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Battles rage around Damascus, jihadists slay rival rebel leader

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By Marlin Dick
The Daily Star



Residents gather at a site hit by what activists say was airstrike by forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, near a children's park in the Duma neighbourhood of Damascus November 27, 2013. (REUTERS/Bassam Khabieh)



BEIRUT: Fierce fighting pitting Syrian government troops and allied Shiite militias against rebels rocked neighborhoods and suburbs of Damascus Wednesday, amid efforts to clamp down on the reporting of the battles underway.

Hard-line jihadists from the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) in the north, meanwhile, carried out the public execution of leader of a rival rebel group.

Several pro-opposition websites reported that the Damascus suburb of Otaiba was seized by rebel groups, earning rebukes from activist networks.

"The news is completely false," said a media activist group in the Ghouta suburbs. "The areas of Marj and Eastern Ghouta are still surrounded by Assad troops and their mercenaries. We ask the media and coordination committees to stop playing fast and loose with the blood of the fighters in order to get a scoop."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said battles raged from the northeastern suburbs of Jobar and Barzeh to a number of suburbs south of the capital which have been besieged by regime troops for months.

At least 17 rebel fighters were killed in the fighting in the suburb of

STORY SUMMARY

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Moadamieh in the western Ghouta, along with an unspecified number of government troops, the Observatory said.

The Damascus suburb of Jaramana was hit by at least a dozen mortar bombs, activists said, leading to the death of at least one person and the wounding of others.

Half a dozen rebel groups also claimed advances against regime troops in various areas of the southern province of Quneitra, including the capture of small outposts, vehicles and tanks.

The Observatory said two tanks were disabled by the rebels.

It said Tuesday's countrywide death toll reached 226 people, with 171 from the ranks of various mainstream rebel groups and hard-line jihadists as well as regular army forces and their allies, Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Abul-Fadl al-Abbas Iraqi militia.

Observers and activists have recorded a marked stepping-up of military operations over the last week, as rebels fight back against regime offensives in Damascus, Aleppo, and the Qalamoun region north of the capital.

Pro-opposition websites said 10 people were killed in the town of Nabk in the Qalamoun region by government shelling. Rebels seized the town last week, leading to the closure of the main highway between Homs and Damascus.

The Observatory said fierce fighting and shelling by regime troops also took place in Aleppo, Deir al-Zor, Idlib and Deraa provinces.

In Hassakeh province in the northeast, Kurdish fighters from the PYD militia managed to take a village, Tueineh, from jihadists from ISIS, the Nusra Front and allied militias.

The last several weeks have seen a concerted push by Kurdish militias to secure territory that had been earlier held by the Islamist rebel groups.

In Aleppo province, pro-opposition websites said ISIS militants executed a rebel leader, Hasan Jazra, who had earlier been kidnapped by the jihadists.

The video, which could not be independently confirmed, shows several hundred people gathered in the town of Atareb, where ISIS wields control, listening to the verdict being read out.

Jazra and six other men were shot in the back of the head after being convicted by the "Islamic Tribunal" of ISIS for "harmful acts." Pro-opposition websites said the men had engaged in various acts of "theft and looting."

Jazra, the commander of the Ghuraba al-Sham militia, had long been criticized for looting and other violations against civilian populations in the Aleppo region. Opposition groups had also accused Jazra or collaborating at times with the Assad regime.

Also in Aleppo, pro-opposition websites said the Ahrar Syria rebel militia announced a restructuring drive, which saw five small battalions booted out of its ranks for engaging in "illegal acts."

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on November 28, 2013, on page 8.

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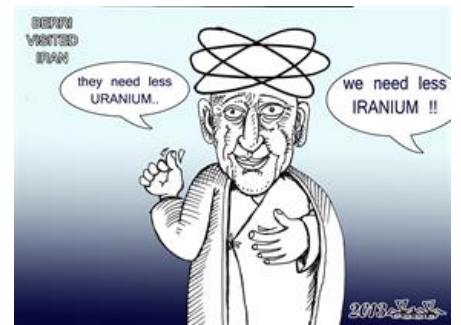
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