

With Cities Under Fire, Assad Sets Date for Syrian Referendum
By Neil MacFarquhar and Alan Cowell, The New York Times
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BEIRUT, Lebanon — With Syrian cities under fire and residents saying life is ever more unbearable, President Bashar al-Assad set a date later this month for a referendum on a new constitution, the state-run SANA news agency said on Wednesday, a gesture apparently designed to offer some kind of government-controlled change after almost a year of the most sustained crackdown in the so-called Arab Spring.

The plan has been discussed for some time and Mr. Assad said in January that the referendum would take place in March. But, SANA said, the Syrian leader has now issued a decree setting Feb. 26 as the date for a ballot.

Even before the violence worsened, the idea of a referendum had seemed to pale before the scale of the crisis and it was not clear how voting could take place peacefully in some areas where government forces are fighting daily battles with army defectors, analysts said.

On Wednesday, Reuters reported that military units backed by armored personnel carriers rumbled into the Barzeh neighborhood of the capital, Damascus, and elite troops searched houses and made arrests, apparently looking for military defectors.

The call for constitutional changes was made by opposition figures at the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March, but their demands have hardened since then into a clamor for Mr. Assad's departure — a refrain echoed by much of the Arab League and many Western nations, but not by China and Russia.

Last year, President Assad had also promised elections in February, but the announcement Wednesday spoke only of a referendum on constitutional changes.

On Sunday, Mr. Assad received a draft of the new constitution from a panel set up in October to frame it, SANA said, describing the document as transforming "Syria into an example to follow in terms of public freedoms and political plurality in a way to lay the foundation for a new stage that will enrich Syria's cultural history."

The announcement of a date for a referendum came after 13 days of bombardment of parts of Homs where a fuel pipeline fire blazed on Wednesday as residents recounted days of deprivation, with rockets and tank shells exploding around them as they sought to escape by bribing government soldiers during lulls in the fighting. A young woman who fled the city, Syria's third-largest, for Beirut, for instance, spoke on Tuesday of the hellish experience that she and others had endured, trapped in their dwellings without heat while desperately awaiting breaks in the military offensive to forage for food or try to flee.

Such is the sense of deprivation in some Syrian areas that French officials in Paris on Wednesday urged the creation of humanitarian corridors to permit access for international aid workers.

Activists also spoke on Wednesday of a renewed assault in Hama, the country's fourth-largest city, just to the north of Homs, that was the scene of a bloody massacre in 1982 in which 10,000 people were killed. The reports said government forces in Hama were blasting residential areas with sustained machine gun fire.

According to Syrian state television, the draft constitution permits a president to be elected to two seven-year terms, setting a limit for the first time in decades. President Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, ruled for 29 years before his death 11 years ago when his son took over.

The draft would also dilute the status of the ruling Baath Party as "the leader of the state and society" by permitting political pluralism. But the constitution forbids the creation of parties based on religion,

profession or regional interests — apparently forestalling the legalization of the Muslim Brotherhood or Kurdish parties in the northwest of the country, Syrian television said.

Talk of a new constitution offered a counterpoint to events on the ground.

“The idea of safety doesn’t exist anymore in Baba Amr,” said Omar Shakir, an activist in the Homs neighborhood of that name, as explosions erupted in the background. “Scary is all that exists,” he said via Skype.

Videos uploaded to YouTube’s syriapioneer channel showed gray and black smoke leaping high overhead as shells crashed into buildings, while the staccato outbursts of machine guns sounded incessantly. Activists described it as the heaviest shelling in five days in an assault that began on Feb. 4.

By Wednesday, the city’s agony had been compounded by a huge blaze after a fuel pipeline was hit early in the morning in Baba Amr, where activists have reported shelling for 12 straight days. The Associated Press said images posted by activists on social networking sites showed thick black smoke billowing over what seemed to be the homes of residents.

SANA news agency said an “armed terrorist group” had blown up the pipeline supplying diesel fuel to Damascus and to the south of the country.

With diplomacy stalled, the French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé took his turn on Wednesday in efforts to restart international negotiations on a solution in Syria after Russia and China vetoed a plan backed by the Arab League and Western nations almost two weeks ago that would have required President Assad to step down.

Speaking to a French radio station, he said moves were under way to overcome Russian objections before a “symbolic” resolution at the United Nations General Assembly is submitted on Thursday, Reuters reported. He also urged the Security Council to discuss the creation of humanitarian corridors to permit aid to reach “the zones where the are scandalous massacres.”

The young woman who fled Homs, a 19-year-old student who asked not to be named because her parents were still in the city, arrived in Beirut on Tuesday. She said that troops allowed civilians to escape on Saturday and Sunday and that people bribed soldiers to ferry them out of the Inshaat neighborhood on tanks or to clear roadways for them to drive their cars out.

She described a city where “all roads were closed, and even if they weren’t, the shelling makes it impossible for you to go anywhere.”

Government services have collapsed, she said, and high, stinking piles of garbage rot on many corners or emit rancid smoke — having been ignited by fighters inside the city for camouflage against government snipers.

Residents have grown to fear the two main hospitals, she said, because the doctors still reporting to work tend to be government sympathizers. Some even carry guns as they make their rounds.

But she detailed a kind of symbiotic cease-fire that had developed between the young army recruits deployed at some neighborhood checkpoints, the font of many defections. The soldiers get food and a certain degree of safety, while residents feel they can run short errands unmolested or occasionally escape entirely.

Residents live in multiple layers of clothing and ration their use of kerosene for heat and hot water. On relatively quiet days, the food stores open, and people rush to buy canned food and flashlights. Simple things like Pepsi have become a luxury item, she said, while hallways in many homes are now stacked with bags of rice and sugar.

“They are anticipating a long siege,” the student said.

Civilians in the Inshaat neighborhood felt more vulnerable because there was no one to protect them, while most of the soldiers from the Free Syrian Army — the name adopted by all local militias — were in Baba Amr. A couple of neighborhoods nearby asked the antigovernment militia members not to come in at all so they could remain safe havens where the wounded, women and children could seek shelter.

In Baba Amr, Mr. Shakir, the activist, estimated that 60 percent of the buildings had suffered too much damage to be habitable. The neighborhood was hit by occasional mortar shells overnight, he said, with the heavier tank and other rounds coming at daylight.

The Syrian government says that it is attacking foreign-inspired terrorist gangs in Baba Amr, and that the fires are tires set alight to make it seem as if the buildings are burning. Syria has severely limited access by members of the foreign media to the country, so claims about the fighting in Homs were impossible to verify independently.

Aside from Homs, activists on Tuesday said the government was assaulting neighborhoods from the outskirts of Aleppo in the north to the area around Idlib — where there is a concentration of defecting soldiers — down to the suburbs of Damascus and the southern city of Deraa, where the uprising first started last March.

The Local Coordinating Committees said dozens of people died on Tuesday, the toll including what it said were two victims of torture at the hands of the security services, whose bodies were dumped in public.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based in Britain, said five government troops died and nine were wounded in a gunfight with defecting soldiers near Hama. It had no other details.

The official news agency reported that 13 members of the security services were buried on Tuesday.

Neil MacFarquhar reported from Beirut, Lebanon, and Alan Cowell from London. Hwaida Saad and an employee of The New York Times contributed reporting from Beirut, and Rick Gladstone from New York.

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