

AI Index: PRE 01/069/2012
08 February 2012

Syria: Brutal assault on Homs must end

Russia and other countries with influence over Syria must act urgently to stop the bombardment of Homs, Amnesty International said today.

More than 200 people have been killed in Homs since Friday, the majority of them unarmed victims of shelling and shot by snipers.

While Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday met with President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, Syrian security forces' unrelenting bombardment of Homs continued and has since intensified. Amnesty International called on Russia to make it clear to the Syrian government, both publicly and in private, that the military assault on the city of Homs must end immediately.

The organization also called on the Arab League to continue its diplomatic efforts on Syria.

"The situation in Homs is critical, and is turning into a major humanitarian crisis. Russia has blocked international efforts to stop the massive human rights violations in Syria, stating that they have a better plan for resolving the crisis," said Salil Shetty, Amnesty International's Secretary-General.

"Russia, and other countries with influence over Syria, must use whatever means they have to restrain the Syrian military in Homs and ensure it stops using heavy weaponry in residential areas."

"The Syrian government seems to think that Saturday's Security Council veto has given it the green light to crush resistance in Homs by any means – Russia needs to make clear, with a loud voice, that this is not the case."

Since Friday residential areas in Homs - including al-Khaldieh, Bab 'Amr, Bab al-Seba' and al-Insha'at - have been subjected to shelling by government forces and there have been heavy exchanges of fire with anti-government fighters in these areas.

The Syrian army has deployed tanks in certain areas. Armed groups in the city are reported to be using Kalashnikovs and RPGs in response.

Since Friday Amnesty International has received 246 names of people reported to have been killed in Homs, including at least 17 children. While some of those killed were armed men fighting against the government forces, the majority were reported to have been unarmed.

Hundreds more are reported to have been injured. Most people are being treated in makeshift field hospitals or at their homes.

Homs residents told Amnesty International that there is a severe shortage of medical staff, equipment and medication to treat the injured. On Monday a field hospital treating both injured residents and fighters was hit by shelling.

The Syrian News Agency said on 7 February that 30 men from the army and security forces were buried after being killed by what they termed “terrorist groups” in different parts of the country.

Amnesty International also called on the Arab League to take the opportunity of its Ministerial meeting this weekend to continue its efforts to build international pressure on the Syrian government and other governments who are supporting it.

“The Arab League was rebuffed by the UN Security Council on Saturday but we believe it should continue its work to bring an end to the atrocities taking place in Syria,” said Salil Shetty.

“The first step is for the Arab League to make it clear that they will not let the pressure drop, and to push this issue back to New York, whether that be the Security Council or the General Assembly.”

Amnesty International has received the names of more than 5400 people believed to have been killed in the context of protests in Syria since mass protests began in March 2011.

Amnesty International has concluded that crimes against humanity are taking place in Syria – a finding also made by a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry in November – and called for the situation to be referred to Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, as well as for a comprehensive arms embargo to be imposed on Syria and an assets freeze against President Bashar al-Assad and his close associates.