

Syrian Forces Massing Outside Of Resistance Stronghold

BY BRIAN MURPHY
AND ZEINA KARAM
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Syrian tanks and troops massed Monday outside the resistance stronghold of Homs for a possible ground assault that one activist warned could unleash a new round of fierce and bloody urban combat even as the Red Cross tried to broker a cease-fire to allow emergency aid in.

A flood of military reinforcements has been a prelude to previous offensives by President Bashar Assad's regime, which has tried to use its overwhelming firepower to crush an opposition that has been bolstered by defecting soldiers and hardened by 11 months of street battles.

"The human loss is going to be huge if they retake Baba Amr," said Rami Abdul-Rahman, who heads the Britain-based activist group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The central city of Homs — and in particular the opposition district known as Baba Amr — has become a critical ground for both sides.

The opposition has lionized it as "Syria's Misrata" after the Libyan city where rebels fought off a brutal government siege. Assad's regime wants desperately to erase the embarrassing defiance in Syria's third-largest city after weeks of shelling, including a barrage of mortars that killed up to 200 people earlier this month. At least nine people were killed in shelling Monday, activists said.

Another massive death toll would only bring further international isolation on Assad from Western and Arab leaders.

"The massacre in Syria goes on," said U.S. Sen. John McCain during a visit to Cairo, where he urged Washington and its allies to find way to help arm and equip Syrian rebels.

McCain, a senior member of the Senate Armed Service Committee, said he did not support direct U.S. weapons supplies to Syrian opposition forces, but has suggested the Arab League or others could help bolster the fighting power of the anti-Assad groups. The U.S., he said, could assist with equipment such as medical supplies or global positioning devices.

"It is time we gave them the wherewithal to fight back and stop the slaughter," he said.

Assad's fall also would be a potentially devastating blow for his close ally Iran, which counts on Syria as its most reliable Arab ally and a pathway for aid to Tehran's patron Hezbollah in Lebanon. But McCain urged for "like-minded" Western and Arab nations also to guard against attempts by al-Qaida or other extremists to exploit a leadership vacuum if the regime crumbles.

"For us to sit back and do nothing while people are being slaughtered ... is an affront to everything America stands for and believes in," said McCain, suggesting that the Republicans could seek to make Syria a central campaign issue in this year's U.S. presidential election.

But U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, on a visit to Mexico on Monday, dodged a question about whether the U.S. could accept Arab countries or others arming the Syrian rebels.

We are all working for the planned friends of Syria meeting at the end of this week, which we think will give us a chance to come together and chart a way forward," she said.

She said the meeting in Tunisia "will demonstrate the Assad regime is increasingly isolated and that the brave Syrian people need our support and solidarity."

But she said that should be expressed through humanitarian help and encouragement to the Syrian opposition to promise that everyone they will be represented in a new Syria.

In Cairo, Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Elaraby suggested at a news conference that Russia and China — two countries that recently supported Damascus by vetoing a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Assad's regime — may be shifting their positions.

"There are some indications, especially from China and to some degree from Russia that there may be a change in their stance," he said, without elaborating.

Syria-based activist Mustafa Oso told The Associated Press that Assad's military should face strong resistance as residents plan to fight until "the last person." He added that Homs is facing "savage shelling that does not differentiate between military or civilians targets."

Oil Prices Rise After Iran Supply Cut

BY PABLO GORONDI
Associated Press

Oil prices jumped to a nine-month high above \$105 a barrel on Monday after Iran said it halted crude exports to Britain and France in an escalation of a dispute over the Middle Eastern country's nuclear program.

By Monday afternoon, benchmark March crude was up \$2.02 to \$105.26 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange, the highest since May. The contract rose 93 cents to settle at \$103.24 per barrel in New York on Friday.

Iran's announcement will likely have minimal impact on supplies, analysts said, because only about 3 percent of France's oil consumption is from Iranian sources. Britain had not imported oil from the Islamic republic in six months.

"The price rise is more a reflection of concerns about the further escalation in tensions between Iran and the West," said commodity analyst Caroline Bain of the Economist Intelligence Unit. "Banning the tiny quantities of exports to the U.K. and

France involves very little risk for Iran — indeed quite the opposite, it catches the headlines and leads to a higher global oil price, which is something Iran is very keen to encourage."

Markets in the United States are closed Monday for the Presidents Day holiday.

Iran's oil ministry said Sunday it stopped crude shipments to British and French companies in an apparent pre-emptive blow against the European Union after the bloc imposed sanctions on Iran's crucial fuel exports. They include a freeze of the country's central bank assets and an oil embargo set to begin in July.

Iran's Oil Minister Rostam Qassemi had warned earlier this month that Tehran could cut off oil exports to "hostile" European nations. The 27-nation EU accounts for about 18 percent of Iran's oil exports.

Tehran also is considering extending the embargo to other European countries, a semiofficial Iranian news agency reported Monday.

The head of Iran's state oil company Ahmad Qalehbandi was quoted by the Mehr

"Banning the tiny quantities of exports to the U.K. and France involves very little risk for Iran — indeed quite the opposite, it catches the headlines and leads to a higher global oil price, which is something Iran is very keen to encourage."

CAROLINE BAIN

agency as saying that the country would stop selling crude to nations who take action against Tehran.

The EU sanctions, along with other punitive measures imposed by the U.S., are part of Western efforts to derail Iran's disputed nuclear program, which the West fears is aimed at developing atomic weapons. Iran denies the charges, and says its program is for peaceful purposes.

Oil prices also rose on hopes that Greece's new bailout deal will be approved on Monday as well as by China's decision to boost money supply bid to spur lending and economic growth. China's central bank said Saturday it will lower the ratio of funds that banks must hold as reserves, a move that frees tens of billions of dollars.

Oil has jumped from \$96 earlier this month amid optimism the global economy may grow more this year than previously expected. J.P. Morgan raised its Brent crude price forecast to as high as \$135 from \$120 — on Monday, the April Brent crude contract was up 79 cents at \$120.37 per barrel on the ICE Futures exchange.

"Building economic momentum has the potential to pull oil prices higher for the next 12 to 24 months," J.P. Morgan said in a report.

In other energy trading in March contracts, heating oil gained 3 cents to \$3.22 per gallon and gasoline futures rose 3.2 cents to \$3.22 per gallon. Natural gas lost 7 cents to \$2.62 per 1,000 cubic feet.

GOP 'Super PACs' Buoyed By Mega Donors In January

WASHINGTON (AP) — A pair of "super" political action committees supporting top Republican presidential candidates spent nearly \$24 million in January, drawing upon major gifts and repeat donations from wealthy business executives, according to financial reports the groups filed Monday with the government.

The super PACs — Mitt Romney-leaning Restore Our Future and Newt Gingrich-supportive Win-

ning Our Future — raised a combined \$17 million last month. That financial strength allowed the groups to hit the airwaves in key primary states with millions of dollars in expensive TV ads.

The groups' fundraising offers a periodic behind-the-scenes glimpse into the identities of the wealthy supporters who will help elect the next president, along with details on how the tens of millions of dollars they donated have been

spent this election season. Restore Our Future, which spent \$14 million last month, has been boosted by more than two dozen repeat donors. Winning Our Future, which spent \$9.7 million, is largely supported by casino mogul Sheldon Adelson and his wife.

The super PACs, as well as other groups supporting other candidates and the individual campaigns, were required to disclose how much they raised and the

identities of their donors in reports filed with the Federal Election Commission by midnight Monday.

Those reports provided a snapshot of fundraising for President Barack Obama's early campaign and for Republican candidates as they battled during important primary elections in January. During

the month, GOP candidates Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum had briefly surged ahead of front-runner Mitt Romney but trailed the former Massachusetts governor in fundraising. Since then, Santorum has climbed remarkably in polls as support eroded just as stunningly for Gingrich following his disappointing showing in Florida.

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FEBRUARY 24, 25, 26

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Deep Fried Catfish

Serving 5:30-8:00

Saturday

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Bingo Wed. at 7:00pm

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3 p.m.

Free Admission

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\$500 in Total Cash Drawings

\$25 Drawn Every 15 Minutes 7:15pm-Midnight

2-\$500 Gift Card Drawings to Walmart

Must be present to win, to qualify must have won \$50 or more and filled out a yellow ticket

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 29TH

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Buy \$10 in Credits Get \$5 in Free Play

First 50 Customers at 1:00 & 7:00pm

OHIYA BINGO

Friday, February 24th

Regular Session \$16 Pays \$50, \$7 X-tra Packet

Saturday, February 25th

\$20 Pays \$75, \$10 X-tra Packet, Warm-Ups 6PM, Reg. Session 6:30pm

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Saturday, February 25th

Pancake Buffet \$5.50

Dinner Buffet \$10.50 Chicken & BBQ Ribs

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Lewis & Clark Theatre Co.

Theatrical Gala

~2012~

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The Luck of the Irish

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