

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC: A CRISIS THAT DEMANDS ACTION BY THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Amnesty International has submitted the following statement to the sixteenth special session of the UN Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

For six weeks the Syrian government has been violently repressing pro-democracy protests that have been taking place throughout the country. This follows a long history of repression which has seen the arbitrary arrest, detention and imprisonment of peaceful government critics and advocates of reform, including for Kurdish minority rights, torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and prisoners on a widespread and systematic scale, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances. All these human rights violations are being committed with impunity.

Amnesty International has received to date the names of more than 450 people reported to have been killed by Syrian government forces since the protests began in mid-March. Hundreds have been injured and hundreds more detained; many are held in incommunicado detention at undisclosed locations and are at high risk of torture and other ill-treatment. Amnesty International has received harrowing first-hand testimony of torture and other ill-treatment that has been meted out on individuals, including children, detained during these weeks – including severe beatings with sticks, rifle-butts and cables, electrocution and sexual assault.

Many of those killed and injured are reported by eye-witnesses and others to have been shot by security forces, including the army and paramilitaries, using live ammunition firing into crowds of protesters and mourners attending funerals of people previously killed by government forces. Snipers have also shot and killed people in the streets and in their homes and have targeted medical workers and other people trying to help the wounded.

The most intense repression to date occurred on 22-24 April. More than 120 people were killed during “Great Friday” protests called for 22 April; some as a result of army shelling of residential areas in the southern city of Dera’a using tanks. This use of artillery against civilian residential areas indicates that the Syrian government may be determined to quell the popular protests using any means irrespective of their legality and compliance with international human rights law.

Up to a third of the killings have occurred in Dera’a, where the first fatalities occurred on 18 March 2011. Security forces opened fire on local people who were protesting against the arrest and detention of youths alleged to have written political graffiti on walls. Four protestors were killed and at least two more deaths occurred in the following two days. At least seven other people were killed when the army and plain-clothed security agents subsequently raided the ‘Omari mosque where scores of people

were staging a sit-in protest. Those killed included a medical doctor and two women providing water to the protestors.

The security forces have also killed protestors in more than a dozen other cities and towns, including Izra', as-Sanamayn, Latakia, Baniyas, Homs, Hama and Damascus.

The Syrian government and the Syrian state news agency SANA have attributed many of the killings to “terrorist” and “fundamentalist” armed gangs who, they say, have been attacking the security forces and protestors. However, in the overwhelming majority of cases when casualties have occurred there has been clear evidence that killings were committed by the government’s own security forces who were present and were seen to be shooting at demonstrators and participants in funeral processions. In some cases, unidentified gunmen have been seen shooting in and around the streets of urban areas such as Latakia, Dera’a and Baniyas, but their actions and movement suggest that they are operating in conjunction with government security forces. The Syrian government says that at least 26 members of the security forces have been killed, but Amnesty International has not been able to independently verify this information or ascertain the circumstances of such deaths, if they have occurred. Nor is Amnesty International currently able to verify reports that some soldiers have been summarily executed on the orders of their commanders for refusing to open fire on protestors.

Amnesty International has informed the Syrian authorities of its wish to urgently visit the country in order to investigate alleged human rights violations at first hand but, to date, has received no response. The Syrian authorities maintain tight curbs on access to information and freedom of expression with the result that independent investigation and verification of human rights violations is made extremely difficult.

The lack of independent access to Syria to investigate the killings, including of members of the security forces, underlines the need for the United Nations to take action. On 31 March 2011, according to the Syrian state news agency SANA, President Bashar al-Assad directed the establishment of a committee to “launch immediate investigations into all the incidents which claimed the lives of a number of civilians and military personnel in Dara’a and Latakia”. However, given the repeated failures over the years of the Syrian authorities to conduct independent and thorough investigations into numerous human rights violations, the limited scope of the announced investigation and the fact that the Syrian authorities have been blaming “armed gangs” for the violence, Amnesty International considers it highly unlikely that the announced investigation or similar investigations established by the Syrian authorities will be sufficiently independent, objective, thorough and robust to meet international standards.

The large number of detentions accompanying the violent repression, most of which appear to be arbitrary in nature, also contrasts with statements of the Syrian authorities. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad pledged for a second time on 15 April to release all protest-related detainees, except those accused of committing crimes “against the nation and the citizens”, but hundreds of protestors are believed still to be held and to be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment. Indeed, new reports of torture and other ill-treatment are now being received – methods used reportedly include beatings with sticks and cables, electric shocks and sexual abuse.¹ Several Syrian NGOs have reported that as many as

¹ Amnesty International has documented more than 30 different methods of torture used by Syrian security forces over the last two decades.

1700 people may have been detained during the recent protests; to date, Amnesty International has not been able to verify the figure.

Amnesty International urges the Human Rights Council to:

Demand that the Syrian authorities:

Cease all repression of peaceful protesters, including unlawful killings and other excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and other ill-treatment;

Take steps to ensure full accountability for the human rights violations that have been committed in recent weeks and are ongoing, including by undertaking independent and impartial investigations and by bringing to justice those responsible for unlawful killings, torture and other human rights violations in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty;

Invite visits by and facilitate prompt access to relevant UN Special Procedures in order to carry out or assist with direct investigation of the hundreds of killings of protestors and other serious human rights violations that have occurred, the excessive use of force, reports of extra-judicial executions of members of the security forces and others, widespread arbitrary detention, torture, strict controls on freedom of expression and movement;

Request an urgent visit by representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights;

Resolve to keep the human rights situation in Syria under constant review and to establish mechanisms to support this, including by reporting regularly to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly;

Transmit the report of its sixteenth special session on the human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic to the General Assembly prior to the elections for the Human Rights Council scheduled for 20 May 2011.

Amnesty International notes that there are situations of human rights violations of comparable severity in Bahrain and Yemen, and the organisation urges the Human Rights Council to convene in special session without delay to address those situations.

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International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org
