

Egypt revolution sympathisers beaten in Syria-HRW

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* Assad "taking page out of Mubarak's rulebook"-HRW* Heavy security presence despite small turnout* Atassi says she was insulted, slapped

NEW YORK, Feb 3 (Reuters) - Human Rights Watch said on Thursday that Syrian authorities failed to intervene as 15 people who tried to hold a candle vigil in support of the Egyptian revolution were beaten in Old Damascus. The New York based group quoted activists as saying that 20 men dressed in civilian clothes beat and dispersed 15 demonstrators, including rights defender Suhair Atassi, who assembled in front of a police station in the Thomas Gate district on Wednesday. "President Bashar al-Assad seems to have taken a page out of the rulebook of his Egyptian counterpart. His security services are no longer content with simply banning protests. They seem to be encouraging thugs to attack peaceful demonstrators," a Human Rights Watch statement said. The statement quoted Atassi as describing how an officer accused her of working for Israel and turned to violence when she did not answer. "He called me a germ ... he finally slapped me heavily on the face and threatened to kill me," Atassi said. Syrian activists have tried to hold daily protests in solidarity with Egyptian demonstrators this week. Only 30-50 people showed up each time, and a heavy security presence prevented most protests from going ahead. But activists are expecting larger numbers on Saturday, with the protests directed more against the Syrian government. "One of the main organisers of the protests told Human Rights Watch that the Syrian security services showed up at each of the gatherings, filmed the participants and checked their identity papers," the statement said. There was no comment from Syrian authorities. Assad, who succeeded his late father 11 years ago, keeping the authoritarian system intact, said in an interview this week that his priority was stability and that reform would have to wait for what he termed the next generation. Syria has been ruled by the Baath Party since it took power 50 years ago, banning any opposition and imposing emergency law still in force. Protests not organised by the government are also

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