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## **Arab League should clarify human rights situation in Syria**

A meeting of the Arab League in Cairo this Sunday should provide a key opportunity to clarify ongoing allegations about serious human rights violations in Syria, Amnesty International said today.

Ahead of the meeting, numerous Syrian human rights activists have told Amnesty International that grave human rights concerns remain despite the presence of an Arab League observer mission in the country since 26 December 2011.

These include the Syrian security forces' apparent killings of scores of protesters and other individuals since the observers arrived – Amnesty International has the names of 134 people killed in this way since the observer mission began, but the actual figure may be considerably higher. Many more have been arrested for their real or suspected involvement in the pro-reform movement, while the Syrian authorities have failed to release thousands of others similarly detained.

Reports of a deadly bomb blast in Damascus today highlight the deteriorating security situation, while Syrian opposition groups critical of the Arab League mission have called for mass protests to urge UN action on Syria.

“It was a very welcome development for the Arab League to launch this mission to monitor the situation on the ground in Syria and witness the impact of months of serious human rights violations during the bloody crackdown on pro-reform protesters,” said Ann Harrison, Interim Deputy Programme Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“When they report on their preliminary findings this Sunday, we hope those findings will be made public to give the international community a clear picture of the current situation on the ground in Syria, where human rights violations appear to be continuing unabated.”

The observer mission is in Syria to monitor the government's implementation of an agreement reached with the Arab League in late November to help restore calm.

It is the first time a formal mission of observers has been allowed into Syria since the crackdown on pro-reform protesters began last March.

In recent weeks, Syrian opposition activists have repeatedly contested statements made by Arab League officials in the media and elsewhere.

Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi stated that Syrian authorities had released more than 3,500 political prisoners, but it remains unclear what evidence led to this statement.

No list of released prisoners has been made public and Syrian activists have told Amnesty International that they believe the number of such prisoners released was much lower, adding that scores or hundreds of additional political activists were arrested in the last week, including in Aleppo, Latakia and Daraya.

There are also reports that a large number of detainees may have been moved around or taken to hidden detention centres to prevent Arab League observers from seeing them.

As for the withdrawal of military equipment and personnel, all the activists who spoke with Amnesty International said that tanks were often just moved away for the duration of the observers' visits and that pro-government snipers remain in many residential areas, where they continue to threaten protesters and others going about their daily business.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on President Bashar al-Assad's government to bring an end to the violence, including crimes against humanity perpetrated since the fierce crackdown on Syrian pro-reform protesters began in March 2011. Amnesty International and other human rights organizations should be granted access to the country.

The organization has also called on the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, as well as to impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Syria and freeze the assets of President al-Assad and others involved in ordering or perpetrating serious human rights violations.

The Security Council is expected to discuss Syria again on 10 January.

“By their mere presence in Syria, the Arab League's observer mission has given encouragement to the protesters to return to the streets in larger numbers and given more visibility to human rights concerns, but robust action is now needed to stop the violence,” said Ann Harrison.

“A strong Arab League condemnation of the al-Assad government's violations would further build the case for decisive UN action to deliver justice and accountability for the brutal crackdown.”