

# Syria repression stepped up after Assad speech

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In the wake of Monday's speech by President Bashar al-Assad, which combined blustering threats and insincere promises of political reform, Syrian security forces once again opened fire on anti-government demonstrators Tuesday.

At least seven people were shot to death: three in Homs and one in Hama, two cities in central Syria, and another three in Deir al-Zour in the east. The victim in Hama was said to be a 13-year-old boy.

Eyewitnesses cited by Al Jazeera said that pro- and anti-government demonstrators had both come out on the street in each city, and came to blows, when soldiers in armored personnel carriers set upon the anti-Assad protesters.

This follows bloody violence on Friday, June 17, when as many as 19 people were killed in protests, 12 of them in Homs, two in Deir al-Zour and two in the Damascus suburb of Harasta.

Assad's nationally televised speech Monday was the first in which he admitted that it was legitimate for peaceful demonstrators to raise demands for political and economic reform. But he claimed that "saboteurs" were exploiting the protests to shoot and kill police and soldiers, and threatened further repression.

The speech was followed the next day by pro-government rallies involving tens of thousands, organized in Syria's major cities, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Deir al-Zour, and Hama.

It was the third nationally televised speech delivered by Assad since the protests against the government began in the wake of the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt. As in the other speeches, he blamed "foreign conspiracies" for undermining the political stability of Syria.

Also as in the other speeches, Assad raised the prospect of political reform and an end to the one-party

dictatorship in effect in Syria for nearly 50 years. He announced the formation of a 100-member "national dialogue authority" to discuss political changes, following a previous statement lifting the state of emergency, under which all opposition political activity was illegal.

The relaxation of legal repression—at least in words—has been accompanied, however, by an escalation of violence against opposition demonstrators in practice. It has become routine for protesters to assemble, raise political signs and banners, begin chanting slogans, and then be shot down in cold blood.

The official propaganda of the regime claims that, despite more than a thousand demonstrators slaughtered in the protests, the violence is primarily directed against the government, not carried out by it. Hundreds of police and soldiers have in fact been killed, but eyewitness testimony suggests the vast majority of these were shot by security and intelligence agents, or their own officers, because they hesitated to open fire on unarmed demonstrators.

In his speech, Assad reiterated the pretense that anti-regime forces in the pay of foreigners are initiating the violence. "What is happening today has nothing to do with development or reform," he claimed, referring to the protests, "What is happening is sabotage."

He urged the tens of thousands who have fled across the border into Turkey to return to their homes, claiming that they would be protected and not harmed. He said, "There are those who give them the impression that the state will exact revenge, I affirm that is not true. The army is there for security."

Given that most of these refugees fled their homes just ahead of troops commanded by Assad's brother Maher, regarded as the most brutal and implacable force available to the regime, it is unlikely that many

will take advantage of the president's offer.

Assad repeated the claim that "armed groups" had carried out attacks on the military in the town of Jisr al-Shughur, near the Turkish border, and suggested that they were linked to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, which he described as a "minority ... with a medieval mindset" and "destructive elements."

Harking back to the period of his father's rule, when Hafez Assad ordered the destruction of the city of Hama in 1982 to crush an Islamist rebellion, he declared, "Some of these demands are from the period of confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood, the black period," threatening, "We should not continue to live in a black period."

In what appeared to be an attempt to rally his most critical base of support, the merchant and bourgeois layer that has enriched itself over the past decade through the partial opening up of the Syrian economy, he warned that political instability could affect their profits. "The most dangerous thing we face in the coming period is the weakness or the collapse of the Syrian economy," he said.

The popular response to Assad's threats demonstrated the increasing isolation of the regime. Thousands came out into the streets within minutes of the end of his speech, chanting anti-government slogans, in Homs, Latakia, Hama, Dair al-Zour, on the campus of the University of Aleppo and even in the suburbs of Damascus.

The Syrian regime appears increasingly beleaguered internationally as well, although the Arab League issued a statement of support after Monday's speech. The deputy secretary-general Ahmed bin Heli described Syria as a "main factor of balance and security in the region."

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin criticized the repressive measures taken by Assad and dismissed suggestions that Russia was politically supporting Syria, a former client state of the Soviet Union. Putin said that Russia continued to oppose a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian crackdown because the last such resolution, adopted against Libya, had been "over-interpreted" as a pretext for the US-NATO attack on that country.

The British government has reportedly abandoned efforts to get a UN Security Council resolution in favor of stepped-up economic sanctions from the European

Union. EU foreign ministers were to meet on the Syrian crisis later in the week.

The Obama administration has sought to exert pressure primarily through Turkey, Syria's neighbor to the north and a member of the US-dominated NATO. President Obama had a long telephone discussion with Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Recip Erdogan Monday, and Turkish President Abdullah Gul declared that Assad's promises of reform were inadequate.

The Obama administration has not yet called for Assad's ouster, despite loud (and entirely hypocritical) criticism in the media of the bloody repression against protesters. This includes an editorial Saturday in the New York Times that ends, "The only way to end Syria's nightmare is for Bashar al-Assad to go."

Both Washington and the European imperialist powers have sought to utilize the crisis in Syria to pressure Assad to abandon his longstanding alliance with Iran and adopt a more conciliatory foreign policy, particularly towards Israel.

Meanwhile, across the border in Lebanon, the Lebanese army was mobilized to halt clashes between pro- and anti-Assad groups in the city of Tripoli, separating the Bab al-Tebbaneh neighborhood, largely Sunni Muslim, from the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood, largely Alawite, the Shiite-linked sect to which the Assads and the Syrian ruling clique belong. As many as seven people were killed and 48 wounded in a gunfight along the border between the two sectors of the city.



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