

More Than 60,000 Dead In Syrian Civil War

BY BEN HUBBARD
AND FRANK JORDANS
Associated Press

BEIRUT — The United Nations gave a grim new count Wednesday of the human cost of Syria's civil war, saying the death toll has exceeded 60,000 in 21 months — far higher than recent estimates by anti-regime activists.

The day's events illustrated the escalating violence that has made recent months the deadliest of the conflict: As rebels pressed a strategy of attacking airports and pushing the fight closer to President Bashar Assad's stronghold in Damascus, the government responded with deadly airstrikes on restive areas around the capital.

A missile from a fighter jet hit a gas station in the suburb of Mleiha, killing or wounding dozens of people who were trapped in burning piles of debris, activists said.

Gruesome online video showed incinerated victims — one still sitting astride a motorcycle — or bodies torn apart.

"He's burning! The guy is burning!" an off-camera voice screamed in one video over a flaming corpse.

It was unclear if the government had a military strategy for attacking the gas station. At least one of the wounded wore a military-style vest often used by rebel fighters. Human rights groups and anti-regime activists say Assad's forces often make little effort to avoid civilian casualties when bombing rebel areas.

Syria's conflict began in March 2011 with protests calling for political change but has evolved into a full-scale civil war.

As the rebels have grown more organized and effective, seizing territory in the north and establishing footholds around Damascus, the government has stepped up its use of air-power, launching daily airstrikes. The escalating violence has sent the death toll soaring.

The U.N.'s new count of more than 60,000 deaths since the start of the conflict is a third higher than recent estimates by anti-regime activists. One group, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, says more than 45,000 people have been killed. Other groups have given similar tolls.

"The number of casualties is much higher than we expected, and is truly shocking," U.N.

High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said in a statement.

She criticized the government for inflaming the conflict by cracking down on peaceful protests and said rebel groups, too, have killed unjustifiably. Acts by both sides could be considered war crimes, she said.

She also faulted world powers for not finding a way to stop the violence.

"The failure of the international community, in particular the Security Council, to take concrete actions to stop the bloodletting shames us all," Pillay said. "Collectively, we have fiddled at the edges while Syria burns."

The U.S. and many European and Arab nations have demanded that Assad step down, while Russia, China and Iran have criticized calls for regime change.

The new death toll was compiled by independent experts commissioned by the U.N. human rights office who compared 147,349 killings reported by seven different sources, including the Syrian government.

After removing duplicates, they had a list of 59,648 individuals killed between the start of the uprising on March 15, 2011, and Nov. 30, 2012. In each case, the victim's first and last name and the date and location of death were known. Killings in December pushed the number past 60,000, she said.

The total death toll is likely to be even higher because incomplete reports were excluded, and some killing may not have been documented at all.

"There are many names not on the list for people who were quietly shot in the woods," Pillay's spokesman Rupert Colville told The Associated Press.

The data did not distinguish among soldiers, rebels or civilians.

It indicated that the pace of killing has accelerated. Monthly death tolls in summer 2011 were around 1,000. A year later, they had reached about 5,000 per month.

Most of the killings were in the province of Homs, followed by the Damascus suburbs, Idlib, Aleppo, Daraa and Hama. At least three-fourths of the victims were male.

Pillay warned that thousands more could die or be injured, and she said the danger could continue even after the war.

"We must not compound the existing disaster by failing to prepare for the inevitable —

and very dangerous — instability that will occur when the conflict ends," she said.

The U.N. refugee agency said about 84,000 people fled Syria in December alone, bringing the total number of refugees to about a half-million. Many more are displaced inside Syria.

While no one expects the war to end soon, international sanctions and rebel advances are eroding Assad's power. Rebels recently have targeted two pillars of his strength: his control of the skies and his grip on Damascus.

Rebels in northern Syria attacked a government helicopter base near the village of Taftanaz in Idlib province, activists said. Videos posted online showed them blasting targets inside the airport with heavy machine guns mounted on trucks.

All videos appeared genuine and corresponded with other AP reporting on the events.

In recent weeks, rebels have attacked three other airports in north Syria. They clashed Wednesday with forces inside the Mannagh military airport near the Turkish border as well as near the Aleppo international airport and adjacent Nerab military airport, halting air traffic there for the second straight day.

The fall of those airports to the rebels would embarrass the regime but not fully stop the airstrikes by government jets, many of which come from bases farther south.

In another blow to the regime and to Syria's economy, a company based in the Philippines that handled shipping containers at Syria's largest port said it was canceling its contract, citing an "untenable, hostile and dangerous business environment."

The Manila-based International Container Terminal Services Inc. said the amount of port traffic had gone down, hurting business, while conditions in Syria grew more dangerous.

The company's departure will significantly limit cargo services at the Tartus port.

Also, Wednesday, the family of American journalist James Foley revealed that he has been missing in Syria for more than a month. Foley was providing video for Agence France-Presse when he was abducted Nov. 22 by unknown gunmen, his family said in a statement.

Hillary Clinton Leaves Hospital After Clot

BY JOSH LEDERMAN
Associated Press



Clinton

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was released from a New York hospital on Wednesday, three days after doctors discovered a blood clot in her head.

Clinton's medical team advised her Wednesday evening that she was making good progress on all fronts and said they are confident she will fully recover, said Clinton spokesman Philippe Reines. Doctors had been treating Clinton with blood thinners to dissolve a clot in a vein that runs through the space between the brain and the skull behind the right ear.

"She's eager to get back to the office," Reines said in a statement, adding that the secretary and her family are grateful for the excellent care she received at New York-Presbyterian Hospital.

Reines said details of when Clinton will return to work will be clarified in the coming days.

Clinton had been in the hospital since Sunday, when doctors discovered the clot on an MRI test during a follow-up exam stemming from a concussion she suffered earlier in December. While at home battling a stomach virus, Clinton had fainted, fallen and struck her head, a spokesman said.

"Grateful my Mom discharged from the hospital and is heading home," the secretary's daughter, Chelsea, wrote on Twitter. "Even more grateful her medical team (is) confident she'll make a full recovery."

Earlier Wednesday, the State

Department said Clinton had been speaking by telephone with staff in Washington and reviewing paperwork while in the hospital.

"She's been quite active on the phone with all of us," said State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland.

Before being released from the hospital, Clinton was photographed Wednesday getting into a black van with her husband, Bill, Chelsea and a security contingent to be taken elsewhere on the sprawling hospital campus. The last time Clinton had been seen publicly was on Dec. 7.

Clinton's physicians had said Monday that there was no neurological damage but that they planned to keep her in the hospital while they established the proper dose for the blood thinners. They said Clinton, 65, had been in good spirits and was engaging with doctors, family and aides.

Sidelined by her illness for most of December, Clinton was absent on Dec. 21 when President Barack Obama nominated Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., to succeed her when she steps down at the start of Obama's second term, as had long been planned. The illness also forced to cancel scheduled testimony before Congress about a scathing report into the attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, that killed four Americans, although she could still testify in the future.

Trees

From Page 1

microscopic-sized pinewood nematode.

"The nematode's activities in the tree retard the movement of water from roots to needles, which results in the tree's rapid death," Ball wrote. "Pine wilt is not a slow decline, but occurs quickly with trees first showing symptoms in the summer and usually dying by that same fall. These infected trees will also have blue streaks in the wood, caused by a blue-stain fungus, which aids the nematode in killing the tree. These two organisms — the nematode and the fungus — are carried from tree to tree by sawyer beetles. These large-bodied insects, also known as long-horned beetles because of their long antennae, are the only means of the disease spreading."

Pine wilt was first described in 1905 in Japan, according to the Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture. Several studies indicate that the pinewood nematode was actually introduced to Japan from the United States.

It was 1979 before the nematode was reported to cause pine wilt in the United States — namely,

to non-native pines in Missouri.

Since then, pine wilt related to the nematode has mostly occurred in the Midwest in non-native pines such as Austrian, Scotch and Japanese red and black pines.

It has been determined the nematode is not a threat to native forests in the United States.

"The disease has been found in southern South Dakota during the past several decades," Ball wrote. "It periodically occurs in outbreaks, with many trees lost in a specific community or area, during years when the summers are hot and dry."

To stop the spread of the nematode, infected trees should be promptly destroyed, he added.

"This removal can take place any time during the fall or winter but should be completed before the end of April," Ball wrote. "This is the time when the sawyer beetles may begin to emerge from the dead, infected tree and move to a new host. The wood should be either burned or chipped to kill the beetles before they emerge. Merely removing the bark from the wood is not sufficient to kill this insect. The infested tree should also be cut as flush to the ground as possible, as the nematode and insect can also remain in these.

"The insect can survive in firewood, so recently-killed trees should not be cut into firewood

and stored," he continued. "The disease can be spread by chips, but only if the chips are fresh and placed against the trunk of a healthy pine tree. Storing the chips for six weeks will dry them sufficiently so that the danger of disease transmission is minimal."

Pesticide is available that can be injected into trees to prevent infection, but it costs approximately \$200 per tree. Also, it must be used every three years.

"It is best limited to high-value Scotch pines in residential landscapes," Ball stated.

He also warned that pine wilt is not the only serious disease that affects pines in South Dakota.

"Diplodia tip blight and dothistroma needle blight are two other diseases that appear in the area and require other treatments to protect trees," Ball wrote. "It is important to identify what disease has affected the pine before treatments are initiated."

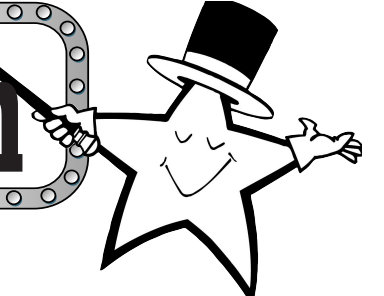
Bertsch said ponderosa pines, which do not get pine wilt, will be planted to replace the diseased Austrian pines.

Before that happens, however, Game, Fish and Parks employees will be busy.

"We've got a lot of cutting ahead of us," Bertsch stated.

You can follow Nathan Johnson on Twitter at twitter.com/AnInlandVoyage

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