

Syrian regime 'importing snipers' for protests

NATE WRIGHT AND JAMES HIDER THE TIMES JANUARY 26, 2012 1:50PM

SYRIA is deploying large numbers of Hezbollah and Iranian snipers as "military consultants" to murder anti-regime protesters, a senior government defector has told The Times.

The salaries of the marksmen are paid through a slush fund replenished with US dollars flown in from Iran, according to Mahmoud Haj Hamad, who was the treasury's top auditor at the Defence Ministry until he fled Syria last month.

The same fund is used to pay the Shabiha, the gangs of thugs who have joined the state security services in torturing and killing protesters.

Mr Hamad, appalled at the destruction of cities by the armed forces, fled Syria with his family last month. His account is the first by a senior insider to confirm the presence of foreign forces in Syria to help to prop up the regime.

Even as the government was blaming the uprising on plots by its Arab neighbours and "foreign elements", it was turning to its regional allies to help to suppress the protests.

"The Syrian intelligence weren't qualified, they didn't have decent snipers or equipment," he said in an interview. "They needed qualified snipers from Hezbollah and Iran."

Both have tight military ties with the regime of President Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, a sub-group of the Shia branch of Islam.

Mr Hamad said: "At the beginning there were hundreds, then when things started to get worse they started to bring in more outsiders. The numbers were huge - in the thousands."

The foreign reinforcements are prized by the regime for their street-fighting abilities, having crushed dissent in Iran and Lebanon.

Mr Hamad said that he could see the men living in compounds around his office on the 12th floor of a Ministry of Defence building in the Damascus neighbourhood of Kafar Souseh, a facility shared by military intelligence.

He said the regime appeared to have started preparing for its bloody crackdown, which the UN estimates has cost 5400 lives since March, even as the first revolts of the Arab Spring were threatening to topple Mr Assad's fellow dictators a year ago.

Ministry colleagues told him that two Iranian warships that passed through the Suez Canal during the Egyptian uprising were loaded with weapons for use against dissidents, and offloaded at the seaport of Latakia.

"Some who saw these things being unloaded said they had incinerators, so they wouldn't need mass graves."

He said he had seen accounts showing that the Shabiha thugs were paid \$US100 a day and were put up in military facilities and trained in communications and infiltration of demonstrations.

That operation was overseen by General Rustum Ghazali, who once headed Syrian military intelligence inside Lebanon, and who was questioned by the UN in connection with the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

Mr Hamad said that Syrian intelligence had extensive experience of using undercover militants from its days of covertly attacking US forces after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when it collaborated with a radical Syrian Muslim cleric, Abu Qaqa, to recruit suicide bombers and fighters to attack US targets inside Iraq.

They would give them training and facilitate their border crossings; a charge long leveled by Iraqi politicians and the US military but always denied by the Assad regime.

Syria's military budget has doubled in the past year to cope with the constant deployment of forces across the

country, Mr Hamad said.

In July, "they started to take 30 per cent of the money set aside for other ministries and transferred this to the Ministry of Defence budget".

The Health Ministry's funding was cut accordingly.

Today, with international sanctions, an overstretched army and the loss of tax revenues from rebel centres such as Homs, Hama and Deraa, the regime is running short of money.

"The Syrian economy has collapsed - it won't last another month. In February, I believe it will fall apart. Iran can't keep giving them money, because their own finances are not that good."

The financial situation has become so desperate that, on December 20, two days before he fled with his family for Egypt - after telling the authorities that his son was enrolling on a university course in Cairo - the regime started abducting the sons of senior businessmen and holding them for ransom.

"They all paid," Mr Hamed said. "There is no government, no state in Syria - it is run by a mafia."

Al-Arabiya television quoted a top Iranian Revolutionary Guard official this week as saying that Hezbollah forces took part in recent fighting in Zabadani near Damascus, which had been taken over by the Free Syrian Army.

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