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Al Jazeera

Deadly blasts rock Syrian capital

Authorities say 30 are killed after two "suicide car bombs" strike Damascus, ahead of planned anti-government rallies.

12/23/2011



State media said investigations indicated that al-Qaeda may have been responsible for the attack [AFP]

Syria's deputy foreign minister says 30 people have been killed in two suicide car bomb explosions in the capital, Damascus, ahead of calls by anti-government activists for fresh protests across the country.

Faisal Mukdad added that 100 people were wounded in Friday's attack which targeted two security facilities in the Kfar Sousa district.

Investigations indicated that an al-Qaeda armed group may have been responsible for the attack, state media reported.

"Several soldiers and a large number of civilians were killed in the two attacks carried out by suicide bombers in vehicles packed with explosives against bases of State Security and another branch of the security services," Syrian Television said.

It aired footage of damaged buildings and dead bodies being transferred to ambulances.

Syria has portrayed the nine-month uprising in the country as the work of "terrorist" extremists and armed gangs.

Al Jazeera's Rula Amin, reporting from neighbouring Lebanon, said the blasts marked the first such attack in the Syrian capital since the start of the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

"The capital has been relatively quiet. If the government is trying to say this is the work of protesters or even al-Qaeda sympathisers, the attack is in the heart of the capital and that makes the government look very vulnerable," she said.

In another part of Syria, activists reported the death of eight people in the central city of Homs, where they said government forces fired at protesters leaving Omar Mosque in Jandali neighbourhood.

'Protocol of death'

The latest violence came a day after the first wave of an Arab League monitoring mission arrived in Damascus to check on Syria's progress in implementing a peace plan to halt the months of unrest.

The mission visited the sites of two explosions in Damascus to inspect damage, state media said.

Using the slogan "Protocol of death, a licence to kill", activists called on Facebook for nationwide protests against the Arab League mission after midday prayers on Friday.

Opposition leaders have charged that Syria's agreement to the mission was a mere "ploy" to head off a threat by the Arab League to go to the UN Security Council.

"We call on the Arab League to refer the matter of the crisis in Syria to the UN Security Council," Omar Edelbi, a spokesman for the Local Co-ordination Committees activist network, said.

He called the observer mission "another attempt by the regime to bypass the Arab initiative and empty it of its contents".

The observer mission is part of an Arab plan endorsed by Syria on November 2 that also calls for the withdrawal of the military from towns and residential districts, a halt to the violence and the release of detainees.

The advance team consists of a dozen security, legal and administrative staff from the Arab League's secretariat who will make the logistical preparations for the arrival on Sunday.

Between 30 to 50 officials were expected to be part of the first mission, which is headed by Samir Saif al-Yazal, one of the Arab League's assistant secretary-generals.

Once all the officials arrive, they will indicate cities they will be visiting in accordance with the peace plan.

Nabil el-Araby, the Arab League chief, has stated that protecting members of this mission is the Syrian government's responsibility.

Violence continues

In the run-up to the advance team's arrival, however, the Syrian National Council, Syria's main opposition bloc, said on Wednesday that government forces had killed 250 people in 48 hours.

A day later, Syria's state news agency said on Thursday that more than 2,000 members of the security forces had been killed since anti-government protests erupted in March.

The UN, however, estimates that more than 5,000 people have been killed in the government's crackdown since mid-March.

As violence continued across the country, the UN Security Council remained deadlocked over a resolution to condemn the violence in Syria.

In New York, France said "significant progress" had been made at a UN Security Council meeting on Syria.

There were tensions at the meeting, however, with Russia renewing demands for an inquiry into NATO air strikes in Libya in a move US ambassador Susan Rice called "a cheap stunt" to divert attention from the Syria crisis.

Russia and China have already vetoed one resolution proposed by European countries condemning Syria.

Russia, which accuses the West of seeking "regime change" in Syria, last week proposed a new text, which the European countries say is not tough enough on Assad.