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Al Jazeera

Syrian tanks storm city of Hama

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At least 45 civilians have reportedly been killed and dozens of others wounded after Syrian tanks stormed the city of Hama, shooting indiscriminately, residents said.

The attack on Sunday morning came nearly a month after Syrian forces besieged the city, following some of the largest demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad's rule since protests began in March, the Reuters news agency reported.

One of the residents, a doctor who did not want to be further identified for fear of arrest, told Reuters that the tanks were attacking from four different direction and "firing randomly".

"They are firing their heavy machine guns randomly and overrunning makeshift road blocks erected by the inhabitants," he said by phone, the sound of machine gun fire crackling in the background.

He said that there were 51 people wounded at Badr hospital alone, which was running short of blood for transfusions. He said tanks had surrounded another main hospital, al-Horani.

Another resident said snipers had climbed onto the roofs of the state-owned electricity company and the main prison, and that electricity had been cut in eastern neighbourhoods.

Assad is attempting to crush an uprising against his 11-year rule that broke out in March, inspired by "Arab Spring" revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and has spread across the country.

Syrian authorities have expelled most independent journalists, making it difficult to verify reports of fighting.

Hama was the scene of a massacre in 1982 when Assad's father, the late president Hafez al-Assad, sent his troops to crush an Islamist-led uprising, razing whole neighbourhoods and killing up to 30,000 people in the bloodiest episode of Syria's modern history.

International concern

Robert Ford, the US ambassador to Syria, visited the city earlier this month in a gesture of international support for what he described as peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, and once a staunch ally of Assad, said in May that "we do not want to see another Hama massacre", and warned the 45-year-old president that it would be hard to contain the consequences if it were repeated.

The Syrian leadership blames "armed terrorist groups" for most killings during the revolt, saying that more than 500 soldiers and security personnel have been killed.

An activist group, Avaaz, said in a report last week that Syrian security forces had killed 1,634 people in the course of their crackdown, while at least 2,918 had disappeared.

Another 26,000 had been arrested, many of whom were beaten and tortured, and 12,617 remained in detention, it said.

Syria-based rights activist Mustafa Osso said the regime had detained more than 4,000 people in raids over the past week as it tries to contain the situation.

"The regime is trying to suppress the uprising because it knows that the opposition will try to hold protests between sunset and sunrise," Osso said.

He called the week of raids the "strongest security campaign since the uprising began".

'Intense shooting'

Meanwhile, Syrian forces killed at least six civilians during [shelling in the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor](#) late on Saturday, as government forces intensified a pre-Ramadan crackdown against protests.

Deir ez-Zor, the capital of a province that carries the same name, is an oil hub but also one of the country's poorest regions.

"More tank columns are heading to town. By using heavy weapons, security forces are waging war against their own people," the Syrian Revolution Co-ordination Union grassroots activists' group said.

Rami Abdul-Rahman, the director of the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said about 60 vehicles filled with reinforcements from the northern city of Raqqah reached Deir ez-Zor after noon.

"Intense shooting could be heard in the western parts of the city," he told The Associated Press news agency by telephone.

"Residents have placed barriers in the streets in order to obstruct advancing troops."

The tribal region, which borders Iraq, has been witnessing intense protests, calling for the downfall of Assad's regime.

The Deir ez-Zor raid followed a night-time attack by government forces on the capital, Damascus, and the eastern city of al-Boukamal on the border with Iraq.

Activists have predicted that demonstrations will escalate during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which begins on Monday, as both sides try to tip the balance in the more than four-month uprising.

Since the uprising against Assad's regime began, Fridays have witnessed the most intense protests as Muslims leave mosques after the weekly prayers and march in the streets.