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Russian Air Strikes Kill Hundreds of Syrian Civilians Reports Say

By Anna Dolgov

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Russian marines guarding the Russian air base in Syria.

Russian air strikes in Syria have killed 2,371 people — a third of them civilians, including 180 children – according to a tally released Wednesday by a Britain-based monitoring group.

The report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights comes amid intensifying criticism of Moscow's handling of its air campaign that began on Sept. 30.

U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner this week cited reports indicating that the Russian air campaign has "killed hundreds of civilians, including first responders, hit medical facilities, schools and markets." The air strikes also led to the displacement of more than 130,000 Syrians, he said.

During a call earlier this week to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, U.S. Secretary

of State John Kerry expressed some of Washington's concerns about the "indiscriminate attacks," Toner said.

But Russia's Defense Ministry scoffed at the mounting reports cited by Western policymakers and analysts, calling them "absurd."

"All of these anonymous and unsubstantiated statements about the alleged use of Russian aircraft on civilian targets in Syria is increasingly reminiscent of hypnotists' acts in a traveling circus," the ministry said on its Facebook page Wednesday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on a wide network of sources inside Syria, says its latest death tally included 792 civilians – 180 children, 116 women and 496 men.

Rebels of various political or ideological stripes suffered losses totaling 924, with the Islamic State terrorist organization losing 655 fighters.

Russia argues its air campaign in Syria is aimed against Islamic State forces and other "terrorist groups." But Western politicians and analysts said the air strikes are intended to prop up the regime of Syria's Bashar Assad by targeting his political opponents.

Along with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Western politicians, various human rights groups, including Amnesty International, have also accused Russia of killing hundreds of civilians via air strikes.

"Some Russian air strikes appear to have directly attacked civilians or civilian objects by striking residential areas with no evident military target and even medical facilities, resulting in deaths and injuries to civilians," Amnesty International's director of the Middle East and North Africa program Philip Luther said in statement last week.

"Such attacks may amount to war crimes," he said.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov dismissed the Dec. 23 report as consisting of "fakes and cliches," the state-run TASS news agency reported.

Amnesty International said in its report the attacks "were identified as suspected Russian air strikes by cross-referencing details of each attack with statements from the Russian Defense Ministry announcing 'terrorist' targets struck, or from details about the nature of the attack in witness testimony.

The group's research "suggests that the attacks may have violated international human law," it added.

But the Russian Defense Ministry spokesman took issue with the wording, saying the report's use of "such expressions as 'suspected Russian air strikes,' 'possible violations of internal law' and so on" amounted to "speculation without any proof," TASS reported.

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