

State of Siege in Syrian City Is Blocking Humanitarian Aid, Health Officials Say

By HANIA MOURTADA
and NICK CUMMING-BRUCE

BEIRUT, Lebanon — Syrian forces bombarded the city of Homs for a sixth day in a row on Friday, while government soldiers backed by Hezbollah fighters clashed with rebels on the outskirts of the city's besieged Khaldiya neighborhood amid warnings from international health officials that fighting was increasingly preventing humanitarian aid from reaching those most in need.

Government forces have trained their sights on Homs and the northern city of Aleppo in recent weeks since they recaptured the strategic border town of Qusayr last month. Antigovernment activists have said the government was aided in the battles by fighters from Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militant group.

The group has not confirmed that, saying only that it would go where it was needed to fight off the insurgency against Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, which Hezbollah leaders say threatens Lebanon and the region.

On Friday, clashes intensified

Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad contributed reporting from Beirut.

near the Khaldiya district, which the army has been trying to storm for weeks, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based watchdog group with a network of activists in Syria.

While the Syrian Army holds large sections of Homs, rebels continue to hold out in a few central neighborhoods. The sustained violence has left the civilian population in dire need of humanitarian assistance, prompting the Syrian National Coalition, the main exile opposition body, to release a statement on Friday asking the United Nations to provide immediate aid.

"The areas under attack in Homs have been cut off from the rest of the world and suffer an urgent shortage of medicine and staple foods," the dispatch read.

Restrictions put in place by the Syrian authorities have increasingly blocked delivery of medicine and medical supplies around the country, even to areas under government control and even as health needs are escalating for people trapped in two years of conflict, the World Health Organization warned on Friday.

"The main problems are to get medicines and medical supplies out from Damascus," the Syrian capital, Elizabeth Hoff, the agency's representative in Damascus, said in a telephone interview.

Ms. Hoff, citing an acute lack of dialysis treatments for more than 5,000 patients and reports of doctors being forced to deliver babies by Caesarean section without proper anesthetics, said: "The situation is getting much worse. We are receiving requests from hard-affected governorates on a daily basis saying the hospitals are empty of medicines and medical supplies."

The health agency's warning was one of several alarms sounded by United Nations organizations on Friday. The human rights office expressed concerns for the fate of several thousand civilians caught in parts of Homs, and it urged all parties to allow civilians to leave the area without fear of persecution or violence.

The United Nations' Rome-based food agencies warned that Syrian crop production had slumped as a result of the disruption and population displacement caused by the war, leaving a quarter of the population unable to produce or buy sufficient food. The World Food Program said it was providing food support for 2.5 million people and was trying to reach four million people by October.

Public health experts said the



Damaged buildings in the Syrian city of Homs, where, humanitarian groups say, the fighting has become so fierce that many civilians are trapped and efforts to send in aid have been thwarted.

national health infrastructure was suffering under the conflict. The government has introduced cumbersome procedures requiring agencies to obtain "facilitation" letters to authorize movement of medical supplies, Ms. Hoff said. In recent weeks officials largely stopped issuing

them, citing security concerns and fears the supplies would end up with the rebels, she said.

Ms. Hoff said that the government had directed that all medical supplies be sent to the Health Ministry, and that its warehouses were brimming with supplies that had not been distributed.

The humanitarian warnings came as members of the Syrian National Council met in Istanbul to elect new leaders and bridge internal divisions, part of an effort to convince Western backers that it can be trusted with distributing lethal aid to moderate elements in the insurgency.

In Okinawa, Talk of Breaking Away From Japanese Control Turns More Serious

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riously."

The independence movement remains nascent, with a few hundred active adherents at most. But Mr. Ota and others say it still has the potential to complicate Japan's unfolding contest with China for influence in the region.

That struggle expanded recently to include what appears to be a semi-official campaign in China to question Japanese rule of Okinawa. Some analysts see the campaign as a ploy to strengthen China's hand in a dispute over a smaller group of islands that has captured international headlines in recent months. Some Chinese scholars have called for exploiting the independence movement to say there are splits even in Japan over the legitimate ownership of islands annexed during Japan's imperial expansion in the late 19th century, as Okinawa and the smaller island group were.

Okinawa has long looked and felt different from the rest of Japan, with the islands' tropical climate, vibrant musical culture and lower average incomes setting it apart. Strategically situated in the center of East Asia, the islands, once known as the Kingdom of the Ryukyus, have had a tortured history with Japan since the takeover, including the forced suicides of Okinawan civilians by Japanese troops during World War II and the imposition of American bases after the war.

For years, Okinawans directed much of their ire over the bases at the United States. But that changed four years ago when the Japanese prime minister at the time, Yukio Hatoyama, reneged on campaign pledges to move the bustling Marine air base at Futenma off Okinawa, rather than to a less populated site on the island as previous governments had approved. After that, many Okinawans shifted much of their anger toward the rest of Japan, which wants the United States military presence to offset China's growing power, but is un-



Chosuke Yara, the head of the Ryukyu Independence Party, last month. "Independence is an idea whose time has come," he said.

Discontent includes a perception that Tokyo is ignoring islanders' concerns.

willing to shoulder more of the burden of bases for fear of crime, noise and accidents.

Local leaders and scholars say the last time Okinawans spoke so openly of independence was during a period of sometimes violent unrest against American control

before the United States ended its postwar occupation of the islands in 1972.

"There is a growing feeling that Okinawans just exchanged one colonial master in Washington for another one in Tokyo," said Shinako Oyakawa, 32, a doctoral student at the University of the Ryukyus and a co-founder of Okinawan Studies 107, a group promoting research into Ryukyuan ethnic identity.

Such discontent has helped nurture groups like hers, which seek to promote the idea that the islanders form a distinct ethnic group. It has also led to the crea-

tion of places like Ryukyu Hall, a privately run school that opened last year and offers classes on Okinawan language and culture.

On a recent weekend, about 30 people gathered at the school, a small, sparsely furnished two-story building, to hear accounts in the Ryukyuan language by survivors of the American invasion of Okinawa in 1945.

"Regaining our identity is the first step toward regaining independence," said Midori Teruya, 41, a co-founder of the school in Ginowan, the site of the Futenma air base.

The talk of independence has grown enough that it is being heard in Tokyo, where some conservative newspapers have begun calling the Okinawan independence activists "pawns" of China.

Whether or not the activists are pawns, there is certainly some discussion in China about using the independence movement. Recently, an editorial in The Global Times, a state-run Chinese newspaper, said China could pressure Japan by "fostering forces in Okinawa that seek the restoration of the independence of the Ryukyu chain."

Few believe China is about to pursue ownership of Okinawa. But Japanese analysts see the informal campaign as the latest gambit in China's attempts to take over the smaller group of islands, known as the Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, by essentially warning that China could expand its claims beyond those islands if Japan ignores its arguments.

"It will create problems for us if the Chinese government tries to use this issue," said Masaki Tomochi, a professor at Okinawa International University who helped organize the symposium on independence in May.

Mr. Tomochi and other activists said that in the remote event that Okinawa became independent, they felt little fear of a Chinese takeover because the Ryukyus had held friendly ties with China for centuries before the Japanese takeover.

Mr. Tomochi's group is planning a second symposium to present research on how Pacific island nations like Palau could serve as a model for a future Ryukyu republic. The idea is to try to overcome what he sees as the main challenge his movement faces: winning over Okinawans who seem content with their Japanese-style living standards.

"People are talking independence now, but how realistic is it?" asked Yoshinao Hiyane, 22, an economics major at Okinawa International University. "My generation has grown up Japanese."

At the movie screening in the market, independence supporters tried to bolster the notion that their idea is more than a fantasy by handing out color-copied "currency" of a Ryukyu republic. They stood before a blue banner with three stars that the organizer, Chosuke Yara, called its flag.

"Recently, the interests of the Japanese people and the Ryukyu people have clearly diverged," said Mr. Yara, 61, the head of the tiny Ryukyu Independence Party. "Independence is an idea whose time has come."

Pope Propels John Paul II And John XXIII to Sainthood

By RACHEL DONADIO

VATICAN CITY — Showing more of his sprightly personality and his priorities, Pope Francis sped two of his predecessors toward sainthood on Friday: John Paul II, who guided the Roman Catholic Church during the end of the cold war, and John XXIII, who assembled the liberalizing Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

In approving the sainthood of John XXIII even without a second miracle attributable to the pontiff, Francis took the rare step of bypassing the Vatican bureaucracy. Francis also said a Vatican committee had accepted the validity of a second miracle attributed to the intercession of John Paul II. Both popes are expected to be canonized before the end of the year.

Also on Friday, Pope Francis issued his first encyclical — a rich meditation on faith and love co-written with his immediate predecessor, Benedict XVI, that clearly displays their different styles: Francis' more conversational, Benedict's more intellectual.

The canonization cause for John Paul began almost immediately after his death in 2005. At

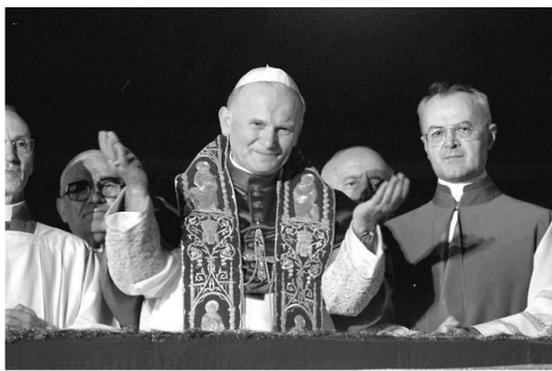
his funeral, crowds in St. Peter's Square began shouting "Santo subito," or "Sainthood now," for the beloved pope. He was beatified in May 2011, after a Vatican committee credited him with interceding to cure a French nun, Marie Simon-Pierre Normand, of Parkinson's disease, the same malady from which the pontiff suffered.

The second miracle attributed to John Paul is said to be the healing of a woman who prayed to the pope on the day of his beatification.

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said Francis was eager to canonize John XXIII. "Despite the absence of a second miracle it was the pope's will that the sainthood of the great pope of the Second Vatican Council be recognized," he said. But he played down the fact that Francis had bypassed a second miracle. "There are lots of theologians who in fact discuss the principle of the fact that it's necessary to have two distinct miracles."

Father Lombardi said John Paul and John XXIII would most likely be canonized before the end of the year.

Alberto Melloni, a Vatican his-



Pope John Paul II, left, who died in 2005, was beatified in 2011. Pope Francis approved Pope John XXIII, right, who called the Second Vatican Council, without a second attributed miracle.

torian and director of the John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies a liberal Catholic research institute in Bologna, Italy, said the canonizations were an important nod to the more liberal wings of the Catholic Church. They "mark the end of a season that cast doubts over the Second Vatican Council, a season of some mistrust," he said.

"Many spoke about the council, criticized it as too weak and with too many compromises, but failed to feel the spirit of the council," he added. "Both popes were bishops at the council, not theologians."

Mr. Melloni said it was signif-

icant that Francis had bypassed the need for a second miracle attributed to John XXIII. Perhaps he decided "that the people of God have already made a judgment about the two popes," he added.

At John Paul II's beatification ceremony, which drew one and a half million people to Rome, Benedict lauded John Paul II as a central figure in the history of the 20th century and a hero of the church.

"He was witness to the tragic age of big ideologies, totalitarian regimes, and from their passing John Paul II embraced the harsh suffering, marked by tension and



contradictions, of the transition of the modern age toward a new phase of history, showing constant concern that the human person be its protagonist," Benedict said at the Mass.

While Benedict's first encyclical, "God Is Love," drew on the work of John Paul, Francis' first encyclical, "Lumen Fidei," or "The Light of Faith," released on Friday, is the first that the Vatican has openly acknowledged was written by two popes together. The encyclical calls on believers and seekers alike to explore how God can enrich their lives.

It also urges Catholics to up-

hold the church's conception of the family. "The first setting in which faith enlightened the human city is the family," Francis writes. "I think first and foremost of the stable union of man and woman in marriage."

The concluding chapter of the encyclical, which touches on the role of faith in reinforcing the common good, recalls the informal, immediate style of Francis, a low-key Argentine Jesuit who regularly delivers off-the-cuff sermons and has chosen to live in a Vatican dormitory instead of the Apostolic Palace.

The opening three chapters are rich in biblical and literary references and bear the mark of Benedict, a theologian who was head of the Vatican's doctrinal office for 25 years before becoming pope in 2005. In addition to the Old Testament and the Gospel, the encyclical quotes Dante, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, T. S. Eliot and the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.

It also touches on a passage in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel "The Idiot," in which Prince Myshkin sees the painting "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" by Hans Holbein the Younger and says, "Looking at this painting might cause one to lose his faith."

"Yet it is precisely in contemplating Jesus' death that faith grows stronger and receives a dazzling light," Francis writes.