining inside the neighborhood, citing dismal humanitarian conditions and a lack of arms to defend civilians. It said around 4,000 civilians were refusing to leave the neighborhood and it urged the International Red Cross to immediately enter and remove all civilians.

"There is no food whatsoever, no medicines, no water and no electricity. There is no communication in the area, thus making matters much worse," it said. "The Assad army has destroyed most of the civilian homes up to now" using missiles, mortar shells and helicopters."

One activist told CNN that shelling appeared to have stopped, the military had entered the neighborhood with tanks, security forces were entering homes and snipers were stationed on the rooftops of government buildings. Another activist group said five explosions shook the city after the rebels pulled out.

CNN cannot independently confirm casualty reports by the opposition, activists or the Syrian government because access to the country by international journalists has been severely restricted.

Syria's violent crackdown against protesters rallying to redress a range of political and social grievances erupted in mid-March.

Who are the key players in Syria?

The United Nations estimates 7,500 deaths and the Local Coordination Committees, an opposition activist group, said around 9,000 people have died in the nearly year-old conflict. The Syrian government says more than 2,000 security personnel have been killed in the violence.

The LCC said at least 26 people had died in Syria on Thursday, 17 in Homs, seven in the Quneitra province town of Jabata, one in the Hama suburbs and one in Idlib. The group also said tanks were shelling inhabited homes in Hama.

The Human Rights Council's move punctuates the growing international consensus against the al-Assad regime and its policies. On Friday, international powers met in Tunisia for a Friends of Syria meeting to begin working on ways to stop the violence, devise a political solution, and deliver aid. That group formed last month after Russia and China vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian government.

The Friends of Syria meeting last week underscored the importance of the political opposition movement, including the Syrian National Council, but the group didn't make reference to armed conflict as a solution, even though a Saudi Arabian diplomat said arming rebels would be a very good idea.

The council announced Thursday it had established a "military bureau" to coordinate with the Free Syrian Army, or FSA, a decentralized network of military defectors resisting the al-Assad regime..

"The Military Bureau will track the armed opposition groups, organize and unify their ranks under one central command, defining their defense missions while placing them under the political supervision of the SNC, and coordinating their activities in accordance with the overall strategy of the revolution," the council said.

"The SNC will work on providing the FSA with all the support it needs to completely fulfill its defense responsibilities, including securing necessary protection for civilians, and tending to the revolutionaries defending Syrians against the criminal regime. Bureau members will seek assistance from appropriate sources, including experts."

The Free Syrian Army, which consists of many disparate militia groups operating under the FSA banner, has grown over the months and is made up primarily of former regime soldiers who refused to accept orders to fire on innocent protesters. The group's Baba Amr brigade on Thursday warned the al-Assad regime it will see a "severe response" to any regime actions that "crosses the limits and affects civilians."

In London, British Foreign Secretary William Hague told Parliament he was withdrawing diplomats from Syria and suspending embassy operations for security reasons.

"My decision to withdraw staff from the British Embassy in Damascus in no way reduces the UK's commitment to active diplomacy to maintain pressure on the Assad regime to end the violence," Hague said in a prepared statement.

The announcement followed Hague's earlier comments that he was "appalled" at the reports of an all-out assault on Baba Amr. Hague said Britain will continue to pressure the regime to cease its attacks, but opposition and rights groups said that pledge was too little, and possibly too late.

*(CNN's Kamal Ghattas, Aliza Kassim and Chelsea J. Carter contributed to this report.)*