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Protesters killed in Syria mosque attack amid wave of detentions

Amnesty International has condemned last night's deadly attack on a mosque by Syrian security forces, amid a sweep of detentions of suspected dissidents across the country.

At least seven people are reported to have been killed in a night-time raid on the 'Omari mosque in the southern town of Dera'a, where scores of protesters were staging a sit-in.

The lethal attack came as security forces rounded up scores of students, activists, journalists and intellectuals around the country following a week of protests, amid similar demonstrations across the Middle East and North Africa.

Dera'a is now under curfew with government announcements telling residents they will be shot if they leave their houses.

"The Syrian authorities must cease the use of excessive force to crush protests and immediately release all of those detained for the peaceful expression of their beliefs," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Those held are at risk of torture or other ill-treatment and we are deeply concerned for their safety."

Shortly after midnight, scores of soldiers and plain-clothed security agents arrived at the 'Omari mosque and some opened fire on protesters.

A Syrian human rights activist told Amnesty International that local residents said at least two of the seven people killed were shot inside the mosque.

If confirmed, the seven deaths bring the number killed during six days of protests in the town to 13.

The activist said security forces were shooting from the tops of buildings at protesters, ambulances and nearby houses.

Videos sent by human rights activists appear to show armed forces shooting in the mosque area while civilians plead for them to stop.

Local sources say those killed are 'Omar 'Abd al-Wali, Muhammad Abu al-Eyoun, Hamid Abu Nabbout, Dr Ghassan 'Ali al-Mahameed, Ashraf Masalma, Ibtisam Masalma and Tahir Masalma. They said scores more were injured.

There are no credible reports suggesting the protesters were armed.

The Syrian authorities have accused "armed gangs" of being behind some of the protests in Dera'a and issued a statement saying Dr al-Mahameed was killed when the ambulance he had travelled in was

“assaulted by an armed gang, which caused his martyrdom”. They provided on further details to support the claim.

Roads to the town have been closed by the authorities, while security forces are said to be going from house to house detaining people and taking them to unknown locations.

Among those detained in Dera’a in the last two days is community leader Nizar al-Harek, who had been appointed to negotiate with the authorities.

Based on reports from Syrian human rights organizations and relatives, Amnesty International has compiled the names of 93 people who were arrested between 8 and 23 March in Damascus, Aleppo, Baniyas, Dera’a, Douma, Hama, Homs, Latakia, Ma’aratan Nu’man and al-Malkiyah and remain detained in unknown locations.

The real number of those arrested is likely to be considerably higher. According to one Syrian human rights organization, around 300 people had been arrested in Dera’a in the five days before last night’s attack.

The 93 people are believed to be aged between 14 and 45 and include five women. Some are members of the same family.

The detained include students, intellectuals, journalists and activists. Not all took part in the demonstrations; some seem to have been arrested for their activities on the internet.