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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Air Strikes Kill Dozens in Northwest Syria

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Members of the Syrian and Palestinian communities hold aloft placards displaying pictures of President Vladimir Putin during a rally in support of refugees that was part of a national campaign in central Sydney, Australia, Oct. 11.

BEIRUT — Russian air strikes have killed dozens of people in a Syrian coastal province, including a rebel commander who formerly served in President Bashar Assad's army, activists said Tuesday.

The activists said the air strikes, which began Monday afternoon and lasted several hours, also wounded scores, making it one of the deadliest incidents since Russia began it aerial attacks nearly three weeks ago.

Since the air strikes began, Syrian troops and their allies from Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group have launched ground offensives in northern, central and southern Syria as well as the in the suburbs of the capital, Damascus, capturing areas formerly held by insurgents.

Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said

at least 45 people were killed in the rebel-held Jabal al-Akrad region in Latakia province.

The Local Coordination Committees, another activist-run monitoring group, said 57 people were killed in the province on Monday, mostly by Russian air strikes.

The Observatory and the LCC said the dead included army defector Basel Zimmo, who was the commander of the First Coastal Division, a rebel faction active in the area.

"The Russians are destroying all the fortifications before the attack on Jisr al-Shughour," Abdurrahman said, referring to a strategic northwestern town that insurgents captured earlier this year.

The Observatory, which relies on a network of activists inside Syria, said hundreds of Russian air strikes over the past three weeks have killed 370 people, including 127 civilians. The group said the dead civilians included 36 children and 34 women.

The air strikes also killed 243 fighters from different insurgent groups, including the Islamic State group and al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front.

Russia has said its air campaign is aimed at helping the government defeat the IS group and other "terrorists," but many of the strikes have targeted Syrian rebels in areas where the extremist group is not present.

Jabal al-Akrad is close to the rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib, which has been targeted by Russian warplanes since Moscow launched its air campaign late last month. Latakia province includes key strongholds of Assad and the Alawite religious minority to which he belongs.

Syria's conflict, which began in March 2011, has killed more than 250,000 people, wounded a million and displaced half the country's population.

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