

250 SYRIANS MISSING AFTER IS ATTACK NEAR DAMASCUS

DAMASCUS: Some 250 Syrians were missing and feared kidnapped yesterday after the Islamic State group attacked a cement factory in an advance against government positions east of Damascus. The jihadists launched the offensive after suffering a series of setbacks at the hands of regime troops in recent weeks including the loss of the ancient city of Palmyra, which officials said residents would start returning to on Saturday. The fresh fighting came ahead of a new round of peace talks due next week in Geneva following a ceasefire between the regime and non-jihadist rebels that has allowed Syrian forces to focus on fighting IS.

After being pushed out of Palmyra on March 27, IS launched the fresh assault this week near the town of Dmeir, some 50 kilometers east of Damascus. Residents said IS attacked the cement factory outside the town on Monday and that about 250 employees had gone missing. "We haven't been able to reach our family members since noon on Monday after an attack by Daesh on the factory," said one resident of Dmeir, using an Arabic acronym for IS. "We have no information about where they are."

An administrator at the plant confirmed that 250 employees had been unreachable since Monday. Dmeir is divided between IS control in the east and rebel control in the west, but several key positions around it, including a military airport and a power plant, are still in government hands. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, said the fighting was heavy but the jihadists had not managed to gain significant ground.

"The most violent clashes are near the airport and the power plant, but IS has not entered either yet," Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman said. IS had seized five regime positions in the area, including two checkpoints, since Monday, he said, adding that 20 members of regime forces and 35 IS fighters had been killed in the clashes.

Palmyra residents return

A Dmeir resident told AFP yesterday that she could hear heavy shelling around the city and that residents were not daring to leave their homes. "We're in the eastern neighborhood. The situation is very tense here," she said, asking not to be named out of fear for her safety.

"We have no electricity, we have no water. There are people fleeing from the eastern districts to the west," she said. Last month's fierce street battles in Palmyra left much of the city's residential neighborhoods severely damaged.

Most of Palmyra's pre-war population of 70,000 people fled west towards the city of Homs when the extremist group advanced on the city in May 2015. Syrian officials in Homs city were this week preparing for the first of these displaced residents to return. "The first group of buses transporting residents back to Palmyra will leave on Saturday (from Homs). The residents started to register their names today," a provincial government official said. He said nearly 45 percent of residential neighborhoods in the city had been destroyed by the recent round of fighting. Many apartment blocks had partially collapsed walls and some had been totally demolished, AFP journalists who visited the city after its recapture reported.

Talks 'doomed'

Authorities this week began restoring power lines in the city and repairs to housing began on Wednesday, provincial governor Talal Barazi told state news agency SANA. An estimated 15,000 residents stayed on under IS rule and most left during the Syrian army's offensive to retake the city, but it was not clear to where they had fled. Since Syria's conflict erupted in March 2011, thousands of people have gone missing — many of them arbitrarily arrested by armed forces across the country. More than 270,000 people have been killed and millions have fled their homes.

UN-backed peace talks to bring an end to the conflict are set to resume next week in Geneva, with this third round focusing on plans for a political transition. The key stumbling block remains the fate of President Bashar Al-Assad. Syria's opposition has clung to its years-long demand that he leave power immediately, but the government has refused. This week the main opposition group, the High Negotiations Committee, said the upcoming negotiations were certain to fail unless Assad's fate is on the table. "If negotiations did not address the fate of Assad, it would be a waste of time and doomed to failure," HNC representative Riad Naasan Agha said Tuesday at a forum hosted by Al-Jazeera in Qatar. Agha said that he was not hopeful the talks would succeed, as negotiations on forming a transitional government were almost at a "dead-end". —AFP



ROME: This file photo taken on March 29, 2016 shows the parents of Italian student Giulio Regeni, Paola Regeni (L) and Claudio Regeni (R), holding a banner reading "Truth for Giulio Regeni" during a press conference with Senator Luigi Manconi (C), president of the Human Rights commission at the Italian Senate. — AFP

EGYPT SEEKS TO DEFUSE ITALY ANGER OVER SLAIN STUDENT

LACK OF PROGRESS CONTINUES TO FRUSTRATE

ROME: Egyptian investigators began briefing Italian counterparts yesterday on a much-criticized probe into the slaying of an Italian student in Cairo that threatens to poison relations between the two countries. The delegation of prosecutors and police arrived in Rome with a 2,000-page file on an investigation in which more than 200 people have been questioned, according to Italian media reports.

The meeting aims at reassuring Italy that everything is being done to bring the killer of 28-year-old Giulio Regeni to justice. Frustrated by the apparent lack of progress, Italian officials have warned of consequences if the Egyptians do not present a credible and detailed account of everything they know about the young man's gruesome fate. The talks are expected to continue into Friday.

The case is a testing one for Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who has fostered a close trade and security relationship with Egypt's military-backed president, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, but is under pressure to respond to public anger over the Regeni case. "The relationship is a huge deal for Italy but Egypt has burnt most of its credit in the last two months in a not very smart way," said Mattia Toalda, an expert on Italian foreign policy at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in London.

The Cambridge student disappeared in central Cairo on January 25. His body was found on the outskirts of the city on February 3 bearing the

signs of torture which, an autopsy concluded, had been inflicted over several days. His mother has said his body was so mutilated she could only recognize him by the tip of his nose and global media coverage of the case has focused international attention on other disappearances and rights abuses in Sisi's Egypt.

Italian officials were initially told Regeni had been killed in a car accident, then that his death had been linked to a personal dispute. At the end of last month, Egypt publicly announced police had killed four members of a criminal gang specializing in abducting foreigners, and that they had found Regeni's passport in the apartment of a sister of one of the slain suspects. That version of events was greeted with outraged skepticism in Italy, where there is a widespread suspicion that the murder was the work of elements in the security services—a theory Cairo dismisses as without foundation.

'Lies again and again'

Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni told parliament on Tuesday the kidnapping gang story was a "new attempt to give credence to a convenient truth", and that Italy was preparing "immediate and proportionate" action if the Egyptian delegation did not provide satisfactory answers. Toalda said he could not remember an Italian foreign minister speaking the way Gentiloni did.

"Basically he is saying to Sisi: 'You

told us lies again and again, and now we have to do something.'" Italy's own investigators are still waiting to receive Regeni's mobile phone records and CCTV images from the neighborhood in which he was abducted. Rome also wants to know if and why Regeni was under surveillance prior to his abduction. The student had been researching labor movements in Egypt.

He disappeared on the fifth anniversary of the uprising that ousted longtime leader Hosni Mubarak, a day when Cairo was on a security lockdown and virtually deserted. Toalda said Italy's options in terms of action were limited to recalling its ambassador, warning its citizens against travel to Egypt on security grounds or seeking backing from its European Union partners to put pressure on Cairo over the case.

All are problematic. An ambassador callback risks being seen domestically as purely symbolic while a travel ban would hurt Egypt's battered tourism industry at the cost of escalating the rift with Sisi's government.

And other EU countries might not be keen to jeopardize their relations with Egypt to support Italy given Rome's past courting of the Sisi regime. "A lot depends on whether the Egyptian team can come up with something that buys Renzi more time in terms of public opinion, which is very inflamed over this issue," Toalda said. "If they don't it will be almost impossible for Renzi not to be seen to be doing something." —AFP