

The people who live here have fled. Only the fighters remain



In Aleppo, Assad's forces are locked in bloody battle with a splintered opposition. **Kim Sengupta**, the only foreign newspaper journalist in the heart of the city, reports

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There was a strange quietness to Salaheddine in between the bursts of ferocious fighting. The strips of cloth that curtain off the narrow, twisting alleys from the sight of the regime's tanks and guns rustled in the wind, there was a faint noise of traffic in the distance. The only human voices, however, were hurried conversations in doorways between fighters; the people who lived here have gone.

The calm was shattered by a few shots, snipers at work. This was followed immediately by deafening rifle fire and then the deep boom of shells and mortars crashing into buildings in neighbouring streets. There were roars of "Allah hu Akbar" from the rebels as ambulances went careering by, playing religious and protest songs in full volume.

Defiance is the theme in the most violent battleground in Syria's civil war at present, the Salaheddine district of Aleppo, the bloody focal point in the struggle for the country's largest city and commercial capital, a symbolic and strategic prize craved by both sides. "F*** you, sniper!" shouted an opposition activist in the car that we were travelling in, crouching low in our seats to avoid shots supposedly coming our way. What we got, instead, was a rocket-propelled grenade, sailing far overhead to hit the ground floor of a house, adding to the pock-marked and burnt architecture of the area.

The Independent was the first international news organisation to enter Salaheddine since Bashar al-Assad's regime began its offensive to clear the main opposition stronghold in the city. Standing on the road where most of the fighting was taking place, Sheikh

Taufik Shiabuddin, the district's rebel commander, said he welcomed a chance to refute "Assad's lies". He counted off the triumphs so far on the fingers of his hand. "We have destroyed two tanks, seven armoured carriers and killed 200 of their soldiers. They had attacked us with a force of 3,000 and they cannot get in. We shall be going forward to them soon, the enemy is suffering," he said to chants of "Takhbir" (call to God) from his followers, who gathered around him.

The regime's forces may be suffering, but they still appeared to have a lot left in reserve, judging by the regularity with which mortar and light-artillery rounds came whizzing over. A helicopter gunship made several passes overhead, but it would have been difficult for the pilot to pick out targets in such confined quarters and it flew off to attack elsewhere.

Looking from the fourth-floor balcony of an abandoned flat, curtained like almost every other balcony in the area, one could see a row of eight green Syrian army tanks, possibly Russian made T-55s, with their barrels pointed towards the streets of Salaheddine. "They have been firing from the tanks, but all they are hitting are empty buildings" said the Sheikh's brother, Ahmed. "We have lost some people for sure, 15 martyrs and 40 wounded. They have tried to bring their tanks in here and we've hit them hard. Assad's people know we are waiting."

All the stores in street were shuttered apart from one with a "special offer" on display - trays of Molotov cocktails. Standing among the bottles, 19-year-old Amir Mohammed Hasif



Clockwise from main: a fighter in Salaheddine; a rebel fighter holds a sign in Russian that says 'transit'; a captured tank; young activists with Molotov cocktails



explained how they were made and added: "My three sisters helped make them. They cannot join in the fight, but they want to contribute as much as possible in other ways."

The revolutionaries in Salaheddine came from a number of different battalions, with the Abu-Bakr detachment from the town of Al-Bab among the first volunteers for this extremely dangerous front line. "We are taking only the best ones who offer to come," Abdul Fawzi Hussein said. "We are winning, but Assad is like a wounded snake, he will keep striking. We don't want brave boys to come and then go back to their mothers as martyrs."

It is difficult to ascertain the gains of each side in Aleppo, although some are obviously false - such as Syrian state TV's assertion of "complete control of Salaheddine". The opposition claims to control around 45 per cent of the area and said it will be taking over the remainder in the coming days. The Independent travelled through parts of eastern and south-eastern

Assad's top man in London goes into hiding in protest at regime's bloodshed

By **LOVEDAY MORRIS** in Beirut

Syria's most senior diplomat in Britain yesterday quit his post in protest at the continued bloodletting by President Bashar al-Assad's regime, in the latest in a slew of diplomatic defections.

The Foreign Office said the charge d'affaires Khaled al-Ayoubi had informed them yesterday morning of his decision and was now at a "safe location" within the UK. He has not yet announced whether he will join the opposition, and is understood to be considering his next move.

"Mr al-Ayoubi has told us that he is no longer willing to represent a regime that has committed such violent and oppressive acts against its own people," a spokeswoman said.

His departure is another blow to the Assad regime. It illustrates the revulsion and despair the regime's actions are provoking among Syrians from all walks of life, inside the country and abroad.

Mr al-Ayoubi joined the Syrian diplomatic service in 2001 and was posted to London on 18 February last year, where he is believed to have joined the embassy as a second secretary. Only three junior diplomats now remain at the embassy.

The previous charge d'affaires, Ghassan Dalla, was expelled in May following the Houla massacre, and ambassador Sami Khiyami was recalled in March after Britain closed its embassy in Damascus.

Several senior diplomats have defected in recent weeks, including envoys in Iraq and Cyprus.

"We urge others around Bashar Al-Assad to follow Mr al-Ayoubi's example; to dissociate themselves from the crimes being committed against the Syrian people and to support a peaceful and free future for Syria," the Foreign Office said.

The deputy police chief of Latakia city also defected and fled to Turkey overnight with 11 other Syrian officers, a Turkish official said. Another 600 Syrians had arrived in the last 24 hours, bringing the number of Syrian

refugees in Turkey to around 43,500. Amid growing concern about security on its southern frontier, Turkey sent a convoy of troops, missile batteries and armoured vehicles to the border with Syria yesterday.

On the ground, Syrian rebels put forward a roadmap for the transition period after the fall of President Assad, taking a swipe at opposition figures outside of the country who are attempting to do the same.

The "national salvation draft", penned by the Homs-based Free Syrian Army (FSA) Military Council Joint Command, calls for the creation of military and civilian bodies which would lead to the creation of an executive council providing a "backbone" for the transition.

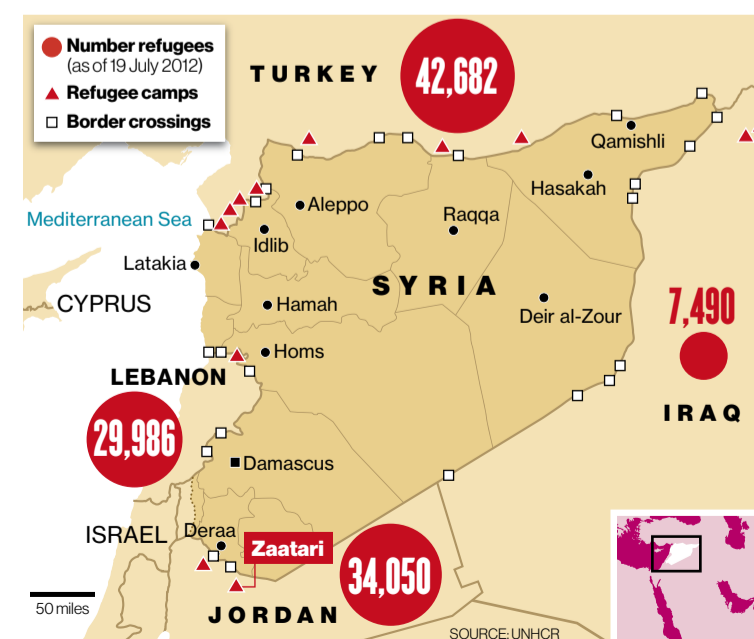
The plan, circulated by Colonel Qassim Saadeddine, follows last week's meeting of the main external opposition group, the Syrian National Council, to determine plans for a transitional government.

In a warning that seemed directly aimed at those efforts, the FSA said "any government that is created anywhere... that lacks national and revolutionary legitimacy... and that lacks the approval of the Joint Command and all the revolutionary forces on the ground, will not see the light".

Col Saadeddine has denounced the leadership of Col Riad al-Asaad, who is not related to the president but seen by many as the FSA's leader. Analysts and Western diplomats have said the opposition based outside the country is likely to become increasingly irrelevant in the coming months, as more developed power structures emerge.

The first step on the FSA's roadmap is establishing a higher defence council which would be drawn from the country's military councils and senior defectors. That body would be responsible for creating a presidential council and a six member executive council.

DISPLACEMENT ACTIVITY THE REFUGEE CRISIS



parts with the rebels seemingly firmly in control.

The revolutionaries were not totally united. One base flew the black flag with gold Koranic inscriptions favoured by extreme Islamists and the fighters there polite but suspicious of strangers. "We know about them, but they keep to themselves," Abdul Fawzi Hussein said. "We shall have to deal with them in the future, but for now our focus is on Salaheddine and Aleppo. If we hold Salaheddine, I am sure, *Inshallah*, if we lose Salaheddine then we shall have difficulty holding on to other areas we have in Aleppo. We must liberate Aleppo."

Mohammed Numer, who lived in an adjoining area, one of the very few families to stay on there, wondered what will be left. "Salaheddine is the worst, but other places are getting affected as well. We have so little food because the shops are shut, there is no electricity and no water and no medicine. The fighters can live... among all that, but what about the rest of us? Who will look after us? We just wish all this will end," he said.



The Syrian embassy in London has been a constant target for protests against the bloodletting by President Assad's regime