

**Activists Allege Execution-Style Killings In Syria**  
**By The Associated Press, NPR**  
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Syrian activists accused regime forces of carrying out execution-style killings and burning homes Friday as part of a scorched-earth campaign in a restive neighborhood in the city of Homs, while the Red Cross headed to the area following a bloody, monthlong siege to dislodge rebel forces.

Syria has faced mounting international criticism over its bloody crackdown on the uprising, which started with peaceful protests but has become increasingly militarized. The U.N. has estimated that more than 7,500 people have been killed since the uprising began nearly a year ago. Activists put the death toll at over 8,000.

France said Friday it is closing its embassy in Syria, a day after two French journalists escaped to Lebanon after being trapped for days in the central city of Homs. The United States and Britain already have closed their embassies in Syria.

Syrian forces retook control of the district, called Baba Amr, on Thursday, and there were growing fears of revenge attacks after the rebels withdrew. The Red Cross reached Homs, but had yet to enter Baba Amr.

Bassel Fouad, a Syrian activist who fled to Lebanon from Baba Amr two days ago, said a colleague there told him Friday that Syrian troops and pro-government gunmen known as shabiha were conducting house-to-house raids.

"The situation is worse than terrible inside Baba Amr," Fouad said. "Shabiha are entering homes and setting them on fire."

His colleague said the gunmen lined 10 men up early Friday and shot them dead in front of a government cooperative that sells subsidized food. He said Syrian forces were detaining anyone over the age of 14 in the three-story building.

"They begin at the start of a street and enter and search house after house," he said. "Then they start with another street."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also said it had received reports of 10 people slain in front of a co-op and called on the Red Cross team heading to Homs to investigate claims by residents the building is being used a prison. Another group, the Local Coordination Committees, said 14 were killed.

The claims could not be independently verified. Information from inside Baba Amr has been difficult to obtain in recent days. Activists elsewhere in the city said those in Baba Amr stopped using satellite connections for fear the government could use them to target strikes. Others accuse the government of scrambling signals.

The central city of Homs, Syria's third largest, has emerged as a key battleground in the uprising against President Bashar Assad that began in March 2011. Activists said hundreds were killed during the nearly monthlong siege, and many lived for days with little food and no electricity or running water.

The U.N. said it was alarmed by the reports of execution-style killings after the Syrian army seized Baba Amr from rebel forces in a major blow to the opposition.

In Geneva, a spokesman for the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights said the agency had received unconfirmed reports of "a particularly grisly set of summary executions" involving 17 people in Baba Amr after government forces entered.

Rupert Colville did not provide details but said his office was seeking to confirm the reports and called on both government and rebel forces to refrain from all forms of reprisal.

The Red Cross, meanwhile, sent a convoy of aid trucks to Homs along a snow-covered route from the capital Damascus early Friday after getting permission from the government.

Khalid Arqsouseh, a spokesman for the Syrian Red Crescent in Homs, said the seven 15-ton trucks were carrying food, milk powder, medical supplies and blankets.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy called the events in Syria a "scandal," adding that the European Council "condemned in the harshest terms what is happening in Syria."

Ambassador Eric Chevallier had only recently returned to Damascus after being recalled to Paris for consultations. He was sent back to help try to get two stranded French reporters out of Syria.

Those reporters flew out of Lebanon on a medically equipped plane Friday after being smuggled out of Syria the night before. One of them, Edith Bouvier, was wounded last week in a rocket attack in Baba Amr that also wounded British photographer Paul Conroy and killed American reporter Marie Colvin and French photographer Remi Ochlik. Another French reporter, William Daniels, was traveling with Bouvier.

Conroy and Spanish reporter Javier Espinosa also were smuggled out of Syria this week.

Activist videos posted online Thursday purported to show the burials of Colvin and Ochlik in Baba Amr early this week. The Syrian government said it dug up the bodies after taking Baba Amr so they could be repatriated.

The West has stepped up its criticism of Assad's regime amid mounting reports of atrocities at the hands of security forces. The U.S. has called for Assad to step down and Hillary Rodham Clinton said he could be considered a war criminal.

Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin blasted the West Friday for backing the Syrian opposition against the government, saying it has fueled the conflict. But his foreign ministry made it clear that it will not be able to stop other countries from launching a military intervention if they try to do it without U.N. approval.

Putin called for both Syrian government and opposition forces to pull out of besieged cities to end the bloodshed, adding that Western refusal to make that demand of Assad's opponents has encouraged them to keep fighting.

"Do they want Assad to pull out his forces so the opposition moves right in?" Putin said at a meeting with editors of top Western newspapers in remarks carried by state television. "Is it a balanced approach?"

Activist groups said protesters took to the streets in towns across Syria Friday, many of them met with tear gas, gunfire and arrest campaigns by Syrian security forces.

The Observatory said 10 people were killed in the town of Rastan near Homs when a mortar landed near marchers. The LCC said 13 were killed the same event, among 37 reported dead nationwide.

Protesters dubbed Friday the day of "Arming the Free Syrian Army" reflecting a widening perception that only military action can stop the crackdown on dissent and hasten Assad's downfall.