

## Fleeing Syrians say too late for reforms, Assad must go

Contributed by Yara Bayoumy, BOQAYA, Lebanon for Reuters  
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(Reuters) - Syrians who fled for their lives from a security crackdown in the border town of Tel Kelakh say violence has hardened attitudes toward President Bashar al-Assad and unrest will not end until he steps down.

Assad had lost credibility and it was too late to implement reforms since security forces laid siege to the town, raiding homes and arresting and killing dozens, they said.

"The first words my year-old son will learn to say are: 'We don't want Bashar'," said Ahmed, who fled from Tel Kelakh, where security forces, the army and irregular Assad loyalists known as shabbiha had cracked down on earlier this week.

"Are these his reforms? To oppress people? Until when will we be downtrodden?" he said. Like other refugees interviewed by Reuters in the Lebanese border village of Boqaya, he asked that his surname not be used to protect his family still in Syria.

Rights groups say Assad's forces have killed at least 800 people in a crackdown against protests inspired by uprisings across the Arab world. Syrian authorities say armed groups, backed by Islamists and outside powers, are to blame for most of the violence and have killed more than 120 soldiers and police.

The 45-year-old president has said the protests are serving a foreign-backed conspiracy to sow sectarian strife.

Many of the refugees accused the forces of a bias against the Sunni Muslim majority in a country ruled for decades by followers of Assad's minority Alawite offshoot of Shi'ite Islam.

At Boqaya's village mosque, turned into a makeshift shelter, an 18-year-old refugee named Omar said he had been detained and beaten by security forces while he was organizing for women to flee the town last weekend.

"One soldier said: Let him die like a dog because his name is Omar," the refugee, whose left eye was swollen red, told Reuters. Omar is a common name among Sunnis, rare among Shi'ites and seen by many in the region as a mark of Sunni identity.

### GRAVEST CHALLENGE

Assad has dealt with the gravest challenge to his rule by making reform gestures, such as lifting a hated decades-old state of emergency, while sending tanks to flashpoints to suppress protests raging in the country for the last nine weeks.

A rights activist said security forces shot dead 44 demonstrators who took to the streets of Syria on Friday, in defiance of a military crackdown.

UNHCR quotes local authorities as saying 4,000 Syrians have crossed into Lebanon since late April and 1,000 people fled Tel Kelakh to Lebanon's Wadi Khaled region in the last week.

Lebanese families have been taking them in since security forces first launched their operation on Tel Kelakh a week ago.

Some Lebanese residents left their homes to make more room for refugees. The Boqaya village mosque is strewn with mattresses and belongings. Other refugees sit on home terraces, smoking water pipes, nervously watching Syrian tanks take up positions kilometers away.

Um Hamza, staying in a home with 35 other people, said she and scores of people who squeezed into a lorry on Saturday night to make the short journey across the border had come under fire from the direction of the Meshtemehly and al-Ghayda villages, both of which are predominantly Alawite.

"There was fire from both sides. The bullets were raining on us. Six people were wounded," she told Reuters. At least two other people corroborated her statement.

Syria prevents most international media from operating in the country, making it difficult to independently verify witness and official accounts.

Some residents, especially the men, say there is no way they will go back to Syria with Assad's government still intact.

They express hope that mass protests will erupt in Damascus and the second city of Aleppo and that soldiers will defect from the army. In the meantime, all they can do is stay defiant.

"We used to demand freedom," said another refugee also named Omar. "But after we saw this freedom in the shape of tanks and terrorizing by the army, we will not accept anything less than him stepping down."

(Editing by Peter Graff)