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To: H
Subject: Fw: 6 soldiers among dead; Syria weighing observers (AP)

From: AOC SESO OS
Sent: Sunday, December 18, 2011 02:54 PM
To: Syria Unrest; NEWS-NEA; NEWS-Mahogany
Cc: SES-O
Subject: 6 soldiers among dead; Syria weighing observers (AP)

(SBU) Embassy Damascus is unable to confirm the Qatari prime minister's assertion that Syrian President Asad will sign the Arab League plan on Syria.

(U) BEIRUT (AP) - Armed clashes erupted in Syria Sunday, killing at least 15 civilians and six government troops, activists said. Isolated and faced with a possible civil war, Syria appeared to be bending toward allowing Arab League observers in as a step toward ending the conflict.

The Al-Arabiya TV channel said it had information from the Qatari prime minister that Syrian President Bashar Assad will sign an observer deal but gave no further details. Last month Syria agreed to an Arab League plan but balked at its implementation

The foreign minister of Oman, speaking to reporters ahead of a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Saudi Arabia, also said Sunday he is "optimistic" that Syria will sign the protocol within 24 hours "and save the Arab world from foreign intervention.

The Arab League has given Syria until Wednesday to sign a protocol to allow observers into the country, or else it will likely turn to the U.N. Security Council for action to try to end the deadly violence against regime opponents

Syria's state-run news agency SANA quoted Assad Sunday as saying in front of an Iraqi delegation that Syria has "dealt positively with proposals presented because it's in (Syria's) interest for the world to know what is happening in Syria."

Syria has in the past said it would accept to have the monitors but then placed conditions that were rejected by the Arab League.

Syria's foreign minister was scheduled to hold a news conference Monday, when he is expected to announce Syria's position.

The head of the Iraqi delegation met later Sunday with Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby in Cairo. He told reporters Iraq wished to play "an active role in supporting Arab League efforts" on Syria which he described as the "sole and appropriate framework" to solve the crisis in Syria.

Attacks by Syrian security forces and clashes with gunmen believed to be army defectors continued in Syria Sunday in the latest sign that the nation's uprising may be deteriorating into civil war.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said an army officer was among the six soldiers killed in the town of Qusair in Homs province, near the border with Lebanon.

"Three armored vehicles were destroyed, and those inside were killed and wounded," according to the group, which relies on a network of activists inside the country. It said the clashes also resulted in the "partial destruction of some homes."

Heavy gunbattles were also reported Sunday in several villages in the restive Jabal al-Zawiya region in the northern Idlib province near the Turkish border, where many defectors are believed to be operating.

The Observatory and the Local Coordination Committees activist network said at least 15 civilians were killed in clashes and shootings by security forces toward civilian areas in the Homs region, as well as the Jabal al-Zawiya area and the town of Maaret al-Numan in the north.

Among the dead was a young man who was killed when security forces opened fire during a funeral of a man killed earlier in the eastern Deir el-Zour province.

The reports could not be confirmed independently, because Syria has banned most foreign correspondents and limited movement around the country.

Syria has seen a sharp escalation in armed clashes recently, raising concerns the country of 22 million is slipping toward civil war nine months into the uprising against Assad.

The Syrian revolt began in mid-March as protesters emboldened by uprisings across the Arab world took to the streets to demand an end to the Assad family's more than 40-year rule. The regime responded with a bloody crackdown that the U.N. says has killed at least 5,000 people.

Speaking after an Arab ministerial committee meeting in Doha Saturday, Qatar's prime minister Sheik Hamad Bin Jassem Bin Jabr Al Thani said Arab foreign ministers will hold a "decisive and important" meeting in Cairo on Wednesday to decide on the next step.

He said there is near unanimity on taking the Arab League's plan to the Security Council in hopes the world body can press Damascus to accept it. Syria has demanded changes to the proposal, which calls for an end to the bloody crackdown.

The United Nations has been waiting for word from the Arab League before moving ahead with a resolution on Syria. A clear nod from Damascus' Arab neighbors could ease Russian and Chinese opposition to sanctions. Both nations have veto power at the Security Council.

The Arab League plan calls for Syria to halt its crackdown, hold talks with the opposition and allow in Arab observers to ensure compliance with the deal. It does not call for foreign military intervention, as in Libya.

The 22-member League has also suspended Syria's membership and imposed sanctions, but it has been divided over whether to seek the help of the wider international community beyond the Arab world.