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Syrian government using militias for mass killings: U.N. report



Syrian militias, known as Popular Committees, are being used by the Syrian government to commit mass killings which are at times sectarian in nature, U.N. human rights investigators said on Monday. “In a disturbing and dangerous trend, mass killings allegedly perpetrated by Popular Committees have at times taken on sectarian overtones,” the U.N. commission of inquiry on Syria, led by Brazilian Paulo Pinheiro, said in its latest report to the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The uprising in Syria erupted two years ago with largely peaceful protests but escalated into a civil war pitting mainly Sunni Muslim rebels against President Bashar al-Assad, whose Alawite faith is an offshoot of Shi’ite Islam. The investigators, who cited accounts from witnesses and victims, also said people were being harassed or arrested by the committees because they came from regions perceived as being supportive of the uprising. Both sides in the conflict, which is mired in a “destructive stalemate”, have committed violations against civilians, the investigators said. The bodies of those killed in massacres have been burned or dumped in rivers, they said. Rebel forces regularly execute captured Syrian soldiers and militiamen, and have established detention centers in Homs and Aleppo, the report said. Syria’s ambassador Faysal Khabbaz Hamoui took the floor at the Council to dismiss the report as based on “partial information from untrustworthy sources,” and he accused Qatar and Turkey of “supporting terrorism” in his country.

Meanwhile, Syrian jets bombed Baba Amr in Homs city in a bid Monday to repulse a rebel attack on the strategic neighborhood, a watchdog said, as Al-Qaeda claimed the killing of 48 Syrian soldiers on Iraqi territory. On the diplomatic front, a top Syrian opposition official met Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov Monday in a bid to reverse Moscow's refusal to back calls on President Bashar al-Assad to step down. Rebels launched a surprise assault on Baba Amr at dawn on Sunday, hoping to take back the neighborhood which they lost to Assad's forces a year ago. The regime responded by waves of shelling, launching air strikes and sending reinforcements which had "completely sealed" the city of Homs, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, adding that fighting flared throughout the night. "The army will at all costs hunt down the rebels even if it destroys the neighbourhood," said Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman. "The regime cannot allow them to stay ... because the neighbourhood of Baba Amr is known as an (anti-regime) symbol in the international media." The Observatory said at least 175 people were killed across Syria on Sunday -- 79 regime soldiers, 50 rebels and 46 civilians. Regime troops seized Baba Amr from rebels just over a year ago after a bloody month-long siege that left the district in ruins and claimed hundreds of lives, including those of two foreign journalists. Iraq meanwhile was set to be dragged into the deadly Syrian conflict despite its efforts not to become entangled in the bloodletting across its borders. On Monday, Al-Qaeda front group in Iraq claimed an attack on a convoy in the west of Iraq that killed 48 Syrian soldiers and nine Iraqi guards, in a statement posted on jihadist forums. The soldiers, who were wounded and received treatment in Iraq, were being transported through the western province of Anbar on their way back to Syria when the attack took place on March 4, according to the Iraqi defence ministry. But the ministry blamed the attack on a "terrorist group that infiltrated into Iraqi territory coming from Syria." The statement on jihadist forums said that Islamic State of Iraq fighters were able to destroy a column of "the Safavid army with its associated vehicles" carrying "members of the Nusairi army and Syrian regime 'shabiha.'" Safavid is a word implying Shiites are under Iranian control, while Nusairi is a derogatory term for Alawites, the sect to which Syrian President Bashar al-Assad belongs, and shabiha is a name used for Syrian pro-regime militia forces. Baghdad has consistently avoided joining calls for the departure of Assad, saying it opposes arming either side and urging an end to the violence that has ravaged Syria for the past two years, leaving at least 70,000 people dead. Baghdad is caught between conflicting pressures over Syria -- its powerful eastern neighbor, Shiite Iran, backs Assad's regime, while the United States and many Arab states want Assad to bow to opposition demands and step down. On the diplomatic front, Haytham Manna of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change -- an anti-Assad group tolerated by the regime as it opposes the armed conflict -- said he thought the road to peace in Syria ran through Moscow. "We have always said that a peaceful political solution goes through Moscow," Manna told Lavrov in opening remarks of their meeting in Moscow at the Russian foreign ministry. "A military solution is still being enforced on the ground. But the predominant majority of Syrians are convinced that a political solution is desirable, that it will save us, and that it stands a real chance." Russia has vetoed three U.N. resolutions sanctioning Assad for the violence and has said it viewed pressure on him to step down as undue foreign interference. Lavrov gave no sign on Monday that Moscow was ready to ease its stance in regard to its traditional Arab ally two years into the conflict.