

CIA-BACKED SYRIAN REBELS UNDER RUSSIAN BLITZ

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Leading Republican Ryan reconsiders running for speaker

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KAFR BATNA, Syria: A Syrian man rides a bike with his two daughters behind him in a plastic box in this town in the rebel-held Eastern Ghouta area on Friday. — AFP

FIERCE BATTLES IN CENTRAL SYRIA REGIME ADVANCES WITH RUSSIAN AIR SUPPORT

DAMASCUS: Syrian troops backed by Russian airstrikes seized a village in central Syria yesterday amid fierce clashes with rebels, part of a ground offensive launched earlier this week. That offensive marked the first major air-and-ground assault since Moscow began its military campaign in Syria on Sept 30. Russian officials say the airstrikes are targeting mainly Islamic State militants, but most strikes are hitting areas where the extremist group is not present. The fighting is concentrated in Hama and the northern Idlib provinces, where a consortium of mainstream rebels as well as Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, the Nusra Front, are operating.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on a network of activists across Syria, said government troops seized control of Atshan on Friday amid intense Russian airstrikes in the region. It said troops also seized the nearby Um Hartein village. Syrian troops have faced stiff resistance from the rebels, who have used advanced US-made TOW mis-

siles to attack Syrian tanks and armored vehicles.

The Russian defense ministry said in a statement that Russian planes flew 64 sorties and targeted 54 sites in the past 24 hours, without elaborating. Among the sites attacked, it said, were command outposts in Aleppo and Idlib provinces. Russia, a key ally of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, has insisted its airstrikes are targeting the Islamic State group and other terrorists. But US officials said this week that Russia has directed parts of its air campaign against US-funded groups and other moderate opposition groups in a concerted effort to weaken them.

The Observatory said Russian warplanes yesterday bombed a headquarters of the ultraconservative Ahrar Al-Sham rebel group in Saraqeb, in Idlib province. There was no immediate confirmation or details. Heavy fighting was also taking place in the al-Ghab plain in Hama province a natural barrier between areas controlled by Sunni Muslims and the Alawite sect to which Assad and

many of his loyalists belong.

Syria's civil war, which has killed more than 250,000 people in the past four years, has displaced half the country's pre-war population of 23 million people. A US-led coalition has been striking Islamic State targets in Syria for over a year. A military official quoted by Syria's state-run SANA said yesterday that two F-16s from the US-led coalition violated Syrian airspace and targeted civilian infrastructure in Aleppo. The unnamed official said the strikes destroyed two power plants in the Radwanayah area east of Aleppo city, causing a blackout.

The head of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes key rebel backers Saudi Arabia and Qatar, meanwhile said Russia's intervention could help defeat the IS group if it works with other nations battling the extremists. "I am not downplaying the difficulties. The war against Daesh and defeating its dangers is possible if the opposing parties against Daesh, among them Russians, work together properly," GCC Secretary General

Abdullatif Al-Zayani said at an event in Abu Dhabi, referring to IS by its Arabic acronym.

The GCC is comprised of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. Saudi Arabia has denounced the Russian air campaign. Also speaking at the event in Abu Dhabi Saturday was UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, who is headed to Iran on Sunday. He called on all countries in the region, and the Security Council, to work toward a "credible political transition in Syria." "An end to this war is in everybody's enlightened self-interest. Enough is enough," he said. — AP

TEN DEAD, INCLUDING KIDS, AT DUBLIN TRAVELLERS' SITE



DUBLIN: Irish police officers exit a site in the south Dublin suburb of Carrickmines yesterday where a fire killed at least 10 people. — AP

DUBLIN: Ten people have died, including a couple and their five children, after a pre-dawn fire yesterday at a site in Dublin housing members of the traveller community. "We can confirm 10 fatalities now," an Irish police spokesman told AFP, but he could not say how many were children. Members of two related families are believed to have died, including a baby as young as six months old. "Unfortunately a husband and wife, their four sons and baby daughter and other relations are lost," said Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny. "It's such an unspeakable tragedy to have an entire family wiped out in a horrific inferno," he added.

A number of other people were taken to hospital after inhaling smoke at the site made up of caravans and prefabricated buildings. Dublin Fire Service said it was too early to establish the cause of the fire in the south Dublin suburb of Carrickmines, which is about 16 km from the city centre. A police source said the fire did not appear suspicious but that a forensic investigation was under way to discover the cause and how it spread. Emergency services were alerted shortly after 0300 GMT.

Irish President Michael D Higgins described the incident as a "dreadful tragedy". He added in a statement: "My thoughts at this time are with the families and friends of those who have lost their lives and those who have been injured." Local councillor Peter O'Brien said: "People went to bed on a Friday night looking forward to the weekend and never woke up." "That's a hard thing to get your head around," he told AFP at the scene where people have been laying flowers.

The victims are believed to be from three generations of the same family living on the site, according to Irish media reports. The Southside Traveller Action Group, which offers support to travellers in the area, said the community was "in a state of shock at the devastating" events. People left homeless by the fire will be accommodated by authorities in Dublin, the group said in a statement. "It is our understanding that... the names of the deceased will not be released today," it added. — AFP

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