

THAI CAVE RESCUE

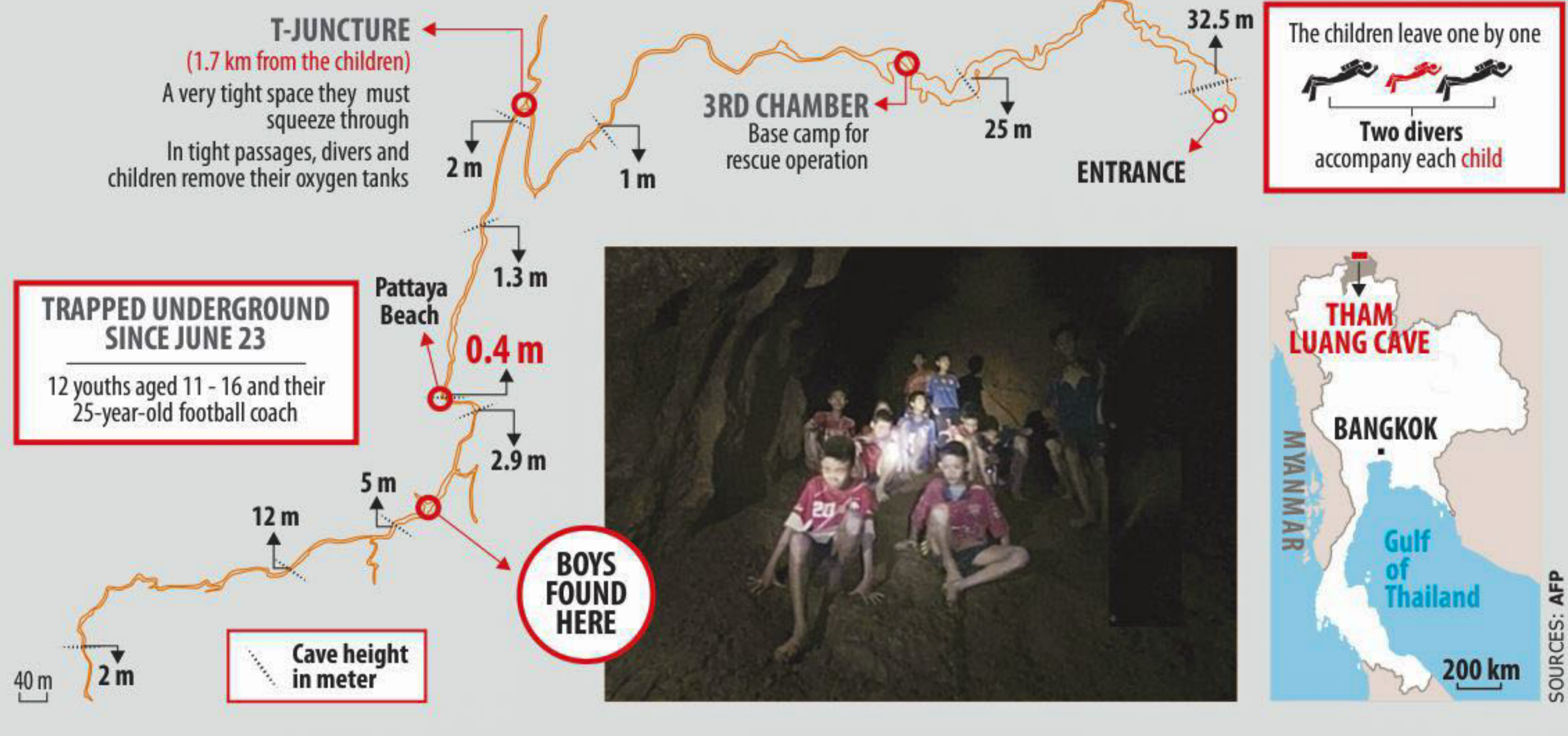
A TIMELINE

Thai authorities yesterday began a dramatic operation to rescue 12 boys and their football coach from a flooded Thai cave, where they have been trapped for more than two weeks. Here is a timeline of the efforts to find and free the group.

SATURDAY, JUNE 23 The youngsters, aged between 11 and 16, and their 25-year-old coach enter the Tham Luang cave in northern Thailand during heavy rains after football practice. They are reported missing by a mother after her son does not come home that night. Local officials find bicycles locked to a fence and shoes and football boots close to the entrance. SUNDAY, JUNE 24 Park officials and police find handprints and footprints believed to belong to the boys. Relatives start to keep a vigil outside the cave. MONDAY, JUNE 25 Thai Navy SEAL divers enter the cave searching for the boys. Makeshift shrines are set up for parents to pray and make offerings as heavy rains continue. TUESDAY, JUNE 26 Divers reach a T-junction several kilometres inside the cave but are forced back by rushing floodwaters that clog a narrow crevice near an elevated air pocket called "Pattaya Beach", where the boys are believed to have retreated. WEDNESDAY, JUNE 27 A team of more than 30 American military personnel from the US Pacific Command arrive, including pararescue and survival specialists. They are joined by three British diving experts who enter the cave but quickly retreat in the face of heavy flooding. THURSDAY, JUNE 28 The underwater rescue is temporarily halted after downpours bring fast-moving floods inside the cave. Water pumps are shipped in to drain the rising, murky floodwaters and drones are dispatched to help find new vents in the cave roof. FRIDAY, JUNE 29 Thailand's junta leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha visits the site, leads a meditation and jokes and cooks with relatives, asking them not to give up hope. SATURDAY, JUNE 30 A break in the rain allows divers to reach further inside the cave but they are still a long distance from where the boys are believed to be. SUNDAY, JULY 1 Divers inch further into the cave, as an operating base is set up inside and hundreds of air tanks and other supplies are pulleyed in. MONDAY, JULY 2 Finally, a miracle: the 12 boys and their coach are found alive late Monday evening about 400 metres beyond Pattaya Beach. Crowds at the teeming rescue site cheer the good news, but attention soon turns to the difficult task of getting the boys out safely. TUESDAY, JULY 3 Much-needed food and medical supplies -- including high-calorie gels and paracetamol -- reach the boys as rescuers prepare for the possibility that they may remain in the cave for some time. WEDNESDAY, JULY 4 Officials say the group are being taught how to use diving masks and breathing apparatuses. Teams pump out water around the clock as more rain is forecast for the days ahead. THURSDAY, JULY 5 In a sign of increased urgency, authorities say expected rains may force a complex rescue quicker than first thought. A team of bird's nest collectors scour the mountainside in search of new openings into the cave roof. FRIDAY, JULY 6 Tragedy strikes: a diver helping to establish an airline to the boys dies after passing out while returning from the chamber. Saman Kunan's death raises serious doubts over the safety of attempting a rescue through the cave's cramped and waterlogged passageways. Thailand's Navy SEAL commander says oxygen levels inside have dropped. He warns the window of opportunity to free the youngsters is "limited", in the first official admission that the rescue cannot wait out the monsoon rains. SATURDAY, JULY 7 Rescue operation chief Narongsak Osottanakorn says it is "not suitable" yet to have the boys dive to safety. A scrawled message emerges from the team's coach, offering his "apologies" to their parents. The head of the rescue mission says more than 100 vents are being drilled into the mountainside in a frantic bid to reach the boys. SUNDAY, JULY 8 Authorities announce that, with more heavy rain expected soon, the extraction operation has begun. Thirteen "world class" foreign divers and Thai Navy SEALs enter the cave as the rescue begins. Six of the trapped boys rescued and brought to hospital.

SOURCE: AFP, MAE SAI

THAILAND: RESCUE OPERATION



RESCUERS' CHALLENGES

Twelve boys and their football coach trapped in a flooded Thai cave will have to squeeze through an extremely narrow tunnel in pitch blackness -- the main "crisis" point that looms near the end of their treacherous escape bid. Authorities have highlighted the tiny passageway near T-junction, or Sam Yak in Thai, as the most dangerous element of the journey for the "Wild Boars" team that began yesterday morning, but there are many other potential pitfalls. Here are some of the challenges that the boys and their coach will face leaving the cave they ventured into on June 23, becoming trapped more than four kilometres (2.4 miles) from the entrance because of monsoon rains.



**T-JUNCTION:** The sliver of space is 1.9 kilometres from the shelf where the boys have been sheltering above the waters. After energy-sapping efforts navigating jagged tunnels and clambering up or down rock walls for this distance, they will confront Sam Yak. "The biggest crisis spot for diving is on the left from the T-junction," said Narongsak Osottanakorn, the rescue mission chief, in a briefing on July 2. "There is a tunnel that has a passageway going up and coming down narrowly and you have to turn a bit and it's very small." After that though, the tunnels widen, the waters subside, and walking is even possible, according to authorities, with the rest of the journey expected to be relatively safe as they will have reached a forward operating base inside the cave.

**DIVING ABILITY:** The boys, aged from 11 and 16, have no diving experience and some can not even swim. They have received training in recent days in preparation for the extraction effort, but they will have to swim using scuba gear through fast-flowing water in darkness, a challenge for even elite divers.

**DURATION, STRENGTH:** The journey will be a long one. The rescue mission chief told reporters yesterday that the first boy was not expected to emerge until 9pm. This tallies with previous estimates from officials that it would take the divers five hours to reach the ledge where the team is trapped, and six hours for the journey out. The boys were found dishevelled and weak nine days after they ventured in. Although they have been receiving food and medicine since then, their lack of strength could be a crucial factor in determining their fate.

**VISIBILITY, PANIC:** The water in the cave is muddy and unclear, with one diver comparing it to a cafe latte. The labyrinth has no outside light. The boys will be helped through the darkness by guiding rope, torches and the escorts. Nevertheless, the poor visibility is one of the factors raising concerns about the boys -- already traumatised after spending so long in the cave and having to swim underwater -- potentially panicking.

**BAD WEATHER:** The operation was launched after several days of relatively mild weather, as more than 100 million litres of water were pumped out of the cave. Weather forecasters warned heavy rain was on its way, which could flood the area completely. They said there was a 60-per cent chance of moderate to heavy rain on yesterday afternoon, and that heavier rain would continue from Monday to Thursday.

SOURCE: AFP

TERRORIST ATTACK

6 cops killed in Tunisia

REUTERS, Tunis

At least six members of Tunisia's security forces were killed yesterday in an ambush in the northwest of the country close to the border with Algeria.

State news agency TAP said nine had died, while the interior ministry put the initial death toll at six.

One of the Arab world's most secular nations, Tunisia became a target for militants after being hailed as a beacon of democratic change with an uprising against autocrat Zine Abidine Ben Ali in 2011.

Some militants operate in remote areas near the border with Algeria, which has been fighting the remnants of a major Islamist insurgency in the 1990s.

Culprit or saviour?

THE STRAIT TIMES

The head coach of the Thai football team spent the morning of June 23 preparing his young assistant for an important task: Looking out for the boys by himself.

Nopparat Khanthavong, the 37-year-old head coach of the Moo Pa (Wild Boars) football team, had an appointment that morning. Ekapol Chanthavong, his assistant, was to take the younger boys to a football field nestled by the Doi Nang Non mountain range, a formation with numerous waterfalls and caves that straddles the Thailand-Myanmar border.

"Make sure you ride your bicycle behind them when you are travelling around, so you can keep a lookout," he wrote in a Facebook message he shared with The Washington Post.

The hours that followed kicked off a chain of events that has riveted the world: A dramatic search and rescue that found the boys alive nine days later, huddled on a small, muddy patch surrounded by flood waters.

Attention has focused on the only adult, 25-year-old former monk Ekapol, and the role he has played in both their predicament and their survival.

As four of the boys are out now in a complex rescue operation, some have chided

Ekapol for leading the team into the cave. A large warning sign at the cave's entrance raises the risk of entering so close to the monsoon season, they say, and he should have known better.

But for many in Thailand, Ekapol, who left his life in the monkhood three years ago and joined the Wild Boars as an assistant coach soon after, is an almost divine force, sent to protect the boys as they go through this ordeal. A widely shared cartoon drawing of Ekapol shows him sitting cross-legged, as a monk does in meditation, with 12 little wild boars in his arms.

According to rescue officials, he is among the weakest in the group, in part because he gave the boys his share of the limited food and water they had with them in the early days. He also taught the boys how to meditate and how to conserve as much energy as possible until they were found.

"He loves them more than himself," said Joy Khampai, a longtime friend of Ekapol's.

Ekapol on Saturday apologized to all the parents and promised to take care of the boys.

But the parents instead thanked him. "If he didn't go with them, what would have happened to my child?" said the mother of Pornchai Khamluang, one of the boys in the cave, in an interview with a Thai television network. "When he comes out, we have to heal his heart. My dear Ek, I would never blame you."



THE WILD BOARS SOCCER TEAM

At least four of 12 boys were rescued yesterday after being trapped for more than two weeks in a flooded cave network in northern Thailand. It's not clear yet which boys are rescued and who are not. Here's what we know so far about them:

- PEERAPAT SOMPEANGJAI, 16** Peerapat turned 16 on the day the group went missing, June 23. Yesterday, his 17-year-old sister Phanphatsa told CNN she promised to make her brother another birthday cake -- and all his favorite foods -- on his safe return.
- PONCHAI KHAMLUANG, 16:** Ponchai attends Ban Pa Yang School.
- PIPAT BHODI, 15:** Pipat, a student at Ban San Sai School, also had his birthday on June 23, the day the boys went missing.
- PRAJAK SUTHAM, 15:** The eighth-grade student at Mae Sai Prasitsart School had his 15th birthday on July 1 while trapped inside the cave.
- ARDOON SAM-AON, 14:** Ardoon Sam-aon is an eighth-grade student at Ban Wiang Phan School.
- AKARAT WONGSUKCHAN, 14:** Akarat Wongsukchan is a student at Darunratwithaya School.



**NATTHAWUT TAKUMSONG, 14:** Natthawut Takumsong is a grade-eight student at Mae Sai Prasitsart school. His family told CNN yesterday they were praying for his safe return, and the first thing they'll do when he's out is throw a birthday party for him.

**PANUMAS SAENG-DEE, 13:** Panumas is a student at Mae Sai Prasitsart School.

**DUANGPHET PROMTHEP, 13:** Duangphet also attends Mae Sai Prasitsart School.

**SOMJAI JAIWONG, 13:** Somjai attends Mae Sai Prasitsart School.

**MONGKOL BOONPIAM, 13:** Mongkol is a grade-seven student at Ban Pa Muat School.



**CHANIN VIBOONRUNGUANG, 11:** The youngest of the group is Chanin, who is in his final year at Anubanmaesai primary school in Mae Sai. In a letter to his parents posted on the Thai SEALs Facebook page, Chanin told his parents, "Don't worry about me. I am fine. Please tell Pee Yod (a female relative) to take me to eat fried chicken. Love you all," he said. SOURCE: CNN

Turkey sacks 18,000 more in new purge

AFP, Ankara

Turkish authorities yesterday ordered the dismissal of more than 18,500 state employees, including police officers, soldiers and academics, ahead of the expected end of a two-year state of emergency this month.

The Official Gazette said 18,632 people had been sacked including 8,998 police officers over suspected links to terror organisations that "act against national security", in what could be the last of the purges under emergency rule.

Turkey has been in a state of emergency since the July 2016 attempted overthrow of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan but the European Union and critics have repeatedly called on Ankara to end it.

Turkish media dubbed yesterday's decree as the "last", with officials indicating the government could declare emergency rule over as early as Monday.

The latest period is officially due to end on July 19.

Critics say Erdogan is using the extra powers permitted under emergency rule, renewed seven times, to target opponents, with human rights defenders including Amnesty International lambasting the purges as arbitrary.

But the government says they are necessary to remove multiple terror threats inside state institutions.

Erdogan on Monday will be sworn in as president after his outright victory in June 24 elections under a new executive presidency, following that there will be a lavish ceremony and then the new cabinet will be announced.



A local resident walks in front of submerged and destroyed houses in a flooded area in Mabi town in Kurashiki, Okayama Prefecture, Japan, yesterday. The death toll from torrential rain and landslides in western Japan rose to 81 people yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

BACKLASH OVER BREXIT PLAN

May 'faces leadership contest'

Survey says Britons for general election if Tory plotters oust PM

AGENCIES

Theresa May is facing the threat of a leadership contest amid mounting anger from Brexiters over her government's Brexit policy.

Anti-EU Tories attacked a plan agreed by the cabinet at Chequers on Friday, with many believed to be ready to submit the letters needed to trigger a contest.

Euro-sceptics are reported to be circulating a draft statement calling for May to go, and some have publicly backed Jacob Rees-Mogg as her replacement.

As the fallout continued, it was also claimed that Boris Johnson, the foreign secretary, had described the proposals agreed at Chequers as "a big turd" and said supporting them amounted to "polishing a turd" - before agreeing to back them.

After marathon talks at her country retreat on Friday, May's divided cabi-



Brexiters believe the government's strategy breaks the prime minister's promises to remove the UK from the EU single market and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The Labour party yesterday said it

net agreed on a new "free trade area" where Britain would accept EU rules for goods.

May is likely to face an angry backlash when she addresses the 1922 Committee of Tory MPs today.

would vote against the type of Brexit deal being pursued by May, fuelling doubts about the government's ability to get its plans through Parliament.

However, May dismissed talk of a leadership challenge, telling the Sunday Times: "The only challenge that needs to be made now is to the European Union to get serious about this, to come round the table and discuss it with us."

Amid the political storm, a poll has revealed that a majority of the British public want a general election if Tory plotters oust May and replace her with one of her rivals.

Tens of thousands return home after south Syria ceasefire deal

AFP, Beirut

Tens of thousands have returned to their homes in southern Syria since a ceasefire deal between regime ally Russia and rebels to end more than two weeks of deadly bombardment, a monitor said yesterday.

The deal was largely holding despite air strikes on two areas that killed four civilians, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said, as rebel evacuations under the deal were postponed.

President's Bashar al-Assad regime is determined to retake control of the key southern province of Daraa bordering Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, seven years after protests there sparked Syria's civil war.

Since June 19, a deadly regime bombardment campaign on the province had caused more than 320,000 people to flee their homes, according to the United Nations, many to the sealed border with Jordan.

On Friday, rebels and the regime announced a ceasefire deal, providing for opposition fighters to hand over their heavy weapons and paving the way for a regime

takeover of the province.

More than 60,000 people have since hit the road from the Jordanian frontier, heading back to their homes in the east or west of the province, the Britain-based Observatory said.

- Evacuations postponed - On Sunday, the returns were continuing, the Observatory said, even as regime warplanes pounded two areas of the province.

Three civilians were killed in air strikes on Um al-Mayazeen, just five kilometres (three miles) north of the Jordanian border, said the Britain-based monitor.

"Regime forces launched an assault on the village," Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman said, two days after they retook control of the key border crossing of Nassib to its south.

Earlier, rebel fire on a regime convoy travelling near Um al-Mayazeen on the highway from the border had killed several soldiers, Abdel Rahman said, without providing a toll.

A regime air strike on the rebel-held half of the provincial capital of Daraa also killed one civilian, he said.