

Syrian regime extends crackdown on protests

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Syrian security forces followed up Friday's brutal assault on demonstrations by intensifying the crackdown and firing on funeral processions held Saturday for the victims. In doing so, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad sent a clear message that despite the lifting of emergency laws in place since 1963, dissent will not be tolerated.

At least 15 people were shot dead and dozens were injured on Saturday, bringing the number killed over the weekend in Latakia, Homs, Hama, Izra'a and Damascus to at least 103, according to human rights groups. More than 300 have been killed since political unrest first broke out in Dera'a on March 18.

Outrage at the killings brought thousands of people onto the streets on Saturday to mourn the dead. While previously the slogans were for "freedom," a number came out openly against Assad.

There were reports that six people taking part in mass funerals in the southern village of Izra'a, near Dera'a, were killed. Mourners were chanting, "Bashar al-Assad, you traitor! Long live Syria, down with Bashar!" Witnesses said that troops opened fire on mourners at a roadblock at Sheikh Maskeen as they returned to Dera'a.

Five people were killed in Douma, on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, when security forces opened fire on the funeral procession of 1,500 protesting against the eight people killed the previous day. The pallbearers had to abandon the coffins and run for cover.

The security forces included both troops and gunmen on the ground and snipers on the roof of the *Ba'ath Party* headquarters near the Hamdan hospital, where residents were trying to stop security forces arresting the injured and preventing them from being treated inside.

Within Damascus itself, at least three people were killed at another mass funeral of 1,000 mourners for

people killed in Barzeh, a poor suburb where there are many Iraqi immigrants. Witnesses said mourners were chanting, "People want the fall of the regime." Others called out, "Bashar, you coward, take your soldiers to Golan," referring to the Golan Heights, which Israel captured in 1967 and which have since been incorporated into the state of Israel, complete with settlements.

Plainclothes security forces with assault rifles also raided dozens of homes across the country. According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 18 men were arrested in the northern cities of Idlib, Raqqa and Aleppo. A number of human rights activists were arrested in Harasta, a suburb of Damascus, in the early hours of Sunday morning, including Daniel Saud, the head of the Committees for the Defence of Democracy, Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria. Mahmoud Issa, an opposition figure, was arrested in the central city of Homs.

Human rights activists said that Fayez Sara, a journalist who was jailed for two-and-a-half years along with 11 Damascus Declaration members and released in 2010, was arrested again. According to one report: "The secret police have been rounding up every outspoken figure they can get their hands on. They either call them in for 'interrogation' and keep them, pick them up from the street, or break into their home."

There are about 4,500 political prisoners, or "prisoners of conscience," in Syria, including political dissidents, Kurds, religious leaders, trade unionists and students, mostly held without trial.

The police have set up checkpoints across Damascus, and flashpoint neighbourhoods are subject to lockdown, with only residents allowed to enter after identity checks. These measures are aimed at stopping protests spreading to the city centre.

According to a statement from Syria Revolution 2011, a Facebook site based outside Syria, students in

Dera'a and Damascus have declared a general strike in all Syrian universities until "massacring the peaceful protesters comes to a stop and all prisoners of conscience and opinions are released."

But Syrian state television claimed that security forces were merely responding to clashes between the protesters and government supporters. It denied the scale of the carnage, stating that only eight people were killed and 28 wounded on Friday, including army personnel, in attacks by armed groups in Izra'a. An armed group had attacked a military base in the Damascus suburb of Muadhamiya, it said.

Two Syrian legislators, Nasser al-Hariri and Khalil al-Rifaei, rejected the official account and resigned as members of the largely symbolic parliament. Both are independent MPs who represent Dera'a, which was the flashpoint for the protests and has seen scores of protesters killed.

Al Hariri, referring to the deaths on Friday and Saturday, said, "I feel sorry for those who were killed in Houran today and yesterday by the bullets of security forces, despite the fact that the president has promised no live ammunition by security forces at all."

Al-Rifaei said, "I convey my condolence to the people of Houran and the Syrian people. The Syrian people and the people of Houran voted for me to be a member of parliament and now I can't protect them anymore."

"Security solutions do not work," he added.

Rezq Abdulrahman Abazeid, the government-appointed mufti (a Sunni religious leader and Sharia interpreter) for Dera'a, also resigned in protest. He said, "When they announce at high levels that (protesters) will not be shot at, we see that the truth on the ground is not like that."

The increased use of the armed forces and live ammunition to suppress the unrest in Syria follows concessions made by the Assad regime. These include a new government, the sacking of a few officials, citizenship to up to 300,000 Kurds, a wage increase for public sector workers, the lifting of the emergency law and a new law granting the right to peaceful protest if approved by the police.

In a televised speech, Assad made clear that the intention of these measures was to remove any "excuse" for further demonstrations.

As yet, the demonstrations have not grown to the size of the mass protests that toppled Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt and the security forces have been able to break them up. Assad may also have been emboldened by the reluctance—thus far at least—on the part of the US, Britain, France and the United Nations to do more than issue statements deploring the regime's violence.



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