

# Rebels declare end of Assad rule in Syria

AFP- Islamist-led rebels declared that they have taken Damascus in a lightning offensive on Sunday, sending President Bashar al-Assad fleeing and ending five decades of Baath rule in Syria.

Residents in the Syrian capital were seen cheering in the streets of Damascus, as the rebel factions heralded the departure of “tyrant” Assad and “declare the city of Damascus free”.

The president’s reported departure comes less than two weeks since the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group launched its campaign challenging more than five decades of rule by the Assad family.

“After 50 years of oppression under Baath rule, and 13 years of crimes and tyranny and (forced) displacement... we announce today the end of this dark period and the start of a new era for Syria,” the rebel factions said on Telegram.

Prime Minister Mohammed al-Jalali said he was ready to cooperate with “any leadership chosen by the Syrian people”.

The head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdel Rahman, told AFP “Assad left Syria via Damascus international airport before the army security forces left” the facility.

AFP was unable to immediately confirm the report, which follows a source close to Hezbollah saying fighters from the key Assad ally had left their positions around Damascus.

HTS said their fighters broke into a jail on the outskirts of the capital, announcing an “end of the era of tyranny in the prison of Sednaya” which has become a by-word for darkest abuses of the Syrian regime.

The rapid developments in Damascus come only hours after HTS said they had captured the strategic city of Homs, on the way to the capital.

The defence ministry earlier denied that rebels had entered Homs, describing the situation there as “safe and stable”.

Homs lies about 140 kilometres (85 miles) north of the capital and was the third major city seized by the rebels who began their advance on November 27, reigniting a years-long war that had become largely dormant.

– Hezbollah fighters leave –

Monitoring events in Damascus, the Britain-based Observatory confirmed “the doors of the infamous ‘Sednaya’ prison... have been opened for thousands of detainees who were imprisoned by the security apparatus throughout the regime’s rule”.

Assad’s government has earlier denied the army had withdrawn from areas around Damascus.

Reports the president had fled were followed by the premier saying he was ready to “cooperate” with a new leadership and any handover process.

“This country can be a normal country that builds good relations with its neighbours and the world... but this issue is up to any leadership chosen by the Syrian people,” Jalali said in a speech broadcast on his Facebook account.

Assad has for years been backed by Lebanese Hezbollah, whose forces “vacated their positions around Damascus” according to a source close to the group.

Hezbollah “has instructed its fighters in recent hours to withdraw from the Homs area, with some heading to Latakia (in Syria) and others to the Hermel area in Lebanon”, the source also told AFP.

– ‘Suddenly everyone was scared’ –

AFP has been unable to independently verify some of the information provided by the government and the rebels, as its journalists cannot reach the areas around Damascus where the rebels say they are present.

Residents of the capital described to AFP a state of panic on Saturday as traffic jams clogged the city centre, people sought supplies and queued to withdraw money from ATMs.

“The situation was not like this when I left my house this morning... suddenly everyone was scared,” said one woman, Rania.

A few kilometres (miles) away, the mood was starkly different.

In a Damascus suburb, witnesses said protesters toppled a statue of Assad’s father, the late leader Hafez al-Assad.

AFPTV images from Hama, Syria’s fourth-largest city, showed abandoned tanks and other armoured vehicles, one of them on fire.

Hama resident Kharfan Mansour said he was “happy with the liberation of Hama and the liberation of Syria from the Assad regime”.

– Soldiers ‘fled’ to Iraq –

The Observatory said on Saturday government forces had lost control of all southern Daraa province, the cradle of the 2011 uprising.

The army said it was “redeploying and repositioning” in Daraa and another southern province, Sweida.

The Observatory also said troops were also evacuating posts in Quneitra, near the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights.

Jordan has urged its citizens to leave neighbouring Syria “as soon as possible”, as have the United States and Assad ally

Russia, which both keep troops in Syria.

An AFP correspondent in Daraa saw local fighters guarding public property and civil institutions.

In Sweida, a local fighter told AFP that after government forces withdrew “from their positions and headquarters, we are now securing and protecting vital facilities”.

An Iraqi security source told AFP that Baghdad has allowed in hundreds of Syrian soldiers, who “fled the front lines”, through the Al-Qaim border crossing. A second source put the figure at 2,000 troops, including officers.

– ‘War, blood and tears’ –

HTS is rooted in the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda. Proscribed as a terrorist organisation by Western governments, it has sought to soften its image in recent years, and told minority groups living in areas they now control not to worry.

Since the offensive began, at least 826 people, mostly combatants but also including 111 civilians, have been killed, the Observatory said.

The United Nations said the violence has displaced 370,000 people.

UN special envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, called for “urgent political talks” to implement a 2015 Security Council resolution, which set out a roadmap for a negotiated settlement.

US President-elect Donald Trump posted on his Truth Social platform that the United States should “not get involved”, after outgoing US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called Friday for a “political solution to the conflict”, in a call with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.

After Fidan and his Iranian and Russian counterparts discussed

Syria in Qatar on Saturday, Iran's top diplomat Abbas Araghchi said they agreed on the initiation of "political dialogue between the Syrian government and legitimate opposition groups".

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said it was "inadmissible" to allow a "terrorist group to take control" of Syrian territory.

Moscow and Tehran have supported Assad's government and army during the war.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose government backs some armed groups in northern Syria, said Saturday that Syria "is tired of war, blood and tears".

AFP