

Syria: dozens more dead, US and France divided

Contributed by ANDREW RETTMAN EUObserver
Monday, 28 March 2011

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - Syrian President Bashir al-Assad's forces killed at least 20 more protesters over the weekend. But the US gave him credit for reforms and ruled out intervention, in contrast to hawkish French rhetoric.

Pro-Assad militias used sniper rifles, machine guns and swords against protesters in the northern town of Latakia on Saturday (26 March) killing at least 12 people and injuring over 150.

The violence came after clashes in the southern town of Sanamin and in the capital Damascus on Friday in which at least 10 lost their lives. Syrian officials put the death toll at around 30 since 18 March. But Amnesty International says the number is closer to 55, while Syrian activists say it is well over 100.

Al-Assad has freed prisoners, promised to lift the country's long-standing emergency law and to change the constitution to appease demonstrators.

But some EU diplomats stationed in Damascus fear he is capable of extreme violence if things go badly, citing the example of his father, who massacred over 20,000 people in the town of Hama in 1982.

Speaking on the CBS talk show Face the Nation on Sunday, US secretary of state Hilary Clinton condemned the violence but appeared to give al-Assad a blank cheque in terms of outside intervention.

When asked by the show's host, Bob Schieffer, if the US would consider a Libya-type operation in Syria if things get worse, she said "No. Each of these situations is unique, Bob ... if there were a coalition of the international community, if there were the passage of [UN] Security Council resolution, if there were a call by the Arab League, if there was a condemnation that was universal - but that is not going to happen."

She added: "There's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer."

The Latakia killings ignored the third appeal in almost as many days by EU foreign relations chief Catherine Ashton.

In her strongest statement to date, Ashton earlier on Saturday had said: "I am appalled and extremely concerned by the situation ... I strongly condemn the brutal repression, including the totally unacceptable use of violence and live ammunition, which must cease now."

France and the UK have not yet reacted to Latakia. But the Clinton rhetoric stands in contrast to remarks by French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Brussels on Thursday.

Referring specifically to Syria and Libya, Sarkozy at the time said: "Every ruler should understand, and especially every Arab ruler should understand that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will from this moment on each time be the same."

"No democracy can accept that the army shoots live ammunition at protesters."

Commentators have accused the US and the EU of double standards in launching anti-Gaddafi air strikes while turning a blind eye to killings in strategic countries such as Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, which is seen as a buffer to Iranian influence in Lebanon.

In a swipe at Clinton on Sunday, Ken Roth, the head of US NGO Human Rights Watch, tweeted: "Clinton: won't intervene in Syria because Assad is seen as 'reformer.' Should begin by reforming open-fire orders."

In Libya, coalition bombers over the weekend hit Gaddafi targets in Sirte, shortly before the town fell to rebels. Rebel forces on Monday began to move on Tripoli, amid reports that Gaddafi is getting ready to flee to Chad.

Speaking on the same CBS show on Sunday, US defence chief Robert Gates said the military objective is to protect civilians and not to unseat Gaddafi.

"If we've learned anything over the past number of years, regime change is very complicated and can be very expensive and can take a long time," he said. When asked if Gaddafi's days are numbered, he quipped: "I wouldn't be hanging any new pictures if I were him."

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