Syrian regime cracks down on protests

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Syrian security forces allegedly killed around 100 people in the Syrian city of Hama over the weekend. Since April there have been several large demonstrations against the regime of President Bashar Assad in Hama, in the northwest of Syria, and repeated crackdowns by regime forces.

There has also been fighting in the towns of Al-Bukamal and Deir ez-Zor in the east of the country. The Aljazeera news network reported the testimony of one witness in Deir ez-Zor who claimed that the Syrian army killed 25 people and injured 60 others during an attack on Monday.

Deir ez-Zor is one of Syria's major oil and gas hubs, close to the Iraqi border, and has been a center of anti-Assad protests since early this year.

Aljazeera cited unconfirmed reports from the anti-government group Avaaz that the holiday town of Zabadani, located near the Lebanese border, has been surrounded by Syrian troops.

The Syrian army reportedly resumed attacks inside Hama on Monday, with tanks shelling several buildings and killing an estimated 10 people.

In 1982, Hafez Assad, the late father of the current president, laid siege to the city of Hama following an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood party. An estimated 10,000 people were killed in that assault.

With reporting from within Syria very limited, various largely European-backed human rights groups and opponents of the Damascus regime have provided most of the figures for the number of civilians killed in Hama and other towns across Syria.

The Syrian government has claimed that reports of the killing of civilians are exaggerated, and that Syrian security forces are fighting armed anti-government groups backed by foreign powers.

While the number of fatalities is uncertain, there is substantial evidence of a major crackdown by the regime on its opponents, including the use of heavy weaponry and snipers by government forces.

Tensions in Syria have been heightened by the actions of the United States and the Western European powers. In mid-July US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Assad that he was "not indispensable" and that his regime had "lost legitimacy." This followed a provocative meeting between the US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, and opposition forces in Hama.

Ford's visit was condemned in the strongest terms by Damascus as a breach of diplomatic protocol and an attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of Syria.

Sections of the official Syrian opposition have lined up behind the diplomatic efforts of the European and US governments. Ammar Abdulhamid, founder of the Tharwa Foundation, a Syrian reform organization based in Washington DC, has called for a "strong UNSC [United Nations Security Council] resolution" against the Assad government, and for Turkey to intervene to aid the opposition.

Ambassador Ford was recalled to Washington Sunday for emergency talks at the State Department on developments in Syria. On Wednesday Ford is due to testify before the US Senate, where Republican and Democratic legislators are expected to call for a harder line against Syria.

The European powers are also pushing for diplomatic and economic measures against the Syrian government. The European Union extended its sanctions against Syria on Monday, freezing assets and issuing travel bans to five additional regime personnel. Including President Assad, 35 senior figures of the government in Damascus are now covered by the EU sanctions.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé called the situation in Syria "horrifying" and stated that the United Nations should "shoulder its responsibilities by speaking out loud and clear" against the killing of civilians.

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Germany called on the UN Security Council to convene and discuss the situation in Syria. The closed-door session of the Security Council, convened in New York on Monday evening, is considered unlikely to pass any significant measures. Permanent members China and Russia, as well as non-permanent members such as Brazil and South Africa, have refused to agree to a resolution supported by the European powers and the US that condemns the Assad regime.

Russia's foreign ministry issued a brief statement of "serious concern" about the situation inside Syria on Monday, describing the use of force against civilians in Syria as "unacceptable." Though more muted than the statements of the Western powers, it marked a change in tone from the Kremlin. The statement served as a "kind of insurance policy for Moscow to take further steps at the UN," said Fyodor Lukyanov, an analyst at the Moscow Council on Foreign and Defense Policy.

Turkey, which has developed close economic ties with Syria over the past decade, also voiced greater criticism of the Syrian government. Turkish President Abdullah Gul expressed "shock" at the apparent use of tanks against civilian areas: "The recent developments in Syria have deepened our already existing concerns."

The Turkish government has threatened that it will send its armed forces into Syria to prevent a "humanitarian crisis" that threatened to send a flood of refugees across the border into Turkey. Ankara, which has waged its own decades-long war against the large Kurdish minority population near the border with Syria, is concerned that a civil war in Syria could destabilize its hold on ethnic-Kurdish regions of Turkey.

Ankara has also provided refuge for many Syrian opposition leaders, and in July hosted a meeting of Syrian opposition groups. Participants at the National Syrian Salvation Conference in Istanbul demanded the resignation of Assad and a "peaceful transition of power."

The Western powers' claims to be shocked by Assad's violence are entirely fraudulent. These same powers have waged a five month-long air war against the defenseless population of Libya, raining death from the skies upon civilian areas of Tripoli and other Libyan cities—not to mention their ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Until the outbreak of mass protests in the Middle East, the governments in the US and Western Europe had been courting Bashar Assad for years.

As in Libya, the imperialist and regional powers are trying to influence the Syrian conflict to secure their predatory interests—against the aspirations of the masses fighting capitalist dictatorships in Syria and across the Middle East.

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