

Troops open fire as protests explode across Syria

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Troops fire on protests as Mideast's upheaval reaches Syria, spreading across its cities

DAMASCUS, Syria – Troops opened fire on protesters in cities across Syria and pro- and anti-government crowds clashed in the capital's historic old city as one of the Mideast's most repressive regimes sought to put down demonstrations that exploded nationwide Friday demanding reform.

The upheaval sweeping the region definitively took root in Syria as an eight-day uprising centered on a rural southern town dramatically expanded into protests by tens of thousands in multiple cities. The once-unimaginable scenario posed the biggest challenge in decades to Syria's iron-fisted rule.

Protesters wept over the bloodied bodies of slain comrades and massive crowds chanted anti-government slogans, then fled as gunfire erupted, according to footage posted online. Security forces shot to death more than 15 people in at least six cities and villages, including a suburb of the capital, Damascus, witnesses told The Associated Press. Their accounts could not be independently confirmed.

The regime of President Bashar Assad, an ally of Iran and supporter of militant groups around the region, had seemed immune from the Middle East's three-month wave of popular uprising. His security forces, which have long silenced the slightest signs of dissent, quickly snuffed out smaller attempts at protests last month.

Syrians also have fearful memories of the brutal crackdown unleashed by his father, Hafez Assad, when Muslim fundamentalists in the central town of Hama tried an uprising in 1982: Thousands were killed and parts of the city were flattened by artillery and bulldozers.

The Assads' leadership — centered on members of their Alawi minority sect, a branch of Shiite Islam in this mainly Sunni nation — have built their rule by mixing draconian repression with increasing economic freedom, maintaining the loyalty of the wealthy Sunni merchant class in the prosperous cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

Bashar Assad now faces the same dilemma confronted by the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain — ratchet up violence or offer concessions. A day earlier, his government seemed to test the latter track, offering to consider lifting draconian emergency laws and promising increased pay and benefits for state workers.

As massive crowds rejected the offers, the worst violence appeared centered around Daraa, where the arrest of a group of young men for spraying anti-regime graffiti last week set off a cycle of growing demonstrations and increasingly violent government crackdowns.

The Syrian government said 34 had been slain in Daraa before Friday, while the U.N. human rights office put the figure at 37. Activists said it was as high as 100.

Thousands poured into Daraa's central Assad Square after Friday prayers, many from nearby villages, chanting "Freedom! Freedom!" and waving Syrian flags and olive branches, witnesses said. Some attacked a bronze statue of Hafez Assad. One witness told The Associated Press that they tried to set it on fire, another said they tried to pull it down.

Troops responded with heavy gunfire, according to a resident who said he saw two bodies and many wounded people brought to Daraa's main hospital.

After night fell, thousands of enraged protesters snatched weapons from a far smaller number of troops and chased them out of Daraa's Roman-era old city, taking back control of the al-Omari mosque, the epicenter of the past week's protests.

The accounts could not be immediately independently confirmed because of Syria's tight restrictions on the press.

In Damascus, the heart of Bashar Assad's rule, protests and clashes broke out in multiple neighborhoods as crowds of regime opponents marched and thousands of Assad loyalists drove in convoys, shouting, "Bashar, we love you!"

The two sides battled, whipping each other with leather belts, in the old city of Damascus outside the historic Umayyad mosque, parts of which date to the 8th century. About two miles (three kilometers) away, central Umayyad Square was packed with demonstrators who traded punches and hit each other with sticks from Syrian flags, according to Associated Press reporters at the scene.

An amateur video posted on the Internet showed hundreds of young men marching through Damascus' old covered bazaar, some riding on others' shoulders and pumping their fists in the air as they chanted: "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, Daraa!"

Security forces chased and beat some 200 protesters chanting "Freedom, Freedom!" on a bridge in the center of the city, an activist said.

After dark, troops opened fire on protesters in the Damascus suburb of Maadamiyeh, a witness told the AP. An activist in contact with people there said three had been killed.

The scenes of chaos and violence shocked many in this tightly controlled country where protests are usually confined to government-orchestrated demonstrations in support of the regime, and political discussions are confined to whispers, mainly indoors.

"There's a barrier of fear that has been broken and the demands are changing with every new death," said Ayman Abdul-Nour, a Dubai-based former member of Assad's ruling Baath Party. "We're starting to hear calls for the regime's ouster."

Also startling was the scope of the protests — in multiple cities around the country of nearly 24 million.

Troops opened fire on more than 1,000 people marching in Syria's main Mediterranean port, Latakia. One activist told the AP that witnesses saw four slain protesters in a hospital. Another was reported killed in the central city of Homs, where hundreds of people demonstrated in support of Daraa and demanded reforms, he said. The activist, like others around the country, spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation by the regime.

Demonstrators in the southern village of Sanamein tried to march to Daraa in support of the protesters, but were met by troops who opened fire, said an activist in Damascus in touch with witnesses there. He said the witnesses reported as many as 20 fatalities, though it was impossible to confirm the number.

A video posted on Facebook by Syrian pro-democracy activists showed five dead young men lying on stretchers in Sanamein as men wept around them. The voice of a woman could be heard saying, "Down with Bashar Assad."

An unidentified Syrian official asserted that an armed group attacked the army headquarters in Sanamein and tried to storm it, leading to a clash with guards.

Further protests erupted in the town of Douma, outside the capital, and the cities of Raqqa in the north and Zabadani in the west, near the border with Lebanon, a human rights activist said, reporting an unknown number of protesters detained.

The protests in Damascus appeared led by relatively well-off Syrians, many of whom who have been calling for reforms for years and have relatives jailed as political prisoners.

They contrast sharply with the working-class Sunni protesters in conservative Daraa, where small farmers and herders pushed off their land by drought have increasingly moved into the province's main city and surrounding villages, looking for work and in many cases growing angry at the lack of opportunity.

The protests in Daraa appeared to take on a sectarian dimension, with some accusing the regime of using Shiite Hezbollah and Iranian operatives in the crackdown.

The origin of the protests, far from urban centers, makes Syria's uprising similar to Tunisia's, in which demonstrations in towns and villages spread to cities, said Bassam Haddad, director of the Middle East studies program at George Mason University.

That doesn't necessarily mean the regime is in danger, he said. "If this continues at the level we see right now or if the regime finds a way to deal with the protests at this level, the Syrian regime will be able to weather the storm." But he said the bloodshed could only cause protests to expand.

The White House urged Syria's government to cease attacks on protesters and Turkey said its neighbor should quickly enact reforms to meet legitimate demands. The U.N. said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon spoke to Assad Friday morning and underlined "that governments had an obligation to respect and protect their citizens' fundamental rights."

Mroue reported from Beirut. Michael Weissenstein and Ben Hubbard in Cairo contributed to this report.