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Security Council must refer Syria to the ICC

The UN Security Council must refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Amnesty International said today, amid escalating government violence against protesters calling for reform.

The call comes as the Security Council considers its response to the brutal crackdown that has left some 400 people dead since mid-March.

“The Syrian government is clearly trying to shatter the will of those peacefully expressing dissent by shelling them, firing on them and locking them up,” said Salil Shetty, Amnesty International’s Secretary General.

“The Syrian government and its security forces have long felt able to operate with total impunity, and we are now seeing the result of that in the kinds of bloody acts that they have been committing on the streets of Syria in recent days.”

“President al-Assad and those around him have to understand that their actions will have consequences, namely that if they gun down their own citizens the international community will hold them individually criminally responsible before the ICC or national courts of states exercising universal jurisdiction.”

The organization also called for the imposition of a comprehensive arms embargo on Syria and an assets freeze on President Bashar al-Assad and others involved in ordering or perpetrating serious human rights abuses.

Since protests began in March, unarmed Syrians gathering to call for greater freedom have routinely been attacked by security forces firing live ammunition directly into crowds of peaceful demonstrators.

The government last week announced the lifting of the 48-year-old state of emergency, but violence has since spiralled, with at least 120 people killed on Friday, until then the bloodiest day so far.

Amnesty International has received the names of 393 people killed since protests began, but the real number is likely to be higher.

In a number of incidents, snipers have targeted wounded people lying in the streets and people trying to assist them, according to Amnesty International's sources.

The organization rejected claims by the Syrian government that many of the killings had been committed by anti-government armed groups, saying that it had seen no evidence to support such allegations.

After the Syrian army deployed in Dera'a on 25 April, tanks were reportedly used to shell residential buildings where there was no evidence that the persons inside were armed.

Several hundred people have been arrested across the country, the vast majority held incommunicado and with their whereabouts unknown. Many of those who have been released have reported that they were tortured in detention.

On 26 February the UN Security Council unanimously resolved to refer the situation in Libya to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.

“The Security Council needs now to step up to the mark and show leadership on Syria as it did on Libya,” said Salil Shetty.

“A consistent policy of zero-tolerance for crimes against humanity will send a signal to all governments that impunity for crimes under international law is no longer acceptable.”

Background

The human rights violations by the Syrian authorities reported in the last few weeks include murder and torture and appear to have been committed by members of the security forces as part of a widespread - as well as systematic - attack on the civilian population. As such these violations would amount to crimes against humanity.