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Young Syrian activists held amid widespread repression

At least three young human rights activists who helped to organize peaceful protests in and near Damascus are being held incommunicado in unknown locations after their recent arrest, while fears are growing for a fourth who has gone missing.

The news of the activists' plight comes amid reports that some 25 people have been killed since yesterday in the port city of Latakia, where Syrian tanks and ships reportedly continue to shell residential areas in an attempt to quell protests.

Across Syria, more than 1,700 people have been killed since mass protests began in mid-March, according to a list of names compiled by Amnesty International.

"The Syrian authorities must immediately reveal the whereabouts of any activists arrested in connection with the ongoing pro-reform protests and give them access to their families and lawyers," said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"If they are being held solely for their involvement in peaceful protests, the authorities have no basis to continue holding them, and they must be released immediately and unconditionally as they would be prisoners of conscience. The Syrian authorities must also investigate reports of torture and other ill-treatment in detention and bring those responsible to justice."

Sources have told Amnesty International that two of the activists – Islam al-Dabbas and Majd al-Din Kholani, both of whom are students from Daraya, south-west of Damascus – had been beaten severely following their arrest by Air Force Security on 22 July and 8 August, respectively.

According to human rights activists, Air Force Security oversees arrests in Daraya. Along with the other Syrian intelligence services, it regularly detains people suspected of opposing the government and holds them incommunicado for lengthy periods in detention centres that are notorious for torture and other ill-treatment.

Women's rights activist Hanadi Zahlout was arrested at a café in Damascus on 4 August. Detainees recently released from the Political Security branch in Damascus said they had seen her in detention there, and that she had made a confession after being forced to watch her friend being tortured.

Damascus-based activist and film producer Shadi Abu Fakher was last heard from on 23 July when he phoned a friend he was meeting that day to say he was just two minutes away.

Family members of the detained activists have been too afraid to ask authorities for details of their whereabouts, sources have told Amnesty International, which fears they may have been subjected to enforced disappearance.

All four activists had helped to organize peaceful pro-reform demonstrations in and near the capital. Islam

al-Dabbas in particular was well-known for presenting water bottles with flowers to the army when they attempted to attack protesters in Daraya.

Since the beginning of popular protests in mid-March, the Syrian security forces have arrested thousands of people in cities across the country. Amnesty International has received numerous accounts of detainees being tortured and otherwise ill-treated, with some dying in custody as a result.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), based on evidence of crimes against humanity.