

Syrian regime calls out army against protests

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President Bashir Assad called out the Syrian army Sunday morning in the port city of Latakia, the first use of regular army troops in the intensifying political crisis of his right-wing dictatorship. Heavy military patrols stopped and searched cars as well as pedestrians carrying bags, looking for weapons and demanding identification papers.

At least 20 people died in Latakia Friday and Saturday, most of them killed by gunmen who fired from rooftops at crowds protesting against the regime. At least 90 people were reported treated for gunshot wounds on Friday at one of the city's two hospitals.

The shootings provoked violent attacks on the police, with police cars smashed and burned, as well as on offices of Assad's Baath Party and the offices of SyriaTel, the mobile phone company owned by Assad's family.

Latakia is a critical political indicator for the Assad regime. It is Bashir Assad's birthplace, and home to a large population of Alawites, a minority sect of Islam, linked to Shiism, to which Assad and the entire ruling clique belong. Alawites make up an estimated 15 percent of the population of Syria as a whole, compared to 75 percent who are Sunni Muslim.

Mass protests against the regime threatened to ignite tensions along sectarian lines, and there were eyewitness reports that the police had intervened to prevent clashes between armed gangs when gunfire erupted. Several policemen were among those shot and killed from the rooftops.

The Syrian government confirmed the deaths of 12 people in Latakia, but it denied that security forces had carried out the shootings, claiming that "armed elements" of outside origin had acted as snipers, shooting at both police and protesters. Syrian state television said that a majority of the 100 people seeking medical treatment were policemen.

Such claims cannot simply be dismissed as official

propaganda. That imperialist or Israeli agents are firing into crowds to inflame sectarian tensions and destabilize the Assad regime is entirely possible. The United States and France, the former colonial power, to say nothing of Israel, which has fought three wars with Syria, have an interest in destabilizing the Baathist regime, which has close ties to Iran and to the Hezbollah movement in neighboring Lebanon.

The protest movement first erupted in Daraa, an overwhelmingly Sunni-populated city in the south of Syria, but it has since spread throughout the country. There were further large protests in Daraa on Saturday, as mosques across the city announced the names of "martyrs" killed in previous protests. Demonstrators demanded the release of political prisoners and the arrest of officials responsible for the shootings of the past week.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators turned out Saturday in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, the country's four largest cities. In the town of Tafas, just south of Damascus, mourners at a funeral procession and other residents attacked and set fire to a police station and a Baath Party headquarters.

In Douma, another town near Damascus, thousands staged a sit-in that was attacked by security forces and thugs using clubs and sticks, according to witnesses. At least 200 people were arrested.

Syria's rubber-stamp parliament went into session on Sunday night amid suggestions that it might vote on repealing the state of emergency, through which the Baath Party has ruled since 1963, as well as the section of the constitution that bans any parties independent of the Baath-led National Progressive Front.

The Assad regime has attempted to blend promises of concessions and brutal repression in order to confuse and divide the opposition. On Saturday, more than 260 prisoners, mainly Islamists nearing the end of their jail terms, were released from Saydnaya prison in the

capital.

The next day, the authorities released a lawyer, Diana Jawabra, and 15 other people arrested in Daraa for protesting the earlier arrest of children caught painting anti-Assad graffiti.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Jordan, riot police attacked an anti-government rally in the capital city of Amman, killing one man and injuring more than 100. The demonstrators had set up a tent camp modeled on Tahrir Square in Cairo, demanding the resignation of the prime minister, Marouf al-Bakhit, appointed by King Abdullah only last month.

The police attack began with a provocation by 200 pro-government thugs who stormed into the camp with rocks and sticks. The police then arrived to “break up” the fight, but took the side of the pro-government forces, destroying the camp.



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