

Syrian government says 12 killed in seaside city

Contributed by AP
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(AP) DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Syria's government said Sunday that unknown gunmen firing from rooftops and prowling the streets of the Mediterranean city of Latakia are to blame for two days of violence that killed 12 people.

A week of political unrest in southern Syria expanded on Friday to other parts of the country, including Latakia, a scenic seaside city in the north where the streets echoed with gunfire after around 3,000 protesters held a peaceful rally to demand political freedoms.

The government's tally of the dead was the first official account of the scale of the violence there.

The state news agency Sana quoted a government official as saying gunmen fired from rooftops, broke into homes and destroyed public property. Their identities remained a mystery.

The dead included security forces and residents of the city alike as well as two members of the shadowy "armed elements," the report said. About 200 people were wounded, most of them government security personnel, it said.

"Armed elements roamed the streets, occupied the rooftops of some buildings and opened fire randomly, terrorizing people," SANA said, quoting the unidentified official.

That matched witness accounts, but left open the question of who was behind the shooting.

As Syria's political unrest spread to Latakia, a religiously mixed city, it seemed to be taking on a sectarian element, even though the crowds of anti-government protesters appeared mixed on Friday.

But there was talk there of possible attempts to divide those residents who are members of the president's minority Muslim Alawite sect — an offshoot of Shiite Islam — and majority Sunni Muslims.

One witness said groups of people drove around in Alawite dominated villages on the city's outskirts, spreading rumors that the Sunnis were about to attack them. "Then they drove to Sunni areas and told them the opposite," he said.

"How can the government not know who these people are? We demand an immediate investigation and trial of those responsible," he said.

He said Latakia was a "ghost town" Sunday with people too scared to leave their homes.

He spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of arrest.

After Friday's protests, Syrian soldiers in army vehicles entered the city at night, witnesses and activists said. The deployment capped a chaotic day in which protesters and the government traded accusations of violence and incitement.

"All of a sudden, at sundown, unknown people in cars and on rooftops began shooting randomly at people," said the witness, who attended Friday's protest. "It was total chaos, but how it started and who they are, nobody knows," he said.

"It was terrifying, it was sheer horror," he said.

The government account on the official news agency said the unknown groups of gunmen attacked public and private businesses, destroyed shops and broke into people's homes. They also attacked a hospital and destroyed several ambulances, the report said.

President Bashar Assad's government accused a major Sunni cleric in Qatar for inciting the unrest.

Presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban said Qatar-based Sheik Youssef al-Qaradawi had incited Sunnis to revolt with his sermon in Doha on Friday. Al-Qaradawi, who has millions of followers around the world and is seen as one of most influential voices in Sunni Islam, praised the Syrian uprising and criticized the regime.

Shabaan said those words were responsible for the unrest in Latakia.

"There was nothing (in Latakia) before al-Qaradawi's sermon on Friday," she told reporters in Damascus Saturday. "Al-Qaradawi's words were a clear and honest invitation for sectarian strife."

She also accused Palestinians from the nearby al-Ramel refugee camp of involvement in the violence, but did not elaborate.

Sectarian divisions are a deeply sensitive topic in Syria, where Assad has used increased economic freedom and prosperity to win the allegiance of the prosperous Sunni Muslim merchant classes, while punishing dissenters with arrest, imprisonment and physical abuse.

Assad has placed his fellow Alawites, adherents of a mystical offshoot of Shiite Islam, into most positions of power in Syria. He has built a close relationship with Iran, allowing the Shiite powerhouse to extend its influence into Lebanon, where it provides money and weapons to Hezbollah militants.

Demonstrators on Saturday also attacked a police station and offices of the Baath party in the town of Tafas, six miles (10 kilometers) north of the southern border city of Daraa, the epicenter of more than a week of anti-government protests.

An activist in Daraa told AP Sunday that up 1,200 people were still holding a silent sit-in the al-Omari mosque, at the center of the protests there.

He said the army and police were surrounding the area in a tense standoff with the protesters, but reported no violence. "I think they will storm our sit-in very soon," he said on condition of anonymity.

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