

Syria: President Bashar al-Assad faces indictment by the International Criminal Court

Contributed by By Adrian Blomfield, Middle East Correspondent; The Telegraph
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President Bashar al-Assad faces indictment by the International Criminal Court as Western leaders were told on Sunday that the Syrian leader could be held to account for the deaths of 120 anti-government protesters.

An influential body of international judges and lawyers called for Mr Assad and his lieutenants to be held to account for Easter weekend attacks in which troops and militiamen fire on civilians.

"Those ordering and carrying out these attacks, including those firing live rounds into crowds, must be held criminally accountable," the International Committee of Jurists (ICJ) said in a statement.

As opposition supporters continued to bury dead comrades on Sunday, four more were reported to have been killed.

William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, warned all Britons in Syria that the scale of violence was so grave they should leave immediately or risk not being able to leave "at all" as the turmoil worsened.

Western governments were coming under growing scrutiny for their divergent policies towards Libya and Syria, where more than 300 people have been shot dead since unrest began five weeks ago.

Critics complained that while the West has been comparatively quick to go to the aid of the Libyan people, Syrians struggling against one of the Middle East's most repressive regimes had largely been abandoned to their fate. "The international community has failed so far to protect the people of Syria from wide-scale human rights violations," Wilder Taylor, the ICJ's secretary-general, said.

Syria has deployed many of the same tactics used by Col Gaddafi in Libya, with unarmed protesters facing live fire by both the security forces and loyalist militiamen and snipers.

But many Western officials have been reluctant to criticise Mr Assad too harshly, even though his regime has long been treated as a near pariah.

Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, initially sought to present Mr Assad as a reformist struggling against hardliners in his regime. Even Israel, which remains technically at war with Syria, has privately urged Washington to refrain from action that could destabilise Mr Assad for fear that his downfall could usher in a more hostile government.

But after more than 100 deaths on Good Friday, the bloodiest day of the protests so far, Western leaders have stiffened their language. President Barack Obama called the killings "outrageous" and yesterday Mr Hague joined the chorus of condemnation. "I deplore the increasing violence in Syria and am appalled by the killing of demonstrators by Syria's security forces," he said.

Such condemnation is unlikely to pacify human rights activists. The ICJ called for Syria to be referred to the United Nations Security Council. "There is enough evidence suggesting mass killings now," said Said Benarbia, the ICJ's legal officer for the Middle East. "The Security Council must assess the magnitude of human rights violations. It must decide whether to have an international fact-finding mission and, if there is enough evidence, refer it to the International Criminal Court."

Human Rights Watch, the New York-based advocacy group, also called for action by urging Western states to impose sanctions on Syrian officials involved in the killings of civilians.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8471338/Syria-President-Bashar-al-Assad-faces-indictment-by-the-International-Criminal-Court.html>