

Syria's crisis begins to go international

Contributed by Samia Nakhoul, Reuters
Wednesday, 08 June 2011

DUBAI: The increasingly bloody crisis engulfing Syria has started to go international.

A French initiative in the U.N. Security Council to secure condemnation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's repression of protesters is just one symptom of growing world alarm.

On Wednesday, Turkey reported that 122 Syrians had fled across the border to escape an expected military crackdown in a northwestern Syrian town where the government has accused "armed gangs" of killing more than 120 security personnel.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan declared that his country would not "close its doors" to Syrian refugees and urged Assad's government to be more tolerant toward civilians.

Small groups of refugees fled earlier to Lebanon when Syrian security forces were suppressing protests in a border town.

Israel and the United States accuse Damascus of promoting Palestinian rallies at the fence dividing Syria from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights to divert attention from the challenge to four decades of Assad family rule.

The United States and Britain, unlike France, have stopped just short of proclaiming that Assad has lost all legitimacy. But his ability to control Syria is also in question.

"Assad is finished, but we have to see how this regime will crumble," said Burhan Ghalyoun, a Syrian opposition and academic at the Sorbonne in Paris. "Is it going to crumble from inside, through growing demonstrations, or will the world unite, demand that the killing ends and threaten intervention?"

Despite belated enthusiasm for pro-democracy movements that have unseated leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, no Western leaders — let alone their autocratic Arab partners — have shown any appetite to intervene in Syria, an Iranian ally with a volatile ethnic and religious mix lying in a web of regional conflicts.

Syria's old Cold War ally Moscow, unhappy about how NATO powers have interpreted a U.N. resolution authorizing military action to protect civilians in Libya, has said it may veto a possible Security Council resolution condemning Damascus.

Turkey, which had sunk huge efforts to foster a new relationship with Syria over the past decade, has publicly chided Assad for failing to heed its urgings that he respond to unrest by leading reform, rather than risk being swept away.

Qatar, a wealthy Gulf state friendly to Syria — as well as to the United States — has also been involved in attempts to persuade Assad to change course, diplomatic sources say.

After contacts between Washington, Ankara and Doha, the Qatari prime minister met Assad twice in Syria last month, the sources say, adding that Qatar offered Assad funds and political support if he embraced reform, but he backed away from the idea.

Despite some vague promises of dialogue and selective prisoner releases, Assad seems locked onto a course of repression to ensure the survival of his 11-year rule.

Bloody events in Jisr al-Shughour, near Turkey, suggest cracks in the loyalty of elements in his security forces or the beginnings of armed opposition, or some combination of the two.

Activists and residents say at least part of the bloodshed in the Sunni town followed a military deployment to crush a mutiny among other army units. Some sources say several mid-ranking officers in turn disobeyed orders to fire on mutineers and were themselves shot by loyalist security forces.

The government says gunmen roaming the town killed more than 120 men from various security forces in ambushes and attacks.

The death toll was far higher than in similar reported instances of security personnel being shot after defecting to the demonstrators. There have also been previous reports of some dissidents taking up weapons and attacking security

forces.

With most independent media barred from Syria, it is hard to piece together a reliable and coherent account.

But threats by the authorities to send the army to restore order in Jisr al-Shughour have stirred memories of a fierce crackdown there in 1980, when the president's father, the late Hafez al-Assad, put down a Muslim Brotherhood uprising.

That was the prelude to the much bloodier 1982 episode in the city of Hama where many thousands were killed and the old town was razed by troops sent to wipe out Brotherhood rebels.

Wael Merza, a Syrian academic and opponent of the Assad administration, said: "Bashar is trying to recreate the 2011 version of his father's Hama massacre in 1982. He is opting for a city-by-city massacre rather than one mass killing.

"Bashar doesn't want to respond to people's demands. The basis of his policy is a calibrated bloodbath."

Erdogan's Justice and Development party, with its roots in Islamism, is sensitive to the plight of Syrian Sunnis — the majority in a population ruled by an elite that is dominated by Assad's minority Alawite sect. The Turkish premier warned last month that Turkey would "not tolerate another Hama."

Lebanese analyst Jamil Mroue predicted that Erdogan would toughen his line on Assad after Turkey's election Sunday.

Last weekend, Turkish President Abdullah Gul told visiting Egyptian pro-democracy activists that rulers in the region must respect their own people and accept their legitimate demands.

"I would like to remind rulers in Muslim Arab countries of the necessity of being realistic, of perceiving the world better and of seeing that there is already no place for authoritarian regimes in the Islamic world," Gul said.

"Everyone is aware that I am speaking about countries such as Syria and Libya," he added.

Despite its friendship with Syria, with which it has had a visa-free border since 2009, Turkey has accepted a trickle of Syrian asylum-seekers and hosted a conference of Syrian opposition figures last week. Turkish officials say Ankara has made preparations for a further influx of Syrian refugees.

Turkey, Syria's main trade partner, has so far had little influence on events in its neighbor, but it has the means to hurt Assad's government, which has transferred substantial funds to Turkish banks since Syria withdrew from Lebanon in 2005.

Turkey's demographic make-up — a Sunni majority with big Kurdish and Alawite minorities — is not dissimilar to Syria's, except that in Syria the Alawite minority has been in power for four decades, behind the facade of one-party Baathist rule.

Mroue said it was not clear if Assad was really in charge or complicit in the harsh measures against protesters — a question that has been recurrent since he inherited power in 2000.

"We never got really to know if he is blocked from doing what he has promised to do," said Mroue. "Either he is part of the set-up and we believed the lie for 10 years that Bashar is a reformist. Or he is just a PR man with the rank of a president."

Syrian opposition groups are also trying to give their struggle an international dimension, sending a delegation on Tuesday to present what they said was evidence of crimes against humanity to the International Criminal Court, which could ultimately lead to a referral of Syria to the Security Council.

The delegation said 1,168 people had been killed, 3,000 wounded and 11,000 detained since the uprising in Syria began on March 18. It also reported 893 forced disappearances.