

Assad regime guns down protesters in Syria

Patrick Martin
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Syrian police and troops shot down dozens of anti-government protesters Friday, as a wave of demonstrations against the regime of President Bashir Assad swept through more than a dozen cities. The movement has been sparked by revulsion over the massacre of protesters Wednesday in the southwestern city of Daraa, in which as many as 100 people may have died.

A funeral procession of 20,000 people commemorated the victims of Wednesday's shootings on Thursday in Daraa, and an even larger protest took place Friday, bringing an estimated 100,000 people into Assad Square in the center of the city. Demonstrators carried Syrian flags and chanted "Freedom, freedom." They burned photographs of Bashir Assad and tore down a bronze statue of his father, longtime president Hafez al-Assad.

Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria for 30 years, after taking power in a military coup in 1970. After his older son Basil died in a crash, the younger son Bashir was groomed for the dynastic succession, becoming president on his father's death in 2000.

The military dictatorship has ruthlessly suppressed democratic rights and social opposition for four decades, and social contradictions have worsened under the economic liberalization policies of Bashir Assad, which have enriched a new layer of Syrian capitalists while living standards for the great mass of working people have stagnated.

Eyewitnesses to Friday's massacre in Daraa said armed men came out on the roofs of buildings around the central square and opened fire on the crowds, killing as many as 50 people.

According to one report, the crowd scattered after the gunfire began, but thousands returned to the center of the city after nightfall, seizing control of the al-Omari mosque, the focus of the weeklong protests, overpowering a small number of soldiers who had been left on guard, and seizing their weapons.

Reuters reported that the Daraa demonstrators mocked the president's brother, Maher Assad, head of the Republican Guard, the regime's elite fighting force, because troops were being used against the Syrian people, not against Israeli forces occupying Syrian territory on the Golan Heights. "Maher, you coward. Send your troops to liberate the Golan," was the chant taken up by thousands.

In the nearby village of Sanamein, eyewitnesses reported troops opened fire on protesters who were seeking to march to Daraa, killing another 15 people.

Videos posted on YouTube showed bodies of victims laid out in front of weeping relatives in several cities. Another showed youth marching through the Damascus bazaar, chanting, "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, Daraa." After dark, troops opened fire on protests in the Damascus suburb of Maadamiyah and killed three people, according to an AP report.

Demonstrators were attacked by security forces in the port city of Latakia, where at least four people were killed, including a 13-year-old boy, who was beaten to death by police. There were protests in Homs, where another demonstrator was reported killed, and in Raqqa, Zabadani and Duma.

At a protest by 1,000 people in Tel, just north of Damascus, demonstrators denounced Assad's family as "thieves." There was even a protest reported in Hama,

the city where Assad's father notoriously organized a bloodbath in 1982, massacring an estimated 20,000 people after an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Assad made a nationally televised speech Thursday to promise economic concessions and political reforms, a maneuver typical of those carried out by right-wing dictatorships facing mass revolts over the past three months. He promised to consider lifting the emergency law, which has given the ruling Baath Party dictatorial power since 1963.

His chief spokeswoman, Bouthaina Shaaban, read out a list of decrees, including a pay raise for government workers of 10 to 20 percent, the provision of health insurance, a cut in consumption taxes, and promises to increase job opportunities, crack down on corrupt officials, and provide more freedom for the press and political opposition.

Shaaban claimed that Assad had given direct orders not to kill opposition demonstrators. "I was a witness to the instructions of His Excellency that live ammunition should not be fired—even if the police, security forces or officers of the status were being killed," she claimed. Only hours later came the bloody events in Daraa and other cities.

One Assad decree established a committee "to contact and listen to citizens in Daraa." Shaaban added, "Every decision that is being made has taken into account the people of Daraa," she said.

This is no doubt true, but in another sense—the regime is focused intently on how best to suppress the people of Daraa, and all those in a country of 22 million who seek an alternative to the right-wing dictatorship.

At least one prominent dissident, Mazen Darwish, was arrested shortly after Assad's speech, and other activists in the capital were reportedly detained.

There is mass popular opposition to the repression and corruption of the Assad regime. At the same time, the imperialist powers, particularly the United States and France, the former colonial overlord in Syria, are at work seeking to hijack the anti-Assad movement and

install a more pliable stooge regime.

Speaking in Tel Aviv on Thursday, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, "I would say that what the Syrian government is confronting is in fact the same challenge that faces so many governments across the region, and that is the unmet political and economic grievances of their people. Some are dealing with it better than others. I've just come from Egypt, where the Egyptian army stood on the sidelines and allowed people to demonstrate and in fact empowered a revolution. The Syrians might take a lesson from that."

These remarks amount to inciting a military revolt against Assad, with the implied promise that the United States would quickly reward such a palace coup, providing it results in a foreign policy more to the liking of Washington, as well as a further opening up of the Syrian economy to foreign capital.



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