

Conflict intensifies in Syria

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The Assad regime has stepped up its clampdown on demonstrators calling for democracy and an end to corruption. It is seeking to prevent the protests, as yet relatively small, from becoming a mass movement for the removal of the ruling clique, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt.

President Bashar al Assad has served notice that further rallies will not be tolerated and deployed the army with tanks to block the roads, carry out killings, including sniper shootings, and conduct mass arrests. It has shut down telecommunications, expelled foreign reporters and imposed restrictions on the movement of journalists.

According to activists, nearly 200 protesters have been killed and about 800 have been arrested since the demonstrations began in March in Dera'a protesting against the detention of school children for anti-government graffiti.

On Sunday, the army and pro-government gunmen killed at least five protesters and injured dozens of people in the port and oil refinery city of Baniyas, 25 miles south of Latakia. Nine security officers, including soldiers, were also killed. On Monday, after more than 2,000 people broke through a security cordon to attend the funeral of four people killed the previous day, clashes broke out and government forces opened fire. The security forces also beat up men in the central square and barred the injured from getting to hospitals.

The picture is, however, confused. According to some reports, security forces shot soldiers refusing to fire on protesters after the army moved into Baniyas following protests on Friday. Wassim Tarif, a local human rights monitor, said that Mourad Hejjo, a conscript from Madaya village, was one of those shot by security snipers. "His family and town are saying he refused to shoot at his people," Tarif said.

Witnesses have posted video clips showing an injured soldier who says he was shot in the back by security

forces, while another shows the funeral of Muhammad Awad Qunbar, reportedly killed for refusing to fire on protesters.

The state media contradicted this, claiming that an armed group had ambushed and killed nine soldiers. It criticised "those sowing trouble, disorder and discord when Syria has already begun to address the problems and pave the road for change and reform".

Oppositionists have since conceded that not all soldiers reported dead or injured were shot after refusing to fire. Tarif said, "We are investigating reports that some people have personal weapons and used them in self-defence".

Workers in Baniyas were reported to be holding a three-day strike. The army has surrounded Baniyas, cutting off transport and telecommunications. Residents say that bread is running out and electricity and telecommunications were intermittent.

Troops also sealed off and attacked two villages close to Baniyas, Bayda and Beit Jnad. In Bayda, Haitham al-Maleh, a veteran lawyer and human rights activist in Damascus said the troops went house to house rounding up people and marched them out to the central square and beat them up as a deterrent to others. When other villagers went out onto the street to protest, military and security forces opened fire on them, said al-Maleh. Hundreds were arrested.

On Wednesday, hundreds of women and children carrying white cloths and olive branches rallied along the main road between Tartous and Baniyas in protest at the arrest of dozens of people from the villages, and demanded their release.

On Monday, 200 students—largely from Dera'a, which has been the flashpoint for the unrest—rallied in support of the protesters outside the science faculty at the University of Damascus, chanting "God, Freedom, and Syria only". Security forces moved in fast and beat up and arrested students to disperse the demonstration.

Initially, there were conflicting and unconfirmed reports that one student had been beaten to death or killed by gunfire.

Fayez Sara, a well known Syrian writer and journalist, was detained at his home on Monday, while several other activists had been picked up in the past few days.

There are reports from Baniyas and Latakia that pro-government thugs, mafia-type gangs involved in drug trafficking and other criminal businesses linked to different members of the extended Assad family, and private militias are operating. One witness said that these “*shabiha*” gangs had attacked from cars plastered with photos of the president, Bashar al-Assad, on Sunday.

The Assad regime has denied this, blaming the violence instead on armed gangs, and has vowed to crush unrest. Assad issued a statement saying, “The Syrian authorities, in order to preserve the security of the country, citizens and the governmental and services establishments, will confront these people and those behind them according to the law”.

“The Ministry of Interior affirms that there is no more room for leniency or tolerance in enforcing law, preserving security of country and citizens and protecting general order,” the statement continued.

Assad has made a number of concessions aimed at dividing and appeasing different social groups, including promising an end to emergency rule and some limited reforms, sacking some officials and granting Syrian nationality to hundreds of thousands of Kurds. But the gestures are cosmetic and have failed to satisfy protesters.



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