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Syrian civilians hit hard by spreading violence

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KHAN SHEIKHOUN, Syria (AP) — Her daughter, 8, often hides in a closet, terrified of flying bullets. Her son, 6, still asks for his father months after he turned up in a morgue. And the family has little income because her brother-in-law was killed too.

Umm Moussa's extended family is smaller now. They live day to day in a house of simply furnished concrete rooms around an empty courtyard in this dusty city in northern Syria.

"I'm always worried that after all I've lost, I'll lose something else," said the thin, shy 27-year-old, leafing through photos of her dead husband.

As Syria's 15-month-old uprising has morphed from a popular call for reform into an armed insurgency, the country's civilians have paid the highest price.

Most of the more than 14,000 people activists say have been killed are civilians. Countless others have watched their livelihoods collapse, their neighborhoods turn to battlegrounds and their friends and relatives die or disappear.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Journalist Ben Hubbard was part of a three-member Associated Press team that spent two weeks with rebels in northern Syria, collecting on-the-ground information on the revolt against President Bashar Assad — the longest and deadliest uprising of the Arab Spring.

During two weeks in northern Syria, three Associated Press journalists met scores of civilians whose lives have been altered by the conflict: students who cannot cross army checkpoints to reach schools and universities; merchants whose suppliers have stopped delivering; and farmers who left land fallow because they can no longer afford diesel for irrigation pumps.

The international community has harshly

Ben Hubbard • AP

Ahmed Tilawi, center, and his sister Layal Tilawi stand in a doorway near a photo of their dead father Mohammed Tilawi in Khan Sheikhoun, Syria.

condemned President Bashar Assad's regime for its role in the violence, endorsing a plan by U.N. envoy Kofi Annan to try to end it.

But that plan has fallen far short — as is obvious here in Khan Sheikhoun, a city of 80,000 people surrounded by wheat fields and orchards on the country's main north-south highway.

Six military checkpoints ring the city, housing snipers who fire on civilians and rebels alike. Troops block roads to the fields and sometimes set them ablaze, meaning farmers can smell the smoke of their crops burning but cannot fight the flames.

Regime forces have also seized the state hospital and other downtown buildings, parking armored vehicles out front and piling sandbags on the roofs. Residents call the shuttered central boulevard the "street of death" because so many people have been shot there.

Rebels run the rest of the city and have mined its entries. They blast army vehicles passing on the highway with rocket-propelled grenades, and patrol in two armored SUVs that they captured.

They also run a clinic and hang out in a former security building. A bust of the former president, Assad's late father Hafez, is positioned near the entrance, defaced with devilish horns sprouting from the head.

The regime shells occasionally, and

the rebels clash with those manning the checkpoints daily.

One sweltering afternoon, rebels blasted machine guns around the corners of buildings while sniper fire chipped at the streets and walls around them.

Standing at the door to his house, Mohammed al-Safa, 24, listed neighbors struck by those snipers: the family across the street who'd abandoned their home; the 10-year-old girl paralyzed by a bullet in the back; the elderly man shot dead on his roof while adjusting his satellite dish.

"May God protect you!" al-Safa's mother yelled as rebels rushed down their alley.

"The Free Army is all we have to protect us," al-Safa said. "No one else can."

The media team for the city's rebels, now based in a former office of Assad's ruling Baath party, says the numbers show the regime's disregard for civilians: Of the more than 130 people killed in the uprising, only 31 were fighters, said activist Hisham Nijim.

When asked about the Annan plan and the nearly 300 observers sent to monitor it, residents recall "the massacre."

On May 15, U.N. observers left a security building, walked past a number of sand berms and through a rowdy anti-regime protest about 100 meters (yards) away. Apparently feeling protected by the observers, the crowd inched toward the soldiers guarding the building, chanting, "The people want to execute Bashar!" and "Traitors! The Syrian army are traitors!" according to a video of the event.

Minutes later, the soldiers opened fire in a deafening roar, and protesters dropped in the street as the crowd scrambled for cover.

Nijim said 44 people were killed. Photos of 32 of them, including young children and old men, hang in the media office.

"Annan's plan is worthless," Nijim said. "It is impossible that this regime will give up power peacefully. It will only go under force of arms."

The Syrian government rarely comments on its military's actions. It has never acknowledged popular calls for reform and blames the uprising on foreign-backed gangs and terrorists seeking to weaken the country.

The troubles for Umm Moussa's family began in February 2011, when her husband's youngest brother was arrested in a cafe for chatting online about the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. When those uprisings inspired Syrians to protest a month later, his arrest pushed the two older brothers to join.

Security forces attacked the protests and raided activist homes, killing four people on one day in June.

Umm Moussa's husband, Mohammed Tilawi, became a leader, drawing banners and outfitting a pickup truck with huge speakers to blast anti-regime chants, she said.

Security forces attacked the protests and raided activist homes, killing four people on one day in June. More people joined, and some sought arms.

"Anyone who had a weapon — a hunting rifle, a Kalashnikov, even a club — came out to defend the city," activist Osama Abu

Homam said.

That month, Mohammed's other brother, Mukhlis, was shot and killed while manning a rebel checkpoint. The family never found out who shot him.

Mohammed sold his brother's car to buy a rifle. Umm Moussa and their four children saw him less and less as the clashes grew more frequent.

"We often fled the house because we were afraid they'd arrest us to get him to turn himself in," Umm Moussa said. She last saw him alive in September: Gunfire broke out near a protest, and he took his gun and left.

They found his body days later in a morgue in Hama, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) away. The handwritten hospital report she keeps in her pocket said he'd been shot through the gut and that state security had delivered the body.

It didn't explain his broken jaw, nor the large bruises on his face and around his groin. The family suspects he was tortured.

The younger brother was finally released without trial in February 2012. He was shocked when he got home.

"I was surprised to learn how many people had been killed, and I had to get used to life without my brothers," said Abdel-Razaq, 32.

Since then, he has become a cameraman, filming protests and violence to post on the Internet. In April, shrapnel from a shell attack sliced through his stomach. He has a pink, four-inch scar over his navel from the operation to remove the shrapnel.

The family struggles without his brothers' incomes. Before the uprising, Mohammed had a fiberglass workshop that made sinks. Muklis was a blacksmith. Now both shops are closed, and Abdel-Razaq cannot go back to Dubai, where he worked as a cook before the uprising. His mother, 65, wears black daily and cries when she mentions her sons.

Umm Moussa struggles to comfort her children when gunfire breaks out. She worries when her 12-year-old boy, Moussa, sneaks out to attend protests. She chose to give only her nickname, Arabic for "Mother of Moussa," fearing retribution by Assad's regime.

But she also hopes the uprising will give them better lives.

"There is no way this regime can stay after all the people it has killed," she said. "That would be the biggest crime."