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FYI

From: Holladay, Darby G (PACE) [<mailto:HolladayDG2@state.gov>]
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High-Ranking Syrian Officer Defects From Military

By REUTERS

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BEIRUT (Reuters) - A high-ranking army officer announced his defection from Syria's military in a YouTube video on Tuesday and said he joined rebel forces in objection to shelling of his hometown in the crackdown on an 11-month revolt against President Bashar al-Assad's rule.

Adnan Qassem Farzat said in the video he felt compelled to desert the military because the intensified bombardment of rebel-held areas "are not the values of the Syrian army." The authenticity of the video could not be verified.

If confirmed, Farzat would be the second brigadier general to defect - the highest rank of officers to abandon Assad's forces, most of whom have remained loyal to the president, fighting what he says are foreign-backed terrorists. Brigadier general is the fifth-highest rank in the Syrian army.

Farzat said he was from Rastan, a besieged rebel stronghold in Homs province, where the crackdown on the uprising against 40 years of Assad family rule has been especially fierce.

"I am the brigadier general Adnan Qassem Farzat...from the people of the city of Rastan and I announce my defection from the Syrian military and that I have joined the Free Syrian Arab Army," said the bespectacled Farzat, believed to be in his mid-fifties.

He held up an officer identification card but it did not specify his rank. His hometown was one of the first towns to fall briefly into rebel hands though it has been retaken by the army several times and has been heavily battered by fighting.

"I informed some commanders that Rastan is being hit by artillery fire, and in spite of this the bombardment continued violently. Houses have been destroyed and women and children have been killed. These are not the values of the Syrian army and for this reason I am defecting."

At least a third of those killed in security forces' crackdown on the uprising are believed to be in Homs.

The Free Syrian Army, believed to be made up of between 15,000 and 20,000 army deserters, says it plays a defensive role but local battalions launch attacks on state forces and have eclipsed what began as a peaceful protest movement.

Farzat's current location is unknown. He sat in a white walled room adorned with the rebels' green, white and black independence flag.

Other rebel fighters said Farzat would not be able to speak until his location was secured. They would not say if the officer planned to fight from Rastan or head abroad to lead operations.

"If he stays in Syria he will likely takeover leadership of the rebellion in Rastan. If he leaves perhaps he could become a deputy leader or they could negotiate a new leadership role," said Captain Ahmed al-Arabi, a rebel officer in Homs province.

The two leading officers in the Free Syrian Army, Lieutenant Colonel Riad al-Asaad and Brigadier General Mustafa Sheikh, have been operating from southern Turkey.

It is possible the defection could cause friction in the rebel forces or some restructuring within the leadership. There were some tensions when Sheikh, then the highest ranking officer to desert the military, defected in January.

Separate roles were later carved out for each, with Asaad named as head of operations and Sheikh as head of a military council leading officers on the ground. Most rebel fighters in Syria refer to Sheikh as their leader, however.

(Reporting by Erika Solomon and Mariam Karouny; Editing by Myra MacDonald)