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Subject: Fw: AP -- Horrific picture emerges of besieged Syrian town
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From: Fabrice Aidan <[REDACTED]>
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Subject: Fw: AP -- Horrific picture emerges of besieged Syrian town

Sent by Fabrice Aidan, United Nations

From: Douglas T. Coffman
Sent: 05/16/2011 03:28 PM EDT
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Horrific picture emerges of besieged Syrian town

BASSEM MROUE, Associated Press

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WADI KHALED, Lebanon -- Using horses and mules to carry their possessions, Syrians crossed a shallow river Monday to reach safety in Lebanon with tales of a "catastrophic" scene back home: sectarian killings, gunmen carrying out execution-style slayings and the stench of decomposing bodies in the streets.

The accounts are bound together by a sense of growing desperation as President Bashar Assad's regime expands its crackdown on an uprising that has entered a third month with no sign of letting up.

At least 16 people _ eight of them members of the same family _ have been killed in recent days in Talkalakh, a town of about 70,000 residents that has been under siege since Thursday, witnesses and activists say.

The deaths boost an already staggering toll, with more than 850 people killed nationwide since mid-March, according to the National Organization for Human Rights in **Syria**.

"The situation in the city is catastrophic," said a 55-year-old Syrian who asked to be identified only by his first name, Ahmad. He crossed the border into Lebanon before dawn Monday.

"If you walk in the streets of Talkalakh you can smell the dead bodies," he said.

Residents interviewed by The Associated Press on Monday as they crossed into Lebanon said their town, which has held weekly anti-government rallies, came under attack by the army, security forces and shadowy, pro-regime gunmen known as "shabiha."

Residents recognized the shabiha by their black clothes and red arm bands _ apparently worn so they can recognize each other in the confusion of an attack.

Four residents independently told the AP that shabiha gunmen killed a man named Adnan al-Kurdi along with his wife, five daughters and a son in their home _ a harrowing story that could not be independently verified. None of those interviewed knew why the family was killed. But they said the killings motivated them to leave.

"We did not want to have our throats slit," said Umm Rashid, who fled to Lebanon with her seven daughters by hopping on a truck that carried dozens on a short trip across the frontier.

The trip was less than three miles (five kilometers), but it was perilous. Gunmen fired on the truck as it sped out of town under cover of darkness, wounding a woman and an 8-year-old girl, witnesses said.

"Bullets buzzed over our heads in a crazy way," said a 50-year-old resident who gave only his first name, Qassim.

Besides the al-Kurdi family, another eight people were reported killed in Talkalakh _ all of them on Sunday, said Syrian human rights activist Mustafa Osso.

Tension in the town had spiked on Thursday, when authorities cut electricity and telephone service and cut off the water supply. Later, three mosques were struck by rocket-propelled grenades, witnesses said.

The siege apparently was meant to head off protests the next day, when Syrians across the country have been massing after Friday prayers since the middle of March. At first, the protesters called for reforms, but now, enraged over the mounting death toll, many are demanding the downfall of the regime.

Talkalakh residents have been coming out every week, calling for Assad to leave, residents said.

"By Friday night, life turned to hell," Qassim said. Intensive shelling by tanks and heavy machine gun fire pounded the town, he said.

Authorities justified the siege by saying the city was full of Islamic extremists who wanted to form an Islamic state, residents told The Associated Press.

"This is all not true," said Ahmad, who did not want to be further identified for fear of reprisals.

Assad has blamed the unrest on armed thugs and foreign agitators. He also has played on fears of sectarian strife to persuade people not to demonstrate, saying chaos will result.

One resident said the conflict in Talkalakh has taken on dangerous sectarian tones.

Hamid, 45, who asked to be identified only by his first name, said the shabiha gunmen are targeting Sunnis in the city.

Syria has multiple sectarian divisions, largely kept in check under Assad's heavy hand and his regime's secular ideology. Most significantly, the majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, but Assad and the ruling elite belong to the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

The shabiha, too, are believed to be mainly Alawites.

Talkalakh is a Sunni city, surrounded by 12 Alawite villages.

"The city of Talkalakh is empty of people. Most of them have fled to Lebanon," Hamid said.

At the Wadi Khaled crossing point, Syrians crossed a narrow river separating the countries by hopping along rocks in the narrow water.

Bursts of gunfire could be heard from the Syrian side Monday in Wadi Khaled, as Syrians continued to arrive, some using horses and mules to carry their belongings into Lebanon.

Hundreds of Syrian and Lebanese men were standing just steps away from the border as bullets from the Syrian side buzzed overhead, sending them running for cover.

Two ambulances were parked nearby to tend to any wounded Syrians.

One paramedic said one man who crossed the border shortly after midnight had a gunshot wound to his back.

The Lebanese army was fortifying its positions in Wadi Khaled with a bulldozer, setting up sand dunes and putting up barbed wire to protect themselves from stray bullets.

More than 5,000 Syrians have fled to Lebanon in recent weeks. Traveling between the two countries is not difficult; citizens need only their identification papers to pass through.

Elsewhere in **Syria**, the National Organization for Human Rights said in a statement Monday that at least 34 people were killed in the past five days in the villages of Inkhil and Jassem near the southern city of Daraa. Ammar Qurabi, the head of the human rights organization, said five bodies were discovered in Daraa on Monday, raising the overall death toll to 850.

There were also unconfirmed reports that up to 20 bodies were found in a grave there. Calls to Daraa were not going through Monday to verify the reports.

Like Talkalakh, Daraa was sealed off in recent weeks as the military unleashed a deadly siege, sending in troops backed by tanks and snipers to crush the heart of the rebellion. Daraa is the city where the uprising began, touched off by the arrest of teenagers who scrawled anti-regime graffiti on a wall.

A resident of Inkhil told the AP on Monday there were more than 70 tanks in the village and that two hospitals in the area were taken over by security forces.

A similar tactic was used in another brutal crackdown on protesters in the region, in Bahrain. International rights groups have said Bahrain targeted medical professionals who treated injured demonstrators.

"The gunfire never stops," the Inkhil resident said on condition of anonymity.

Munira Ahmad, who fled Talkalakh with her four daughters, said she had no choice but to run.

"We fled from death," she said, holding back tears. She worries nonstop about the family she left behind, including her husband and three sons.

"I don't know what happened to them. My husband has heart problems," she said.

But she cannot call to check on them _ the telephone lines are still cut.