

New videos show scale of Syria protests

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The latest amateur videos from Syria show mass protests and attacks by government security forces.

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Gangs of armed young men roam Syrian seaside city

LATAKIA, Syria — Gangs of young men, some armed with swords and hunting rifles, roamed Sunday through the streets of a Syrian seaside city, closing alleys with barricades and roughly questioning passersby in streets scarred by days of anti-government unrest.

The scenes in Latakia, a Mediterranean port once known as a summer tourist draw, were a remarkable display of anarchy in what had been one of the Mideast's most tightly controlled countries.

Syria has been rocked by more than a week of demonstrations that began in the drought-parched southern agricultural city of Daraa and exploded nationwide on Friday, with security forces opening fire on demonstrators in at least six places and killing dozens. A Damascus-based activist said residents of an impoverished hillside neighborhood of the capital known as Mezah-86 reported that government forces were attacking demonstrators there Sunday night. The activist said two residents reported hearing gunfire in the area as they spoke to him by phone.

"I heard shouting, screaming, fighting and shooting," he said.

One of the residents reported seeing security forces breaking into the home of at least one person who had attended an anti-government protest earlier in the evening, the activist said.

His account could not be independently confirmed because Syria maintains tight restrictions on journalists and many areas have become unsafe in recent days.

The government has also tried to calm the situation with concessions, and President Bashar Assad is expected to announce Tuesday that he is lifting a nearly 50-year state of emergency and moving to annul other harsh restrictions on civil liberties and political freedoms.

Member of Parliament Mohammed Habash told The Associated Press that lawmakers discussed the state of emergency during a Sunday night session and Assad would make an announcement about the issue on Tuesday. He offered no further details.

Ammar Qurabi, an exile in Egypt who heads Syria's National Organization for Human Rights, said there appeared to be divergent views within the Syrian leadership, with one branch that believes in a crackdown and another that believes in dialogue.

He said Assad must address the people and show some transparency as quickly as possible.

"People are asking themselves, where is he? why doesn't he make an appearance?" Qurabi said. "Assad must choose whether he wants to go the way of the Moroccan king, who has pledged to sponsor broad constitutional reforms, or the Gadhafi way. Which is it going to be?"

A top adviser to Assad offered the first hint of reforms in an announcement Thursday, saying the government had begun studying change to the emergency law and other measures. That pledge did not stop protests from erupting in cities across Syria the following day.

Some of the worst violence appears to have taken place in Latakia, a coastal city that is a mix of Sunnis living in its urban core and members of Assad's minority Alawite branch of Shiite Islam in villages on its outskirts, along with small minorities of Christians, ethnic Turks and other groups.

Witnesses told The Associated Press that large, religiously mixed crowds took to the streets of Latakia on Friday to express sympathy with protesters in the southern city of Daraa and demand greater civil liberties and political freedoms and an end to official corruption.

According to the witnesses and footage posted on social networking sites, shooting erupted after nightfall Tuesday that protesters blamed on security forces, and unrest erupted that continued until Saturday. Syrian officials said the government moved the army into Latakia in heavy numbers by early Sunday.

Syrian officials said 12 people had died in the city, and blamed the deaths on unidentified gunmen firing from rooftops.

An Associated Press photographer saw traces of what appeared to have been a serious battle in Latakia's main Sheik Daher square. Two police cars had been smashed and rocks and telephone cables torn from overhead poles were strewn across the streets and sidewalks.

The offices housing SyriaTel, the mobile phone company owned in large part by a cousin of President Bashar Assad, had been burned.

At one of the city's two hospitals, officials said they had treated 90 wounded people on Friday. The photographer saw many suffering from gunshot wounds to the hands or feet. Others were in critical condition.

Few cars or people were on the streets and shops were closed. Soldiers patrolled in heavy numbers, stopping virtually anyone seen carrying a bag. They pulled drivers to the side of the road to ask for identification papers and search their vehicles.

Just before sundown, gangs of 10 to 15 young men began roaming the streets, many armed with sticks and a few carrying guns or swords. Some of the gangs could be seen closing streets and alleys with metal barricades and large rocks.

Their allegiances could not be immediately determined, but pro-government groups of men in civilian clothes and armed with hunting rifles and other firearms also could be seen pulling over drivers, asking them for identification and the reason for their presence in Latakia.

The Baath party's office in Latakia did not appear to be burnt, despite reports from activists Saturday that it had been set ablaze, which the government had denied.

The Reuters news agency reported that two of its staffers had been missing in Syria since Saturday night, saying Beirut-based producer Ayat Basma and cameraman Ezzat Baltaji had been expected to cross into Lebanon by road and be picked up by a taxi.

Reuters said it had asked for Syrian officials' help in securing the journalists' safe return.

Syria's state of emergency has been in force since Assad's Baath party took power on March 8, 1963. It lets the government detain suspects without trial and exercise strict control over the media.

It also allows civilians to be tried in military courts.

Assad's decisions are effectively law but the state of emergency would have to be formally canceled by a presidential decree requiring approval of the cabinet. The decree would then be referred to a parliamentary committee for approval before actually going into effect.

The next scheduled cabinet meeting is Tuesday.

Habash, the lawmaker, told the AP before the parliament session Sunday that it might vote on a section of the constitution that mandates Baath party leadership of the nation. The amendment of the constitution's section 8 would open the way for the formation of parties besides the Baath and 11 other closely associated parties known as the National Progressive Front.

There was no word of such a vote after the session.

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