

U.S. protests Syria embassy attack

MOB STORMS, VANDALIZES AMERICAN AND FRENCH EMBASSY COMPOUNDS

Tensions escalate

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Los Angeles Times

BEIRUT — U.S. Marines in the capital of Syria on Monday drove back dozens of pro-government demonstrators who stormed and vandalized the American Embassy compound, witnesses said.

The attack on the U.S. compound and a similar protest at the French Embassy further raised tensions between the embattled regime of President Bashar Assad and Western nations increasingly alarmed about his ongoing crackdown against democracy protesters.

Witnesses said violent protesters, angered by visits by the U.S. and French ambassadors to the opposition stronghold of Hama on Saturday, breached the walls of both embassy compounds, wrote graffiti, threw rocks and sticks, and raised the Syrian flag inside the U.S. compound.

Protesters smashed windows and vandalized cars belonging to embassy staff, demanding the closure of the two missions. Gunfire dispersed the mobs at the French facility.

In Paris, the French Foreign Min-

istry said three embassy employees were injured. The ambassador's car was vandalized, and the crowd tried to break through the front doors of the embassy using "a battering ram," the ministry statement said, adding that French security forces fired three warning shots, because of the "passivity" of Syrian military personnel.

The embassy stormings, possibly coordinated, were likely an attempt to bolster the spirits of the regime's hard-liners following the visits to Hama on Saturday by U.S. envoy Robert Ford and France's Eric Chervallier. They toured the city a day after hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators gathered to voice their opposition to the Assad regime's four-decade rule.

Clashes between protesters and Assad's supporters have resulted in the deaths of 1,600, in addition to 350 members of the security forces, Syria blames what it calls "armed gangs" and Muslim extremists for the violence.

The diplomatic visits appear to have humiliated and enraged the Syrian leadership by highlighting the peaceful nature of the anti-government protests in that city and may have prevented security forces from unleashing the full brunt of their arsenal to crush the demonstrations.

"How ironic that the Syrian government lets an anti-U.S. demon-

stration proceed freely while their security thugs beat down olive branch-carrying peaceful protesters elsewhere," Ford said Sunday after a smaller protest at the U.S. Embassy.

Congressional Republicans have pressed the administration to withdraw Ford from Syria, an ally of Iran that supports the Islamic militant groups Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The United States did not send an ambassador to Damascus for five years in protest of Syria's alleged role in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in Beirut.

Monday's protests coincided with government-organized talks in Damascus on possible political reforms after four months of unrest. But the talks were boycotted by the main opposition factions and are unlikely to produce any breakthroughs to immediately end bloodshed.

The talks did not stop Syrian forces from pressing their crackdown.

Before the attacks, Syrian troops stormed the country's third-largest city of Homs with armored personnel carriers and heavy machine guns, according to a rights activist. At least two people were killed and 20 wounded, activists said.

Additional information from The Associated Press



Protesters who support Syrian President Bashar Assad hang Syrian flags and Assad portraits at the wall of the U.S. embassy compound Monday, in a photo released by a Syrian news website, Shukumaku.

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