

Activists: Syria Troops Advance Under Russian Air Cover

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The ministry said it used Su-34, Su-24M and Su-25SM planes to strike the targets.

Russian jets intensified their air strikes Monday in a central Syrian province as government and allied troops pushed out insurgents from local villages to expand their control of the area, activists and a military statement said.

The advance is the latest in a government bid to regain control of areas in the rural parts of Hama province, and the Sahl al-Ghab plain. The plain links Hama to the northwestern rebel-controlled Idlib province and is adjacent to Latakia province, a stronghold of President Bashar Assad and the Alawite religious minority to which he belongs.

Meanwhile, the Russian Defense Ministry said it has struck 53 alleged Islamic State targets in the past 24 hours, destroying command centers, ammunition and fuel depots as well as camps where foreign militants are supposedly training.

The ministry said the positions of the IS group were in the central provinces of Homs and Hama, as well as in Latakia and Idlib provinces. IS only has a limited presence on the

edges of Hama, away from where the fighting has been concentrated.

Russia insists it is mainly targeting the Islamic State group and other "terrorists," but the ground-and-air offensive is being waged in areas controlled by mainstream rebels as well as the al-Qaida affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front. A coalition of rebels, which includes the Nusra Front, controls the province of Idlib, from which they pushed out Assad's forces in September, in one of the most serious setbacks for the government.

On Monday, activists said the air strikes pounded the village of Kfar Nabudeh, in the western part of Hama and strategically located less than 10 miles from a major town on the Idlib highway, Khan Sheikhou.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 30 air strikes were reported in Kfar Nabudeh while government troops and Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters entered the village from the south.

Another activist-operated media platform, the Shaam News Network, said the fighting was inside the village as insurgents ambushed government forces in the village reported to be laden with underground tunnels.

However, a Syrian military statement said it took control of the village, and others nearby. There was no way to independently verify the competing claims.

During the last six days of ground operations, government troops have moved in on two villages in eastern Hama, Atshan and Tal Sukayk, and a third in the plain area. Activists say rebels seized one village south of Idlib.

The Russian defense statement said its jets have hit mortar positions around Tal Sukayk in the last 24 hours, as well as a training camp for foreign militants in Mastouma in Idlib.

The ministry said it used Su-34, Su-24M and Su-25SM planes to strike the targets. "The terrorists in the past days were desperately trying to transport ammunition, armaments, fuel and supplies from Raqqa to the front line," the ministry said, in reference to the northern province controlled by the Islamic State group, adding that a "significant part" of their supplies have been destroyed by Russian air strikes. Raqqa province is under IS control and contains the group's de facto capital in Raqqa city.

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