

Assad's troops slaughtered us like sheep, claim refugees
By Alastair Beach and John Lichfield, The Independent
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Refugees fleeing through farmland from marauding Syrian troops have claimed forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad are committing war crimes against civilians in Homs, slitting the throats of children and slaughtering their victims "like sheep".

Human rights groups have said that gunmen who seized the Homs district of Baba Amr last week were rounding up anyone over the age of 14, torturing them and killing them.

The Independent, meanwhile, has spoken to activists inside the city who have said that dozens of civilians have been savagely murdered during the past few days by the feared shabiha militias.

Yesterday there were further reports of atrocities, with some of the 2,000 refugees who have fled across the border to neighbouring Lebanon in the past two days telling the BBC that young children who had remained in Baba Amr had their throats cut by advancing troops.

One mother said that soldiers had detained 36 men and boys on Friday before executing them. Her husband saw a soldier pin down their 12-year-old son's head with a boot while another slit his throat. "I could hear their screams," he said. Another woman said: "They took our husbands. They took them at a checkpoint. They will slaughter them like sheep."

In further evidence of the catalogue of horrors being meted out by the Syrian regime, Channel 4 News reported the torture of patients in government hospitals. The report, based on footage smuggled out of Syria, included testimony from one medical worker who described the torture of patients in the wards: "They twist the feet until the leg breaks."

Last night, volunteers from the International Committee of the Red Cross were still waiting for government approval to enter the devastated neighbourhood of Baba Amr. Locals say the Syrian regime's reluctance to grant the Red Cross access is due to the "clean-up" being conducted by government forces. Damascus claims its generals are trying to clear up the wreckage left by terrorists and armed groups.

The regime's crackdown continued yesterday as hundreds of troops were dispatched to Deraa, the southern city which was the cradle of Syria's uprising.

As diplomatic pressure continued to mount on the Syrian regime, China announced it would be dispatching an envoy to Damascus in a bid to halt the bloodshed. Baathist officials also bowed to international insistence that two other envoys previously snubbed by President Assad be granted entry – former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos.

Meanwhile the French foreign ministry yesterday dismissed as "completely without foundation" a report in a Lebanese newspaper that 13 "French officers" had been captured inside Syria.

However, Syrian opposition sources said there were more reliable reports that one French special forces officer had been "kidnapped" several days ago by Syrian troops on the Syria-Lebanon border. There have been reports in the French press of French agents or special forces operating in Lebanon close to Syria but these have not been officially confirmed in Paris.