

State crackdown claims scores of lives in Syria

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Government forces were reported to have been “shooting randomly” at those attending funerals yesterday for some of the people shot dead in Dera’a on Friday. News reports referred to tanks being deployed overnight Saturday in the Mediterranean coastal city of Baniyas, the location of one of Syria’s two oil refineries. The British *Independent* reported, “Several tanks were seen in the northern district of the conservative city where protests intensified as Assad used increasing force to quell demonstrations in the south.”

The Syrian government cracked down hard on protesters who took to the streets in many parts of the country after prayers on Friday and Saturday, using tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. At least 37 people have died, and this number is expected to rise, making a total of over 160 deaths in four weeks of clashes, mostly in Dera’a, Douma and Latakia.

Syria’s National Organisation for Human Rights reported Sunday that 30 people had been killed on Friday in Dera’a, 3 in the central city of Homs and 4 in the Damascus suburbs of Harasta and Douma.

The army has set up roadblocks outside the towns and suburbs where there were the biggest protests and banned international journalists from going to the demonstrations. Details are sketchy, but the weekend’s demonstrations, attended by around 100,000 across the country, were the largest since the protests started in the southern city of Dera’a more than four weeks ago over the arrest and detention of 15 school children for writing anti-government graffiti.

On Friday, the most violent clashes took place in Dera’a, after tear gas was used to break up the rallies and protesters started throwing stones at the police. Syrian activists said that the security forces opened fire on demonstrators who were chanting “Freedom, freedom”. At least 13 people died, with many more injured. Government officials said only a member of the security forces and an ambulance worker had been killed.

Protesters smashed a statue of Basil al-Assad—President Bashir Assad’s late brother—and set fire to the office of

the ruling Ba’ath Party in the Mahatta district of the city. Last month, protesters pulled down a statue of Assad’s father, former President Hafez al-Assad.

The next day, security forces fired on mourners who had assembled near the Omari mosque in the Old City after the mass funeral for the protesters killed the previous day. Witnesses told Reuters news agency that security forces used live ammunition and tear gas to disperse the mourners who were calling for freedom.

The government denied responsibility for the violence, saying that armed groups had fired on its security forces and protesters. But it did confirm that many people had died, saying that 19 police officers and security forces had been killed as well as several civilians.

The interior ministry accused “plotters pushed by known foreign sides” of firing at protesters in order to create a rift between the people and the police. An official statement read, “[They] have infiltrated the ranks of the demonstrators to sow discord between the citizens and the security forces. There is no more room for leniency or tolerance in enforcing law.”

In other words, the government was making an example of Dera’a, as in Hama in 1982 when up to 20,000 Muslim Brotherhood oppositionists were killed and the city centre was obliterated as a warning to others who might oppose the regime.

While there is mounting unrest over poverty, inequality, lack of jobs for young people who make up 70 percent of the unemployed, and official corruption and repression, opposition groups are small and diffuse. The protests have been organised by social networks, and political dissidents living in the US, Britain and France have played an active part.

Following President Assad’s speech to parliament on March 30, when he appealed for national unity, blaming the unrest and violence on outside agitators, and made it clear that he would crack down violently on further demonstrations, the regime has carried out his threat.

The Assad regime has also made a number of

concessions in order to buy off and divide the opposition. These are widely seen as too little and too late. They include a review of the security legislation, an end to the draconian state of emergency law by April 25, and citizenship rights to the more than 300,000 Kurds rendered stateless by the 1962 census. He has sought to appease conservative Islamists by closing down Syria's only casino, promising to allow new religious institutions to be set up and repeal the ban on women wearing the niqab in universities and schools.

A new government is to be formed by Adel Safar, the former minister of agriculture. Since his ministry's corruption and mismanagement is widely seen as having exacerbated the four-year-long drought in the northeast and south of the country, this has not been viewed with any enthusiasm. In any event, since the president—along with his family, the security and military chiefs and the Sunni business elite—holds all the power, the government has only a minor role.

The regime's brutality in Dera'a is fuelling anger across the country, with anti-government protests in many towns and cities calling for freedom, reform and an end to the emergency laws and corruption. As yet, the demonstrations are small, but in a country where demonstrations are banned and any large gathering, even a wedding party held in an upmarket hotel, needs permission from the interior ministry, they are significant.

On Friday, there were clashes after rallies in Douma, one of a number of poor towns ringing the capital Damascus, where there are many Iraqi immigrants and which has become a focal point of protest. The town has been sealed off and Internet and mobile phone communications blocked. At least 10 people were killed.

In Harasta, on the outskirts of the capital, there were reports of gunfire and of tear gas being fired at protesters, and three people are believed to have been killed. There were also demonstrations outside the al-Rifai mosque in Kefar Souseh, Damascus.

A large protest demanding freedom of speech and assembly took place in the coastal city of Tartous on Friday. The demonstration included many Alawites, who make up about half of the population there. The Assad regime is based on a layer of Alawites, a minority Shi'ite sect, who make up about 15 percent of the population.

Early on Saturday, security forces used live ammunition to disperse a rally by hundreds of people in the port city of Latakia calling for political freedom, causing scores of injuries and possible deaths. One witness said he heard AK-47 fire and saw water trucks hosing down blood on

the streets near the Takhasussieh School in the Sleibeh district.

There were rallies in the northeast cities of Qamashli and Hasaka where there are Kurdish majorities. The region has been badly hit by years of drought, forcing hundreds of thousands to leave their homes and seek work in the southern cities and leaving a similar number dependent upon aid from the United Nation's World Food Programme.

In Hasaka, protesters chanted, "We are calling for freedom and not only for citizenship", in response to Assad's announcement last Thursday that he would grant citizenship to the more than 300,000 Kurds rendered stateless by the 1962 census.

In Qamishli, Kurdish youths chanted, "No Kurd, no Arab, Syrian people are one. We salute the martyrs of Dera'a."

The *New York Times* quoted Hakeem Bashar, a Kurdish leader, as saying, "We want all of the demands that other Syrians in other parts of the country are making. These are national demands, but we are demanding them too because this is our country. We are Kurds, but we are also Syrians."

In the central city of Homs, protests and sit-ins were broken up by live ammunition, killing three people. In Hama, security forces used water cannon and smoke bombs to break up a 2,000-strong protest in the old quarter of the city.



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