



Syria troops quit Druze region

Syria cedes security to Druze leaders after Israeli strikes force troop withdrawal

● Syrian army withdraws from Sweida

● Bodies found on streets

● US, Turkey, Arab nations mediate truce

AFP | Damascus

Syrian troops pulled out of the Druze heartland province of Sweida yesterday on orders from the government, leaving bodies strewn on the street, journalists reported from the provincial capital.

The southern province has been gripped by deadly sectarian bloodshed since Sunday, with hundreds reportedly killed in clashes pitting Druze fighters against Sunni Bedouin tribes and the army and its allies.

In a televised speech, Islamist interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa said community leaders would resume control over security in Sweida after the deployment of government troops on Tuesday fuelled the sectarian bloodshed and prompted Israeli military intervention.

Government troops told AFP that the order to withdraw came



A member of Syrian security forces looks at burnt vehicles in the southern city of Sweida

shortly before midnight (2100 GMT Wednesday) and they completed their pullout from the province at dawn.

A photographer counted 15 bodies on the street in the centre of Sweida yesterday after government forces pulled out.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has said more than 370 people have been killed

in sectarian clashes in the city since Sunday.

Israel had pounded government troops with air strikes during their brief deployment to the southern province and also struck army headquarters in Damascus, warning that its strikes would intensify until the government pulled back.

Sharaa announced in a tele-

vised address that “responsibility” for security in Sweida would be returned to community leaders “based on the supreme national interest”.

Promise of ‘protection’

Sharaa, whose interim government has had troubled relations with ethnic and religious minority groups since it toppled



Israel framed its airstrikes as Druze protection - though analysts suggest it really aims to push Syrian forces from their shared border

veteran leader Bashar al-Assad in December, also pledged to protect the Druze.

“We are keen on holding accountable those who transgressed and abused our Druze people, as they are under the protection and responsibility of the state,” he said.

March saw massacres of more than 1,700 mostly Alawite civilians in their hub on the Mediterranean coast, with government-affiliated groups blamed for most of the killings.

Government forces also battled Druze fighters in Sweida province and near Damascus in April and May, leaving more than 100 people dead.

Israeli strike on Gaza’s only Catholic church kills three

● 600 displaced sheltered at church

● 54 with special needs present

● Pope Leo XIV “deeply saddened”

AFP | Gaza City

An Israeli strike on Gaza’s only Catholic church killed three people yesterday, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said, as Israel said it “never targets” religious sites and regretted any harm to civilians.

Pope Leo XIV said he was “deeply saddened” by the loss of life, which a witness said was the result of a tank shell hitting the church.

AFP footage showed those injured being treated at Gaza City’s Al-Ahli Hospital, also known as the Baptist Hospital, with one receiving oxygen and blood while lying under a foil blanket.

Mourners knelt next to two white body bags laid out on the floor.

“In the morning a tank shell targeted us and hit the church and a number of civilians were killed and wounded,” said Shadi Abu Daoud, a displaced man whose 70-year-old mother was killed in the strike.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem named the dead as Najwa Abu Daoud, Saad Issa Kostandi Salameh and Foumia Issa Latif Ayyad.



A view of the damage to the Holy Family church in Gaza City following an Israeli strike on the church, in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City

“This morning (approximately 10:20 am (0720 GMT)), the Compound of the Holy Family in Gaza... was struck by the Israeli army,” it said in a statement.

“As of this hour, three individuals lost their lives as a result of the injuries sustained and ten others were wounded,” including the community’s parish priest, Father Gabriel Romanelli, it added, revising a previous toll of two.

An AFP photograph showed Father Romanelli with a bandage around his lower leg at Al-Ahli Hospital.

Gaza civil defence spokesman Mahmud Bassal confirmed that three people were killed in an

Israeli strike on the church in Gaza City, with which the late Pope Francis kept regular contact through the war.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, told Vatican News that: “What we know for sure is that a tank, the IDF says by mistake, but we are not sure about this, they hit the Church directly”.

‘Serious act’

The patriarchate, which has jurisdiction for Catholics in Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan and Cyprus, said it “strongly condemns this strike and this targeting of innocent

civilians”.

The site was sheltering around 600 displaced people, the majority of them children and 54 with special needs.

“The people in the Holy Family Compound are people who found in the Church a sanctuary -- hoping that the horrors of war might at least spare their lives, after their homes, possessions and dignity had already been stripped away,” a statement read.

It came as Gaza’s civil defence agency reported that Israeli strikes elsewhere across the Palestinian territory killed at least 22 people.

Israel expressed “deep sorrow”



The struck church was where Pope Francis maintained regular contact during the war, and remembered in his final Easter message before his death

over the damage and civilian casualties, adding that the military was investigating, as foreign leaders, including from France and Italy called the strike “unacceptable”.

“Israel never targets churches or religious sites and regrets any harm to a religious site or to uninvolved civilians,” the Israeli foreign ministry said on X.

Out of the Gaza Strip’s population of more than two million, about 1,000 are Christians. Most of them are Orthodox but according to the Latin Patriarchate, there are about 135 Catholics in the territory.

Pope Francis repeatedly called for an end to the war which erupted in October 2023 and in his final Easter message, a day before his death on April 21, he condemned the “deplorable humanitarian situation” in the Palestinian territory.

Monsignor Pascal Gollnisch, the head of Catholic charity l’Oeuvre d’Orient, said the raid was “totally unacceptable”.



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TWEETS

01



Germany has committed to change their law so we can disrupt the supply of small boats. Working with our international partners gets results for British people. We will smash the people smuggling gangs and secure our borders.

@Keir_Starmer

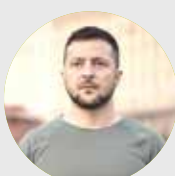
02



Here in KwaZulu-Natal for the #G20SouthAfrica Finance Ministers and CB Governors’ Meeting. Looking forward to insightful exchanges on how to enhance economic resilience & spur growth, and on debt sustainability for low-income countries.

@GitaGopinath

03



Building our own strength. More weapons production. Deregulation. Closer cooperation with partners. Justice. Digitalization. Better care for our heroes and their families. These are key priorities I outlined for the new government.

@ZelenskyyUA

04



A great day for science and partnership! The Republic of Korea joins Horizon Europe. The largest innovation programme in the world, which we propose to double in the next EU budget. Together, we’ll drive cutting-edge research, from digital to clean tech.

@vonderleyen

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