

Syrian demonstrators shot in protests over crackdown

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Thousands of Syrians took to the streets Friday, including in the capital of Damascus, defying the attempt by the Ba'athist government of President Bashar al-Assad to crush protests.

The focus for Friday's "day of rage" was the southern Syrian city of Dara'a, near the Jordanian border, where the mass protests against the Assad regime began six weeks ago. The spark for the protests was the jailing of 15 teenagers for writing political graffiti on a wall, including "The people want the regime to fall."

Early this week, the Syrian army's Fourth Armored Division, led by Assad's brother Maher, stormed the poor agricultural town, shelling civilian buildings, killing scores of people and imposing a state of siege. People have been unable to leave their homes; there are dwindling supplies of food and both water and electric power have been cut off.

The bloodiest clashes erupted Friday, when people from surrounding villages attempted to break this siege by marching with olive branches and white flags into Dara'a. Witnesses reported that soldiers met the marchers with live fire.

The Syrian Human Rights Information Link, based in Damascus, reported the death toll in the town at 19, providing the names of those it said were killed.

London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights gave the death toll in the town as 32 civilians, also claiming to have names of the dead. It said that 55 had died across the country. This would bring the total number reported killed since the protests began to over 500.

The Syrian government reported that four soldiers were killed by "armed terrorists" in Dara'a on Friday and that two others had been kidnapped. Opponents of the regime, however, said that the soldiers had been killed by other troops when they attempted to defend demonstrators.

There have been other reports of clashes between

different units of the security forces, suggesting dissension over the intensified repression. Also pointing to a crisis opening up within the regime, over 200 lower-ranking members resigned from the Ba'ath party in Dara'a in protest over the killing of demonstrators.

While the Friday protests have taken place every week over the past month and a half, beginning outside mosques following Muslim prayers, this week's demonstrations were particularly significant, held as they were in the teeth of fierce repression.

Last Friday had been the bloodiest day since the demonstrations began, with 112 people killed nationwide.

The Ba'athist regime had only a day earlier lifted a state of emergency that had been in effect since it first came to power in 1963, with Assad warning that this and other promised reforms left no "excuse" for people to take to the streets. When they did so anyway, the regime unleashed intense repression.

This Friday for the first time saw a sizable demonstration in the capital of Damascus, with varying sources placing the number of participants as high as 10,000.

Witnesses and shaky videos posted on the Facebook page Syrian Revolution 2011 indicated that the demonstrators, carrying banners, marched in the Maidan district of Damascus. "The people want the downfall of the regime," they chanted, along with slogans in solidarity with Dara'a.

Until now, the Assad regime has managed to disperse such protests in the capital before they could get started. A heavy police presence was imposed, backed by numerous checkpoints on roads into Damascus.

The poorer suburbs outside the capital, however, have seen some of the largest demonstrations and some of the harshest repression. Demonstrators took to the streets of the Damascus suburb of Saqba again this Friday, chanting "We're the youth revolution, not thugs or terrorists."

Protests also took place in Hom, the country's third-largest city, in the largely Kurdish town of Qamishli in eastern Syria, in the port city of Banias and many other smaller towns.

Friday also marked the first time that the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood has publicly called for participation in the demonstrations. Accusing the Assad government of "perpetrating genocide on Syrian territory," a statement issued by the Brotherhood urged Syrians to "not let the tyrants keep you in slavery."

The organization, which launched an Islamist insurgency against Hafez al-Assad, the current president's father, was ruthlessly crushed by the armed forces with the 1982 siege of the city of Hama that left over 10,000 dead.

Until now, the Muslim Brotherhood has insisted that it is not organizing the protests but supports their aims. Backed by both the Saudi and Qatari monarchies, and seen by many within Syria's religious minorities as proponents of a hegemonic Sunni Muslim religious state, it has previously kept a low profile to lessen concerns over foreign interference and sectarian agendas.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration announced a limited set of new sanctions against Syria on Friday, targeting relatives of Bashar al-Assad, including his brother Maher, the Fourth Armored Division commander, the Syrian spy agency and the General Intelligence Directorate and its chief, Ali Mamluk. It also added the Quds Force of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which the US claims has provided riot gear to Syrian security forces.

The measures came in the wake of mounting criticism from Republican officials and others of the administration's failure to take stronger action against the Syrian regime. There are also charges of hypocrisy as the US has attacked Libya on the basis of fraudulent claims that it aimed to protect civilians while doing little in the face of killings in Syria and nothing in response to repression by its allies, such as Bahrain.

An administration official again made it clear, however, that Washington does not favor the downfall of the Assad regime, fearing that it would unleash crises throughout the region. The administration is "not ready" to say—as it did with Gaddafi—that Assad must go, a White House official said. Obama and his aides, he said, "do not want to get out in front of the Syrian people."

The European Union is also discussing proposals for sanctions, while the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva passed a resolution condemning the

Syrian repression.

The UN deputy high commissioner for human rights, Kyung-wha Kang, issued a statement to the council citing "the widespread use of live fire against protesters; the arrest, detention and disappearance of demonstrators, human rights defenders, and journalists; the torture and ill-treatment of detainees; the sharp repression of press freedoms and other means of communication; and attacks against medical personnel, facilities and patients."

A resolution submitted by the US had to be revised to win a majority vote. Language calling for an official commission of inquiry into human rights abuses was changed to proposing an investigative visit by members of the council's staff.

The resolution passed with 26 votes. Russia, China and seven other countries voted against, while eleven countries either abstained or were not present. Russia and China had previously blocked an attempt by Washington and its European allies to pass a Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian repression.

"We believe if we adopt this [human rights council resolution], this will only complicate the situation of human rights in Syria and will increase tension in the country," Chinese Ambassador Xia Jingge said before Friday's vote.

Russia warned the West against "outside interference" that could spark a civil war.

Washington's ambassador to the council, Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe, claimed that the Assad regime needed time to reform itself. "But in the process of exercising their responsibility to reform their government they cannot be mowing down people in their own streets," she said.

She also attempted to deflect charges made by a number of countries, including Brazil, that while intervening in Libya and pressing for condemnations of Syria, Washington continues to give its tacit support to brutal repression by its allies in Bahrain and Yemen.

Washington, she said, does not have "a cookie-cutter approach", but remains "deeply concerned" about human rights throughout the region.



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