

Activists: Islamic State group now holding 220 Christians in Syria

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(RNS) The number of Christians abducted by the Islamic State group in northeastern Syria has risen to 220, activists said Thursday (February 26).

The United Kingdom-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the civilians were kidnapped from 11 villages near the town of Tal Tamr over the past three days by the militants, who control vast swaths of Syria and Iraq.

The abductions, which started Monday, caused thousands of residents to flee and become refugees in nearby cities.

On Wednesday, Osama Edward, founder of the Assyrian Human Rights Network, told CNN that the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS, planned to release a video message Wednesday aimed at President Obama and threatening to kill 150 Christian hostages. The video has not yet been released.

Edward said he feared that the Assyrian Christians taken hostage would face the same fate as members of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority. Twenty of them were beheaded in a gruesome video released by the militants earlier this month.

The U.S. State Department issued a statement condemning the attack and ISIL's "brutal and inhumane treatment" of those who oppose it.

"To bring an end to these daily horrors, we remain committed to leading the international coalition to degrade and defeat ISIL," the statement said. "And to working towards a negotiated political solution that stops the bloodshed and secures a future of freedom, justice and dignity for all Syrians."

On Wednesday, influential Sheikh Anwar Assi al-Obeidi told the Al-Jazeera news network that 118 Iraqi men and nine boys were abducted by Islamic State militants

near Tikrit three days before. Most of them have relatives fighting against the militant group, he said. Al-Jazeera reported on Thursday that 51 had been released.

On Tuesday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 132 Islamic State members were killed and that control of 70 villages in northeast Syria has been wrested from the group in recent days.

*Contributing: John Bacon, USA Today*