

Beat: Politics

Pro-Assad forces kill 175 rebels in ambush near Damascus

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USPA News - At least 175 Islamist rebel fighters, most of them foreigners, were killed Wednesday when forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad carried out an ambush in an insurgent-held area east of the capital Damascus, activists and state-run media said. The ambush occurred near a town in the Eastern Ghouta area east of Damascus when a Syrian army unit pursued rebels as they crossed a field, the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported.

It said the rebels were members of the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front and the Salafist Jihadi Liwa al-Islam group. "[A field commander said] the army process comes as a result of tightening the grip around the armed terrorist groups to prevent terrorists from infiltrating into Eastern Ghouta," SANA said in its report. "He affirmed that the armed group was trying to ease pressure on terrorists ... through bringing terrorists, supported by Western and regional states through the Jordanian borders." SANA said more than 175 rebels were killed and others were injured, but the figures could not be independently verified, though photos released by the government-run news agency showed dozens of bodies. The Britain-based activist group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said it had verified the deaths of at least 152 rebels. "The deaths of 152 fighters from Al-Nusra Front and Islamic battalions was confirmed in an ambush carried out by the Lebanese Hezbollah and regular forces between the towns of al-A`teiba and Meed`a," the Observatory said. It added that at least seven wounded rebels were taken captive during the ambush. Syrian state media said most of those killed in Wednesday's ambush were believed to be Saudi, Qatari and Chechen nationalities. It said "a large number" of rebels belonging to Al-Nusra Front were also killed during an army operation in Latakia province, but no figures were provided. The crisis in Syria began as a pro-democracy protest movement in March 2011, similar to those across the Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian government violently cracked down on the protests, setting off an armed conflict between pro-Assad forces and anti-government forces. The United Nations estimates that more than 100,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed and millions more have fled to neighboring countries since the start of the uprising that has escalated into a full-blown civil war. Opposition groups estimate the number of deaths has already exceeded 200,000, but those figures cannot be independently verified.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com

