

Syrian Unrest After a Failure of Diplomacy
By Anthony Shadid
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BEIRUT, Lebanon — The collapse of diplomatic efforts to mediate Syria's uprising reverberated across the country Sunday, emboldening a government that pressed on with a crackdown in the capital's suburbs and the north and prompting rebel leaders to vow that only force would drive President Bashar al-Assad from power.

There were few words of optimism in a conflict that may or may not yet be a civil war, but already bears the hallmarks of a prolonged struggle pitting a still relatively cohesive leadership against an opposition that has gained control of territory in some places, while crumbling before the government's onslaught in others.

The violence Sunday, centered in long rebellious areas, including the city of Homs, killed 31 people, according to activists, adding to a death toll that the United Nations set at 5,400 before it stopped compiling figures.

Even before the predictions of intensified conflict, the government's citadels of support — Damascus and Aleppo — had begun, after months of relative quiet, to feel the brunt of a contest that emerged nearly 11 months ago in the countryside. In some of the capital's suburbs, military forces have recently begun to act like an occupying army, with residents reporting instances of looting and pillaging. And a cancerous sectarianism that wrecked Syria's neighbors to the east and west, Iraq and Lebanon, has become so pronounced that some military defectors have vowed to attack religious sites.

The events this weekend seemed sure to serve as benchmarks in an uprising that now stands as one of the Arab world's bloodiest. The collapse of the United Nations Security Council's effort to pressure Mr. Assad, after vetoes by Russia and China on Saturday, came just hours after the military shelled Homs in what opposition leaders called the deadliest assault since the uprising began in March. They said more than 200 were killed, a toll that Syrian officials flatly denied.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Sunday called the quashing of the Security Council resolution a "travesty" and said the administration would renew efforts to stop the flow of arms to Syria.

The Assad government hailed the action by Russia and China as a rejection of intervention in Syria's conflict, and a state newspaper signaled that the leadership would be more determined than ever to crush the uprising. It promised that the government would "restore what Syrians had enjoyed for decades." Over all, the domestic media's coverage of the Security Council's vote suggested it was seen in Syria as an important sign that the government retained at least some legitimacy in the eyes of the world.

That sense of the government's hand being strengthened by the failure in New York was so pronounced that Human Rights Watch, echoing critiques by Western and Arab diplomats, warned Syria not to use the veto "as a green light for even more violence."

Armed defectors, joined by civilians who have taken up arms, number only in the thousands, diplomats say, but they, too, hinted at a determination to shift from what they saw as their mission months ago — protecting protesters — and toward a more traditional insurgency. That shift has been most visible in Homs and the northern region of Idlib.

"Only military options are on the table," Col. Riad al-Assad, a defector and commander of the Free Syrian Army, said in a telephone interview from his base in Turkey. "The political options have failed. This regime won't end except through force."

Though Colonel Assad's control over the defectors remains debatable — many diplomats and residents describe the armed opponents as far more atomized — there seems little question that the opposition is growing more militarized and determined. While it retains a peaceful component, giving rise to a vibrant culture of protest, defectors have steadily gathered numbers and boast of their ability to control many areas of Homs, the central city assaulted on Saturday.

An activist in Idlib relayed a recent chant: "Enough for being peaceful, enough whatever, we want weapons and rockets."

As in Iraq, after the American invasion, a debate has ensued over whether to call the conflict a civil war. The argument sometimes masks the real forces at work — a regime bent on exploiting society's divisions, an opposition so far incapable of providing an alternative, and deepening strife that has drawn in not only the government and defectors, but also gangs and criminals. Whether or not a civil war is fought, many fear those forces will pull apart society, causing rifts that could take years, even a generation, to reconcile.

In Homs, many residents say they are reluctant to travel, even by late afternoon. Blackouts lasting hours have made winter feel more severe, and many have resorted to wood-burning stoves. Rival gangs of Sunni Muslims, who are the majority in Syria, and Alawites, a heterodox sect from which Mr. Assad draws much of his leadership, carry out tit-for-tat kidnappings, sometimes imposing hefty ransoms.

In the neighborhood of Inshaat, a woman in her 50s, who gave her name as Samah, said that for months she and her husband had refused to leave.

"The security forces took my sister's house because she lives abroad," she said by phone. "They broke her things and used the chairs and tables as wood to light the fireplace. My husband asked my sons, 'Do you want this to happen to our house?'"

On Sunday, she said they had finally decided to leave for Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

"It's been a month and a half since I've seen the street," she said.

As in Aleppo, the second largest city, residents in Damascus say the mood has grown more somber as hardships grow, though they pale before those in Homs. A 35-year-old government employee who gave his name as Hassan said some people could no longer go in to work because the state had begun commandeering buses to transport security services and militiamen. Families say they have begun stockpiling food, medicine and even drinking water.

"Damascus has completely changed," said a 50-year-old man who gave his name as Sharif. "I am not anti-Assad. I want to live in peace with my children and wife. But for the first time, I get the feeling that President Assad is going to fall from power."

So far, though, Syria seems less at a turning point and more mired in a war of attrition, as forces that began emerging in August gather speed. High-level defections have been exceedingly rare, and even as the government cedes territory in places like Homs and Idlib, it still counts on the support of China, Iran, and most importantly, Russia, whose foreign minister and intelligence chief are scheduled to visit Damascus on Tuesday.

"What holds the regime together most of all is that the opposition is divided, the Arab League is divided, the international community is divided," said Peter Harling, an expert on Syria at the International Crisis Group. "Just hanging on there, living another day, is ultimately winning. People may not like the regime, they may not support it, but they're not convinced the moment has come that the regime is going to fall apart."