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Syria: Death toll rises as bombardment of civilian areas escalates in Homs

At least 377 civilians have been killed in Homs in recent days as Syrian security forces escalated their shelling of civilian neighbourhoods in the besieged city, according to information received by Amnesty International.

On Wednesday, reports also emerged of a military build-up in the city of Hama, 50 km to the north.

The latest surge in casualties chimes with remarks by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that the international community's failure to act had "emboldened" the Syrian military assault.

"The international community must not stand idly by while Homs and other Syrian cities come under fire and civilians are dying in droves," said Ann Harrison, interim Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty International.

"As the debate over how the UN should react to Syria's brutal crackdown has moved from the Security Council – where Russia and China continue to shield the Syrian government – to the General Assembly, the security forces have only stepped up their attacks."

Since 3 February, Syrian security forces have been shelling areas in and around Homs in what they claim is an effort to root out armed resistance groups based there.

Those killed since the assault on Homs began include 29 children, and there have been hundreds of injuries. Little food is getting through and the wounded are not receiving adequate treatment.

As in other cities around Syria, Amnesty International has been told that the authorities have restricted fuel supplies, possibly as a punitive measure.

Military defectors have increasingly been joining the Free Syrian Army and other armed opposition groups, who are said to have greater control in al-Rastan and other areas. Sporadic clashes have broken out between these forces and the Syrian troops surrounding Homs.

In other areas of the city, such as al-Insha'at, the army is said to have occupied vacant homes, where they sleep and position snipers.

The humanitarian situation in the city's opposition strongholds – including Bab Amr and al-Khaldieh – is said to be dire.

As well as food and energy shortages, doctors have told Amnesty International that medical supplies are dwindling and ambulances are being blocked from opposition areas in Homs.

“If there is one thing I would say to the international community, [it] is please put pressure on the government to allow ambulances to move in Homs – people who could be saved are dying because of this,” “Dr Hamza”, a London-based Syrian doctor who does not wish to be identified, told Amnesty International.

Even if Red Crescent aid reaches field hospitals, a severe shortage of rudimentary medical equipment hampers the efforts to treat the wounded. The medical response has also been impeded by cuts to the city’s fuel and electricity supplies.

Syrian activists have told Amnesty International that hundreds of seriously injured civilians have been left untreated in Bab Amr because of the medical shortages. According to “Dr Hamza”, some – including a young child – have had limbs amputated because adequate medical assistance for their injuries was unavailable.

Doctors struggle to keep up with the mounting casualties.

An activist who has regularly visited a field hospital in al-Khaldieh district of Homs told Amnesty International that on his most recent visit, two doctors were tending to 47 wounded patients.

Reports of a military build-up in Hama – where up to 25,000 people died during a brutal 28-day military assault in 1982 – on Wednesday could not be independently verified as phone lines to the city were down.

“As reports emerge of a military build-up in Hama, we fear that yet more Syrians may be at risk of being killed in another brutal military assault. The Syrian authorities must immediately cease shelling civilian areas,” said Ann Harrison.

“Ambulances must be allowed in to retrieve the large number of injured people in Homs, and the security forces must permit medical supplies, food and other essential goods to reach all areas in order to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.”