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MIDDLE EAST

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Syria rebels 'kill Shia residents of eastern village'

Rebels have attacked a village in eastern Syria, killing dozens of Shia Muslim residents, most of them pro-government fighters, activists say.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said at least 60 people died in Hatla on Tuesday.

The attack appeared to be retaliation for a raid on a rebel position by people from the village, it added.

Meanwhile, a government helicopter has reportedly fired three missiles at the northern Lebanese border town of Arsal.

Lebanese officials said one of the missiles had struck the town centre, and that a woman and her daughter were slightly hurt.

Arsal is a predominantly Sunni town about 15km (9 miles) from the Syrian border that is home to some 27,000 Syrian refugees.

It was used as a staging-post by Syrian rebels during the recent battle for the strategically important town of Qusair.

Qusair was recaptured by the army last week with help from the Lebanese Shia Islamist movement, Hezbollah.

'Apostate rejectionists'

According to activists, the fighting in Hatla, a predominantly Shia village just to the east of the city of Deir al-Zour, started after pro-government Shia militiamen mounted an attack on a nearby rebel position on Monday, killing at least two opposition fighters.

The rebels then massed for an attack and overran Hatla the next day. The SOHR reported that 60 Shia residents were killed, most of them fighters who had been armed by the government a few weeks earlier.

At least 10 rebels were killed in the fighting on Tuesday, and surviving Shia residents of Hatla were forced to flee to nearby Jafra, it added.

The London-based Syrian Network of Human Rights also said 60 people had been killed, while an activist in Deir al-Zour province, Thaer al-Deiry, confirmed the rebel attack had been in retaliation for an earlier raid.

"The situation in the village is quiet and the [rebel] Free Syrian Army is in full control," he told the Associated Press.

A video posted online on Tuesday, entitled The Storming And Cleansing of Hatla, showed dozens of gunmen carrying the black flags associated with jihadist groups, celebrating and firing weapons in the streets of a small town.

"We have raised the banner [saying] 'There is no God but God' above the houses of the apostate rejectionists, the Shia, and the holy warriors are celebrating," the cameraman says, according to the Reuters news agency.

"This is a Sunni area. It does not belong to other groups," one fighter shouts in the video.

A government official in Damascus said the rebels had "carried out a massacre against villagers in which older people and children were killed".

Hezbollah said Shia clerics, their wives and children had been among those killed in what it called an act of sectarian cleansing, inspired by prominent Sunni clerics in the region who have issued calls for Sunnis to go to Syria to join the battle against President Bashar al-Assad.

The BBC's Jim Muir in Beirut says the incident has underlined the deepening sectarian nature of the struggle in Syria.

The two-year-old conflict pits rebels who are mostly from the majority Sunni community against government forces led by Mr Assad's Alawite sect, a heterodox offshoot of Shia Islam.

Meanwhile, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague is to travel to Washington on Wednesday for talks with his US counterpart John Kerry to discuss the West's response to the continued bloodshed, including whether to begin supplying the rebels with weapons.

On Tuesday, French foreign ministry spokesman Philippe Lalliot said the conflict in Syria was "at a turning point".

"What should we do under these conditions to reinforce the opposition armed forces? We have had these discussions with our partners, with the Americans, the Saudis, the Turks, many others."

"We cannot leave the opposition in the current state," he added.

More than 80,000 people have been killed and 1.6 million have fled to neighbouring countries since the uprising against Mr Assad began in March 2011, according to the UN.

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