Tens of thousands more displaced as fighting intensifies in northern Syria

BEIRUT (AP) — A U.N. official said Tuesday that recent fighting in northern Syria has displaced tens of thousands of people — some of them staying in open fields with nowhere to go — as clashes between Russian-backed Syrian government forces and opposition fighters intensify.

Activists meanwhile said that Russian airstrikes killed at least 45 people in a Syrian coastal province, including a rebel commander who formerly served in President Bashar Assad’s forces. If confirmed, it would make it one of the deadliest incidents since Russia began its aerial campaign in Syria Sept. 30.

The Russian airstrikes have allowed Syrian troops and their allies from Lebanon’s Hezbollah militant group to launch multiple ground offensives in northern, central and southern Syria as well as in the rebel-held suburbs of the capital, Damascus.

That has increased pressure on Western-backed rebels and pushed more civilians out of the areas of fighting, potentially creating a fresh wave of refugee flows.

A U.N. official in Geneva said that around 35,000 people are reported to have been displaced from the villages of Hader and Zerbeh on the southwestern outskirts of Aleppo city over the past few days.

“Many people are living with host families and in the informal settlements in areas west of the city,” said Vanessa Huggins, a spokeswoman for the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

“People urgently need food and basic household and shelter items,” she said in an e-mail statement, adding that aid agencies are growing more and more concerned for families living outdoors as the weather gets colder.

The Syrian American Medical Society, which has ventured medical personnel into areas of fighting and reporting on attacks in Syria, said Russian air strikes in the area over the weekend targeted the only two hospitals in southern Aleppo, forcing both facilities to shut down and evacuate patients.

Opposition fighters have so far been able to slow down the push by government forces, thanks to U.S.-made anti-tank missiles, although fighting on multiple fronts is draining their resources.

Jamal Saleh, leader of Taimajnu Ezzahah, a rebel group backed by the CIA operating in the central province of Hama, said “a large number of weapons have reached the rebels but that their stocks have been replenished. He refused to elaborate.

“There is assistance but qualitatively there is not enough,” he said in an interview with the British newspaper The Independent. He said the rebels are putting up a fight and pushing back against advances and that the government is accumulating more losses.

“Hizbollah, Iranians and Russians are not from Syria and they don’t know its geography. They also have the truants of mercenaries,” he said.

Turkey-based activist Faraj Shaheed and Hezbollah’s Al-Manar TV said government troops captured the villages of Shqaidji, Beitun and Safera in the southern parts of Aleppo province.

The goal appears to be opening a path to the strategic northeastern town of Jarablus-Shaghour in the northern province of Idolh, which Assad’s forces lost to insurgents in April.

The loss of Jar al-Shughour, followed by the fall of the entire province, was a resounding defeat for Assad, opening the way for rebels to threaten his traditional stronghold in the coastal province of Latakia.

Meanwhile, activists said Russian airstrikes killed and wounded dozens of people in the rebel-held Jabal al-Akrad region in Latakia province. Abu Abdullah, who heads the Russian-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said at least 45 people died.

The Local Coordination Committees, another activist-monitoring group, said 57 people were killed in the province on Monday, mostly by Russian airstrikes. Both groups said the dead included army