

Seventeen more protesters die in Syria

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DARAA, Syria, Aug. 30 (UPI) -- Protesters rallied in several Syrian cities Tuesday, clashing with government forces in confrontations that left at least seven people dead, activists said.

They said at least 17 other people had been killed Monday by forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad, the Los Angeles Times reported.

Tuesday's rallies in Daraa, where six people were reported killed, and Homs, where one death was reported, were on the first day of the Muslim Eid al-Fitr, which ends fasting in the holy month of Ramadan, CNN reported.

Protests were also reported in Aleppo, Damascus and elsewhere around Syria.

The rebel group Local Coordination Committees of Syria reported hearing gunshots in Damascus suburbs and said government forces violently broke up protests in Latakia.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a London-based activist group, said security forces fired on protesters in Baniyas and at least 30 people were detained.

The government-run Syrian Arab News Agency reported "an armed group" kidnapped Attorney General Adnan Bakkour, his bodyguard and driver Monday in Hama. SANA said the three were overwhelmed by seven armed gunmen.

Assad -- roundly criticized and condemned internationally for brutality against protesters -- has promised to discuss reforms and said his troops are protecting Syrians from thugs and terrorists.

Eid al-Fitr has renewed hope among protesters wanting to bring down Assad's regime despite increasingly violent crackdowns by security forces during the past two days, rebels told the Los Angeles Times.

"In the months we have been protesting I have never seen such defiance on the part of the people and such brutality on the part of the regime," a Homs man identified as Omar said.

He said tanks fired on worshipers as they left a mosque.

The Local Coordination Committees reported the presence of armed troops and the Mukhabarat -- Syria's secret police -- near mosques to prevent people from praying, The New York Times said.

Members of the committee, who have planned and documented events in the 5-month-old protest, reported that dozens of soldiers had deserted their positions in several locations throughout Syria to join the popular uprising against Assad.

A heavy presence of government forces was reported Monday in many Syrian communities, including Rastan, where troops fired heavy machine guns, killing at least one person, activists said.

"Gunfire and explosions rang across the town early this morning and we heard that tanks are surrounding the town," a Rastan resident told The New York Times. "We are so scared, too scared to leave the house. We don't know what they are preparing for us."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said more than 2,000 people have died since the uprising began.

Foreign media outlets can't independently confirm death tolls or other information in Syria, which has restricted access to many parts of the country.

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