

Syria clash kills 28 as Assad says open to 2014 run

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## **Syria clash kills 28 as Assad says open to 2014 run**

Damascus — At least 28 people were reported killed in a Syrian firefight Saturday, the day after President Bashar al-Assad said he would seek re-election next year if "the Syrian people want."

The fierce fighting in the coastal region of Tartus underscored the dangers faced by international inspectors who were pressing ahead with the daunting task of identifying and eradicating Syria's vast chemical arsenal.

Poland's foreign minister meanwhile confirmed that a Polish photojournalist kidnapped in Syria in July was alive.

A team of 19 inspectors from the Hague-based Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons arrived in Damascus on Tuesday to begin verifying and dismantling Syria's chemical arsenal under the terms of a UN resolution.

The team faces the massive task of destroying an estimated 1,000 tonnes of the nerve agent sarin, mustard gas and other banned arms at dozens of sites in Syria by mid-2014.

Their immediate aim is to disable production sites by late October or early November using different methods, including explosives, sledgehammers and pouring concrete.

Norwegian broadcaster NRK said Saturday that Oslo had been approached to help with the task of dismantling existing weapons.

The station said the United States and Russia, which brokered the deal under which Syria will turn over its chemical arsenal, approached Norway for help.

The broadcaster said Norway was considered a suitable location for dismantling the weapons because it is politically stable and has large amounts of water, which is crucial for the process.

Syria agreed to the US-Russian deal to turn over its chemical weapons after Washington threatened it with military action in response to an August 21 sarin attack on the outskirts of Damascus that killed hundreds of people.

Washington and much of the international community blamed the attack on Assad's regime, a charge he denied during an interview with Turkish media published on Friday.

Syria's chemical arsenal is in the hands of "special forces" who were the only ones capable of using them, Assad said.

"Preparing these weapons is a complex technical operation... and a special procedure is necessary to use them which requires a central order from the army chief of staff. As a result it is impossible that they were used," he said.

The OPCW team has so far reported "encouraging initial progress" and

OPCW director-general Ahmet Uzumcu said on Friday that the organisation was reviewing an additional submission by Syrian authorities.

The OPCW's mission in Syria is the first time it has carried out such an operation in a country embroiled in a civil war.

Assad could run again in 2014

The violence in Syria has left more than 115,000 people dead and displaced millions from their homes, but Assad told Turkish television station Halk TV he could run for office again in elections next year.

"If I feel that the Syrian people want me to be president during the next stage, I will present my candidacy," he said.

"If the answer is no, I won't do it," he added, saying he expected his decision to become "clearer in the next four or five months."

Assad accused the rebels seeking his overthrow of being "terrorists" seeking to create an "Islamic state," and warned neighbouring Turkey it would "pay dearly" for backing the opposition.

"In the near future these terrorists will have an impact on Turkey. And Turkey will pay very dearly for its contribution," he said.

On the ground, the Observatory said at least 28 people were killed -- 20 pro-regime fighters and eight civilians -- during fighting between regime and rebel forces in Tartus province.

The fighting, on the outskirts of the Sunni village of al-Mitrass in majority Alawite Tartus, ended after "wanted people" inside were turned over to the army, the Observatory said.

Assad hails from the Alawite minority -- an offshoot of Shiite Islam -- while the rebels fighting against him are Sunni-dominated.

In Poland, Foreign Affairs Minister Radoslaw Sikorski confirmed to radio RMF FM that photographer Marcin Suder was "alive" after being abducted in Syria in July.

He said he could not give any details about Suder's health or whereabouts for his "own good."

Suder, a freelancer who works for the Corbis agency and other outlets, was abducted on July 24 during a raid on a media centre in Saraqeb, in the northwestern province of Idlib.