



AUSTIN TICE/MCT  
Community members depart the funeral of a slain rebel fighter, leaving behind shovels to bury the next casualty in Bweda Sharkiya, Syria.

# Syrian Violence Escalates As U.S. Seeks A Turning Point

BY ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY  
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Gunmen attacked a pro-government TV station Wednesday near the Syrian capital, killing seven employees in the latest barrage of violence as world powers prepared for a high-level meeting that the U.S. hopes will be a turning point in the crisis.

Invitations to Saturday's gathering in Geneva were sent by special envoy Kofi Annan to the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council — including Syrian allies Russia and China — but not to major regional players Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The absence of those two countries, as well as the lack of any appetite for international military intervention, could make it difficult for the group to find the leverage to end the bloodshed in Syria. An effort by Annan to broker a peace plan failed earlier this year.

Diplomatic hopes have rested on Russia — Syria's most important ally and protector — agreeing on a transition plan that would end the Assad family dynasty, which has ruled Syria for more than four decades. But Moscow has rejected efforts by outside forces to end the conflict or any plan to force regime change in Damascus.

The United Nations said Wednesday that the conflict, which began in March 2011 as part of the Arab Spring that swept aside entrenched leaders across the region, is descending into sectarian warfare.

President Bashar Assad has so far appeared largely impervious to world pressure and he has warned the international community from meddling in the crisis, which has seen a sharp escalation in violence in recent months. He said this week that his country is in "a genuine state of war," an increasingly common refrain from the Syrian leader.

Assad denies there is any popular will behind the uprising, which is in its 16th month, saying terrorists are driving a foreign conspiracy to destroy the country. Activists say more than 14,000 people have been killed in the violence.

An Associated Press photographer said the attack on the Al-Ikhbariya TV station in the town of Drousha, about 20 kilometers (14 miles) south of the capital Damascus, left bloodstains on the ground and bullet holes in the walls. The attack heavily damaged five portable buildings used for offices and studios.

Al-Ikhbariya is privately owned but strongly supports the regime.

"What happened today is a massacre," Information Minister Omran al-Zoebe told reporters. He blamed terrorists — the same term the government uses for rebels.

The rebels deny they target the media. Activists blamed the attack on elite Syrian troops who defected from the regime Tuesday. The allegation could not be independently confirmed.

Several other staff members of the TV station were wounded

in the attack, which happened just before 4 a.m., an employee said. He added that the gunmen kidnapped him along with several station guards. He was released but the guards were not.

The employee, who did not give his name for fear of retribution, said the gunmen drove him about 200 meters (yards) away and he then heard an explosion from the station.

Hours after the attack, the station was still on the air, broadcasting news of a rally in a Damascus square by people protesting the raid.

Earlier this month, two Al-Ikhbariya employees were shot and seriously wounded by gunmen in the northwestern town of Haffa while covering clashes between government troops and insurgents.

Much of the violence that has gripped Syria in the uprising has been sanctioned by the government to crush dissent. But rebel fighters are launching increasingly deadly attacks on regime targets, and several massive suicide attacks this year suggest al-Qaida or other extremists are joining the fray.

On Wednesday, the U.N. gave a grim assessment of the crisis, saying the violence has worsened since April, when the cease-fire brokered by Annan was supposed to go into effect. There also were signs the bloodshed is descending into sectarian warfare.

"Where previously victims were targeted on the basis of their being pro- or anti-government, the Commission of Inquiry has recorded a growing number of incidents where victims appear to have been targeted because of their religious affiliation," a panel of U.N.-appointed human rights experts said in a report released in Geneva.

Sectarian warfare is one of the most dire scenarios in Syria, which for decades managed to ward off the kind of bloodshed that has long bedeviled Iraq and Lebanon.

Sunnis make up most of Syria's 22 million people, as well as the backbone of the opposition. But the Assads and the ruling elite belong to the tiny Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, which has bred deep resentments.

Several notorious attacks during the uprising appeared to have sectarian overtones — including the Houla massacre in May, when more than 100 people were killed in a collection of villages in central Syria.

Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, who heads a U.N. panel conducting an international investigation of allegations of human rights abuses in Syria, called the country a "crime scene."

He said the probe into the Houla massacre concluded that forces loyal to the regime "may have been responsible" for many of the deaths. Investigators have said pro-regime, Alawite gunmen known as shabiha were believed to be responsible for at least some of the killings.

## Mexican Elections

# Focus Is On Man Expected To Lose

BY MICHAEL WEISSENSTEIN  
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Four days before Mexico's presidential election, much of the nation's attention is focused on a man who appears certain to lose.

That man is Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the fiery, feisty leftist who shut down the heart of Mexico City after the last election with mass protests against a narrow loss that he blamed on electoral fraud.

Final polls released Wednesday showed Lopez Obrador in second place, with the candidate of Mexico's former ruling party, Enrique Pena Nieto, anywhere from 8 to 17 percentage points in the lead.

As a result, few expect anything other than a Pena Nieto victory that will return the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, to the presidency after 12 years out of the nation's highest office.

What remains in doubt for millions of Mexicans is, will Lopez Obrador quietly accept defeat? Or will he call his followers back to the streets for a repeat of the 2006 allegations of fraud, and protests that shut down the heart of the capital for weeks and shook the faith of many, at home and abroad, in the stability of Mexico's young democracy?

In that last run, Lopez Obrador led until the final days and his backers could not believe the official result showing him less than 1 percentage point short of victor Felipe Calderon, though electoral courts upheld it. Lopez Obrador declared himself the "legitimate president of Mexico," named a Cabinet and toured the country to rally backers.

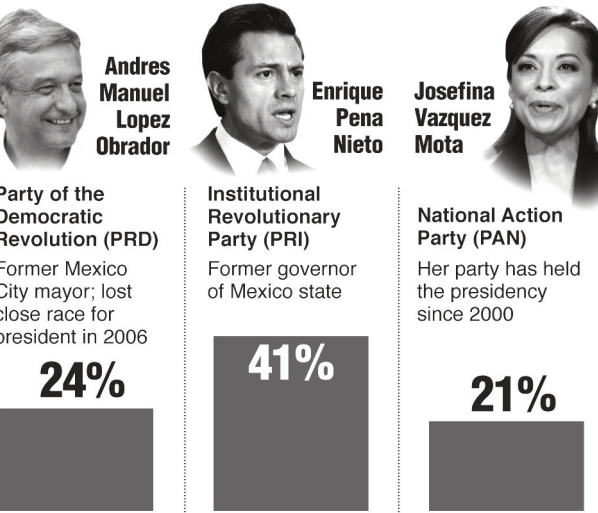
As his final campaign act this year, Lopez Obrador led thousands of people on a march Wednesday afternoon that many see as an uncomfortable echo of the last electoral battle.

Supporters waving the yellow flags of his party and wearing Lopez Obrador T-shirts shouted, "President! President! You are the President!" as they lined four lanes of Mexico City's central Reforma boulevard and headed to the Zocalo, the centuries-old square in the center of downtown that has served as the base for many of his protests.

Some of his supporters brought their pets, among them a white bull terrier with a message written on its side that read "a dog's life no more."

## Mexico presidential race

Registered voters' preference if the election were held today:



Source: Buendia and Laredo poll of 2,000 Mexican registered voters, June 22-24, 2012; margin of error: +/-2.5 percentage points; Dallas Morning News; MCT Photo Service

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There were so many followers trying to get near Lopez Obrador that at one point of the march his security team had to take him out of the crowd through a hole they tore in a construction fencing around the Alameda park.

Maria Antonia Bedolla, a 37-year-old housewife at the march, said she is ready to take to the streets if Lopez Obrador loses again.

"He will win if they don't steal (the election) from us like they did six years ago," Bedolla said. If he loses "I will express my discontent about the fraud."

Lopez Obrador softened his rhetoric at the start of this three-month campaign, saying he wants to build a "Republic of Love" marked by reconciliation and peace. In recent days he has been pledging, when pressed, that he will respect the will of the people, though he asserts he is ahead.

But the former Mexico City mayor has also been launching sharp attacks on Pena Nieto and the PRI, and routinely expressing grave doubts about the validity of the electoral process and the potential for fraud.

He called Tuesday for supporters to closely monitor polling stations.

"These days we're preparing ourselves to defend the vote, so another electoral fraud isn't committed," Lopez Obrador told a crowd

# Boats

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that all kinds of boats are acceptable, as well.

"It can be all types of water vehicles — power boats, pontoons, even jet skis," he said.

Boaters will begin lining up at 3:30 p.m. at Hobie Beach, next to the Lewis and Clark Marina. The parade, led by a boat holding a 29-by-50-foot flag, will start at 4 p.m. and will proceed along the shore to Gavins Point, ending at approximately 5 p.m.

Wolff said participants are encouraged to play music and to decorate the starboard sides of their boats in a patriotic manner for those viewing from the shore.

"They can put on the U.S. flag, and anything with stars and stripes," he said. "It should be a real nice statement for the Fourth of July."

Wolff said the idea for the parade spawned from a similar gathering last year, when several yacht club members wanted to do something for the holiday.

"It was kind of last-minute. Some of the members of the yacht club thought it would be nice to fly flags, but then we decided to have an actual parade," he said. "We had a lot of fun doing that, and people lined up on the shore and really seemed to enjoy it and were cheering. So we decided it would be nice to do it with a little bit more planning this year."

With more preparation and the addition of non-member boaters, Wolff said the club hopes to see many more boats than the 30 that took part last year.

"It would really be nice if we would have a large number," he said. "It's a wonderful opportunity for a statement for our country's independence on the Missouri River."

Wolff said he is slightly concerned that the holiday falling in the middle of the week could keep some people from participating, as many boaters from outside of Yankton only visit the area on weekends. However, he is still optimistic for the event.

"I'm sure it will have some impact, but we still believe there will be a good turnout," he said.

Wolff encourages everyone to attend the event, as even those without boats can join in on the celebration.

"Any spectators who would like to view from the shore care certainly welcome to. They can bring their flags or anything they would like to show their celebration of the independence," he said. "We really feel it's a wonderful lead up to the fireworks in Yankton."

You can follow Derek Bartos on Twitter at [twitter.com/d\\_bartos](https://twitter.com/d_bartos)



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