

Syrian Tanks, Snipers Mow Down Civilians

DEBKA - DEBKAFfile Special Report, April 25th, 2011

Assad has launched all-out war on his people. Tanks firing artillery, APCs, infantry units, commandoes and snipers were deployed for the first time at daybreak Monday, April 25 in cities across Syria for the most brutal assault on any Arab anti-government protest in the four-month uprising.

In the first few hours, hundreds are estimated to have been massacred (over and above the 350 shot dead in the last three days) and thousands injured. Denied medical attention, they are left in the streets to die.

debkafile's military sources report that protest centers in cities with populations of 2-3 million have been stormed by Syrian troops backed by tanks firing automatic 120-mm guns at random, commandoes dropped by helicopter and snipers.

The military offensive to break the back of the uprising (which debkafile Saturday, April 23 first disclosed Assad had decided to launch) is led by his younger brother Maher Assad at the head of the Republican Guard and the 4th Division which is made up mostly of the Assad's Alawite clan. Its first target Sunday night was the southern town of Deraa where the protest movement began and the Mediterranean coastal town of Jableh.

Monday, Syria shut its land borders to Jordan to conceal the scale of the carnage inflicted on the border town of Deraa from outside eyes. Foreign correspondents have been banned from the country since the uprising began.

Monday, indiscriminate fire was also reported in Duma, a dissident suburb of the capital Damascus. By Monday afternoon, thousands of soldiers had spread out across the North, South and Center of the country, apparently preparing to storm the large cities and protest centers of Hama, Homs, Latakia and the Kurdish north.

While times may have changed, Bashar is his father's son. In 1982, President Hafez Assad turned his artillery on a district of Hama and slaughtered 25-30,000 civilians to smash a Muslim Brotherhood revolt. The operation was commanded by Rifat Assad, Bashar's uncle, today an opposition leader in exile.

The incumbent president's killing fields extend not to one but to a score of Syrian cities with unimaginable consequences.

And yet no Western power is rushing to help the pro-democracy protesters of Syria who are dying in their hundreds day by day. And the verbal condemnations coming from Washington and European capitals are soon buried under layers of inaction.

Sunday, April 24, debkafile reported: Bashar Assad's tanks and infantry made their first assaults Sunday night, April 24 on Jableh on the Mediterranean and Daraa in the south, after a 48-hour bloodbath by his security forces claiming up to 350 lives failed break the five-week countrywide uprising against his rule. Video-clips show tanks converging on the two towns with soldiers running in their wake while heavy gunfire continued to resound in Hama, al-Nuaimah near Daraa and Saraqeb, southwest of Aleppo.

The Syrian ruler continues to ignore all the evidence that by massacring civilian protesters he has only magnified their numbers and Sunday decided to press ahead with his last resort for piling on the violence by deploying trained infantry men and tanks in a final attempt to smash the five-week uprising, debkafle's military sources report.

The southern epicenter of the uprising Daraa has resisted the most ruthless attempts to suppress its protest rallies. Less has been heard about Jableh, a town of 80,000 situated between Baniyas and Latakia. Anti-Assad demonstrators have barricaded themselves inside the Abu Bakr Siddiq Mosque, one of Syria's main Sufi centers.

debkafle reported earlier Sunday:

Saturday, April 23 saw the constantly mounting uprising against the Assad regime finally reaching the Syrian capital Damascus where debkafle reports 300,000 – 15 percent of the city's dwellers – took the streets shouting: “Bashar Assad you are a traitor!” That day too the Syrian ruler unleashed his security forces for the harshest crackdown yet in order to break the back of the five-week civil uprising. The result: 350 dead, tripling the number of Friday's bloodbath and thousands of injured.

Early Sunday, secret service thugs hauled thousands of protesters out of their homes. They broke down doors in the Harasta and Ghouta districts of Damascus, dragged their victims out and dumped them on covered trucks which drove off to unknown destinations. Ghouta is the ancient garden quarter of Damascus.

The growing number of injured are condemned to being treated privately or not at all. The authorities have commandeered ambulances to prevent them reaching hospital and hospital wards are raided by security agents who either kill the wounded or arrest them.

debkafle's military and intelligence sources reported that Assad will decide finally at noon Sunday, April 24, whether to muster all 11 divisions of his army and let them loose on the uprising. We reported Friday that the embattled Syrian president had ordered the troops to start moving into the cities the next day. Our sources later reported that he reversed his order at the last minute, reluctant to throw his last card into his desperate bid for survival for fear of a fatal backlash. Some units had already left their bases and remain parked outside the targeted cities awaiting orders to go in.

As the unrest against his rule gains ground, the Syrian president's options are shrinking. Small numbers of security forces can no longer venture into some of the more troubled areas of the country where armed protesters reign unless accompanied by large-scale strength with massive fire power.

debkafle reported Friday night:

Syrian army units were already sighted heading towards the cities, joined for the first time by troops normally on duty on at the Syrian-Israel border.

debkafle's military sources disclose their assignments:

Corps No. 1 was given responsibility for the capital Damascus and its outlying towns and districts;

Corps No. 2 was to take charge of central Syria and the towns of Aleppo, Homs and Hama;

Corps No. 3 was to spread out in the south and Jebel Druze.

It was the last straw for Assad when Friday, the strategic town of Katana west of Damascus was drawn into the protest movement and rallied against his regime. Katana houses the main bases of the Syrian armored corps, which is part of the 7th Division, and serves as divisional logistical administration center. Its population is made up mostly of the officers, men and civilian personnel serving at those bases.

Having Katana turn against the regime finally persuaded its leaders to throw every resource it had into crushing the uprising.

For the Syrian ruler, deploying the entire army is a wild gamble because more than 75 percent of Syria's 220,000-strong rank and file are Sunni Muslims, Kurds and Druzes and therefore drawn from ethnic and religious groups long repressed by the Alawite-dominated regime. Uniformed troops might well flout orders to shoot live rounds into crowds of protesters who are members of their community or even family. It would start the break-up of the Syrian army amid large-scale defections of officers and men.