

“Ghost militia” accused of Houla massacre

The UN peacekeeping chief says there are strong suspicions that a pro-Assad militia, known locally as the shabiha, is responsible for one of the worst massacres in Syria’s 14-month-long uprising

WHO ARE THE SHABIHA?

■ Possibly derived from Arabic word for “ghost” (*shabh*) – has come to mean “thugs” in modern day Syria

■ First appeared in March 2011, during crackdown on uprising against President **Bashar al-Assad** in Latakia, where mafia-like organised crime syndicate called Shabiha has existed since 1970s

■ Membership of shabiha gangs drawn largely from Assad’s minority Alawite sect, which dominates army, security services and government

■ EU imposed sanctions in May on Assad’s first cousins, **Fawwaz** and **Munzir**, for alleged involvement in “repression against civilian population as members of shabiha”

■ Activists say presence of shabiha allows government to deny any involvement in brutal actions against protesters

