Anti-Assad protests enter fifth month in Syria

Jean Shaoul
28 July 2011

The regime of President Bashar al-Assad has deployed tens of thousands of troops to quell the growing protest movement, now in its fifth month.

Last weekend, troops opened fire on demonstrators, killing at least seven people in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and the Idlib region. Hundreds of thousands of people took part in demonstrations around the country after Friday prayers under the slogan of unity to oppose sectarianism and the regime's bloody crackdown, particularly on the people of Homs.

Marches and rallies took place in Hama, Homs, the Kurdish city of Qamishli and other Kurdish towns, the eastern city of Deir El-Zour, the southern town of Sueweida, and the northwest province of Idlib.

In the capital Damascus, there were several brief demonstrations, despite the tight security following the largest protests seen in the city the previous weekend. The security forces had cut telecom networks and set up checkpoints at key intersections to prevent demonstrators converging on the city centre.

Qabun and Rukneddin were cut off, with security forces conducting house-to-house searches. The BBC reported one activist as saying that security forces had turned off electricity and telecoms in the districts of Harasta and Duman. There were reports that the security forces used gunfire and tear gas to disperse the demonstrations.

The government sent tanks and troops into villages in the Jebel az-Zawiya district of Idlib province near the Turkish border.

Homs, which has been a centre of anti-governmesnt protests, has been subject to a military occupation over the last weeks. Security forces have fired indiscriminately from tanks, shelled many homes and buildings in different parts of the city, and made many arrests. This week, there were reports of explosions and heavy gunfire inside the city's Syrian Army War College in the city, with the injured taken to the military hospital, a claim state television denied.

At least 30 people are believed to have been killed in Homs, a religiously diverse city, over the last week but the violent events in the city are murky. The killings followed the seizure, mutilation and deaths of three Alawites. Assad's regime is based in particular on the minority Alawite sect.

The three were reported to have taken part in sectarian attacks on Sunni shops and businesses. The security forces are also reported to have stood by and watched as the attacks took place. In another incident, following the death of an Alawite killed in Aqrabiyah, near the Lebanese border, troops were deployed in the region, leading Sunnis to remain indoors for fear of military retribution.

The *Wall Street Journal* has reported daily fighting between groups of soldiers who have defected from the army and the army in Al-Rastan, north of Homs. On Thursday, the newspaper said, a group of defectors fought government forces in the Bab Siba'a district of Homs, killing 20 and destroying four tanks and seven armoured vehicles.

On Saturday, a passenger train carrying nearly 500 people derailed and caught fire in nearby al-Souda, killing the driver and injuring 14 people. State TV claimed this was an act of sabotage by insurgents, who had torn out part of the tracks. Homs Governor Ghassan Mustafa Abdul-Aal labelled it a "terrorist and criminal" act, but provided no evidence to prove this.

The continuing protests underscore the scale of opposition to the Assad regime.

Urban and rural workers have seen their social and economic conditions deteriorate. While in the immediate post-war period, Syria had one of the highest standards of living in the Arab world, it now has one of the lowest. This deterioration has been particularly sharp since the introduction of market reforms in 2005 and the treaty with Turkey that has seen trade between the two countries soar at Syria's expense.

Almost one third of the people live on $2 a day or less, facing rising food and fuel prices and a sharp rise in unemployment, especially among the youth who

© World Socialist Web Site

constitute three quarters of those without work. The four-year-long drought that ended last winter wrecked the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of poor farmers in the east and south of the country, many of whom are dependent upon UN food programmes or have migrated to the cities. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees languish in impoverished conditions around Damascus, which has also seen an influx of more than a million refugees from Iraq who have limited opportunities to work.

That is why the government has been unable to end the protest movement with either brute force or promises of political reform. Few people believe Assad since he made similar promises when he came to power in 2000 and then again in 2005.

Last Monday, the government announced a new law permitting the formation of opposition parties for the first time in 48 years, provided that they are not based on religion or ethnicity and meet with the approval of a government committee. But the restrictive nature of the law, designed to outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish parties, makes it unlikely to defuse the unrest.

Under pressure from Turkey, Assad has declared a National Dialogue with "oppositionists" and "independents.. However, the only people willing to meet him are disgruntled former regime members and supporters who lack any popular credibility.

Turkey is to host a four-day training session later this week for Syrian oppositionists active in the protests in an attempt to foster a more viable opposition movement. It follows three previous meetings in Turkey of exiled dissidents, who were internally divided and held little sway with the impoverished protesters in Syria.

Turkey's attempt to create an alternative political leadership marks a shift in its attitude towards the Assad regime, with which it had forged increasingly close diplomatic, military and commercial relations over the last ten years. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described Syria's brutal crackdown as "savagery", although he stopped short of calling for Assad's ouster. Turkey is presently hosting about 12,000 Syrians who have fled their homes in northern towns and villages.

Ankara fears that a descent into civil war would lead tens thousands of Syrians to flee across the border, while any unrest in Syria's predominantly Kurdish northeast towns, devastated by the four-year-long drought, could spill over into Turkey, which has a much larger Kurdish minority.

The impact on Turkey could yet be used as a pretext for the NATO powers to mount a military offensive against Syria, and there have been reports that Turkey has been preparing for just such a possibility. According to the Lebanese news website Nowlebanon.com, *As-Seyassah* daily quoted an unnamed British official as saying that "Turkey informed Britain, France, Italy, Germany and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) leadership of the possibility that it would launch an offensive in … Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Latakia."

Tehran, which has close relations with Damascus and Hezbollah in Lebanon, warned Turkey that if it were to be used as a platform for NATO action against Syria, Iran would bomb US and NATO bases in Turkey.

In contrast to Turkey, which has supported the Syrian opposition, Iran has reaffirmed its backing for the Assad regime and warned Ankara, with whom relations have become closer, to change course.

Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi said, "Iran and Syria are two inseparable countries and allies, and Iran will stand by its friend and Muslim [neighbouring] country, Syria, under all circumstances." He dismissed the current unrest in Syria as "guided by arrogant powers and the meddling of enemies."

Iran recently mounted an incursion into Iraq in pursuit of a Kurdish armed group known as PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), in part a warning to Turkey of Iran's crucial role in maintaining stability among Turkey's restive Kurdish population.

Iran has also signed an agreement with Iraq and Syria for a $10 billion pipeline to carry Iranian gas to the Mediterranean via Syria.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site