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Syrian Crisis Escalates, Refugee Exodus Swells

by Mark Snowiss, Lisa Schlein

Syrian army bombardments killed at least 21 people in a Damascus suburb Friday and anti-government protests broke out in several other cities. The U.N. says the number of refugees fleeing the conflict is escalating.

Opposition activists said the three-day death toll in the suburb Daraya had reached at least 70, mostly civilians. They said Syrian forces continued to shell the area from positions on Mount Qasioun, on the northern edge of the capital.

Heavy fighting was also reported in other Sunni Muslim suburbs where rebel fighters are active. And fierce clashes between the rebel Free Syrian Army and government troops were reported in the eastern city of Deir Ezzor.

The opposition [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), based in London, said 220 people were killed in violence across Syria Thursday - many of them in or around Damascus.

The Syrian government says it views the rebels as terrorists who, with foreign help, are seeking to destabilize Syria and topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Accelerating exodus

The United Nations refugee agency says relief operations for Syrian refugees in Lebanon are being hampered by worsening security.

The agency says clashes between rival neighborhoods in the Lebanese city of Tripoli are affecting the pace of refugee registrations.

"Fewer Syrians are turning up to register and appointments for those staying in affected areas have been rescheduled," said agency spokesman Adrian Edwards.

Sniper fire killed a prominent Sunni sheikh in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli Friday. This sparked renewed clashes between pro- and anti-Syrian factions that killed two people and wounded 17 others, dashing a tenuous truce.

Sunni Muslims have led the revolt against Assad, whose minority Alawite sect has mostly stood with him. Sunni-Alawite tensions have been growing in parts of Lebanon as well, such as Tripoli, where the two groups live in neighboring districts.

The [UNHCR](#) recently scaled up its registration process in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq to keep up with the escalating refugee numbers.

The agency is urging Syrians to register as refugees so they can receive basic help and services. U.N. workers say more refugees are coming forward now than before, but many are still reluctant to register, for fear of being identified if they return home.

In all, UNHCR says more than 200,000 Syrian refugees are registered or awaiting registration. Previous U.N. projections had estimated 185,000 Syrian refugees would need aid this year.

The tide of refugees fleeing to Jordan in particular has jumped significantly. Spokesman Edwards said, "We saw a record number of people crossing the border overnight, being received at the Za'atri camp in the north of Jordan," he said.

Turkey has received the largest number of refugees. UNHCR says Turkish authorities have officially registered more than 74,000 displaced Syrians.

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees representative Sybella Wilkes said 2,200 Syrians crossed into Jordan overnight, swelling the population of UNHCR's Za'atri camp to 15,000 refugees.

Protests erupt

Meanwhile, the Local Coordination Committees, an activist group with members throughout Syria, said anti-Assad demonstrations broke out after Friday prayers in several Syrian cities.

"A massive demonstration started in [Aleppo's] Horria square," said LCC spokeswoman Rafif Jouejati, with protesters "chanting for Daraa and other disaster-stricken cities and demanding the trial of the regime and all its symbols."

She said a similar protest took place in the Damascus suburb of Hajar al-Aswad, despite the shelling there.

Lisa Schlein reported for VOA from Geneva and Mark Snowiss from Washington. Some information for this report was provided by AP, AFP and Reuter