

Syrian president expected to address nation

Contributed by the CNN Wire Staff
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(CNN) -- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was expected to address his embattled nation Sunday amid reports of protesters being shot to death in recent days as they called for government reforms.

Assad's government has also signaled that it would consider lifting the country's emergency law and adopting new legislation that would license political parties.

Syria's emergency law, which has been in effect since 1963, allows the government to make preventive arrests and override constitutional and penal code statutes. It also bars detainees who haven't been charged from filing court complaints or from having a lawyer present during interrogations.

Violence has consumed recent demonstrations in the restive city of Daraa and the coastal town of Latakia, according to witnesses.

Syria's state-run news agency, citing an unidentified official source, said the attacks of "armed gangs" in Latakia over the past two days has led to the deaths of 10 security force members and civilians and two gunmen. SANA reported that 200 people, most of them security forces, were wounded by the gangs, which also attacked a hospital.

Anti-government protests in Latakia had started peacefully Saturday before several people were wounded in a hail of gunfire as security forces tightened their control on access to the city, witnesses said. However, presidential spokeswoman Bouthaina Shaaban told state media that it was an unidentified group of gunmen that opened fire at citizens and security forces.

CNN could not independently confirm the accounts as the Syrian government has yet to grant access to the country.

Meanwhile, in the southern city of Daraa where dozens of people were killed in violent clashes earlier this week, hundreds of Syrians demonstrated peacefully without security forces present on Saturday, a witness said.

The protest also served as a funeral site for throngs of mourners to remember those who died in earlier demonstrations, the witness said.

Friday was marred with reports of casualties in the southern cities of Sanamen and Daraa where government security forces allegedly opened fire on protesters. In Daraa, dozens were shot in the head and neck and hundreds more were wounded when snipers on rooftops began firing into the crowd, according to a doctor in Daraa who declined to be named for security reasons.

The protesters, who were not carrying weapons, chanted, "We need our freedom, We need democracy," the doctor said.

In the neighboring city of Sanamen, at least 20 others were killed and more than 60 people were wounded Friday after government security forces began shooting at demonstrators, the doctor in Daraa told CNN.

Thousands in Sanamen marched Saturday in what appeared to be a mixture of political protest and funeral procession as they sought to bury six people killed in violent clashes earlier in the week, another witness said.

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/27/syria.unrest/index.html?hpt=Sbin>