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## **Syrian authorities urged not to suppress 'Great Friday' protests**

The Syrian authorities must not respond with violence to mass demonstrations planned across the country tomorrow, Amnesty International urged on the eve of a Facebook-promoted "Great Friday" protest.

"It is imperative that these demonstrations are policed sensibly, sensitively and in accordance with international law to avoid further bloodshed on Syria's streets," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"These 'Great Friday' protests could be the largest yet. If government security forces resort to the same extremely violent tactics they have used over the past month, the consequences could be exceedingly grave."

Peaceful protests calling for freedom are expected to take place in cities and towns across the country including Damascus, Dera'a, Homs and Baniyas, in all of which demonstrators have been killed by security forces in recent weeks.

The death toll has already exceeded 228 as a result of the crackdown on the protests, which began on 15 March and have since mushroomed as people have taken to the streets to express their grievances.

On Tuesday, eight protesters were shot dead by the security forces while staging a peaceful sit-in protest in the city of Homs.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has just signed a legislative decree to finally end the country's repressive 48-year-old national state of emergency, in force continuously since 1963.

"The lifting of the emergency, so long a symbol of repression and violations of human rights, is a welcome if long overdue step," said Malcolm Smart.

"But tomorrow will be a real test of the government's sincerity in undertaking reforms. We must not see more people being shot down in the streets simply for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly."