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## **Investigation urged into Syrian mass grave reports**

The Syrian authorities must carry out a prompt, impartial investigation into reports that a number of bodies were unearthed near the city of Dera'a and into how those deaths occurred, Amnesty International said today.

Sources have told Amnesty International that local residents on the outskirts of the southern city of Dera'a yesterday found a shallow, unmarked grave containing the bodies of at least five people – said to be 'Abd al-Razaq Abazaid and his four sons, Samer, Samir, Suliman and Mohamed Abazaid.

The circumstances of the deaths and the total number of corpses remain unclear – some reports allege more than two dozen bodies have been found.

“If true, these reports of multiple corpses buried in a makeshift grave show an appalling disregard for humanity,” said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

“The Syrian authorities must immediately carry out independent and impartial investigations into these reports and other killings related to the recent pro-reform protests.”

“Anyone found to be responsible for unlawful killings, torture and other human rights violations must be brought to justice in fair trials.”

Amnesty International has compiled a list of at least 622 people killed by Syrian security forces around the country since pro-reform protests began in mid-March.

A focal point of nationwide pro-reform protests, Dera'a is one of several cities that have been placed under military control in recent weeks.

On Sunday, the security forces relaxed a curfew, allowing local residents to move around the city from 8am until 5pm daily, a local activist told Amnesty International.

On Monday, Dera'a residents apparently informed the security forces after accidentally discovering bodies in an open field behind a graveyard in the city. They were reportedly buried in a hole in the ground that had been covered with dirt and straw.

Eyewitnesses reported that members of the security forces were present while attempts were made to identify the bodies.

The circumstances in which they died are unclear, but one local activist told Amnesty International the bodies are believed to be those of people who were shot dead by Syrian security forces while they were attempting to escape from the city.

“If these people were unarmed and shot by security forces while fleeing, the killings would amount to

extrajudicial executions,” said Malcolm Smart.

“The Syrian authorities should invite in UN human rights experts to carry out or assist with direct investigations into the hundreds of killings and other serious human rights violations that have occurred in recent weeks.”

The Syrian government has denied the existence of a mass grave near Dera’a. Syrian authorities have repeatedly claimed that recent protests have been orchestrated by “armed terrorist groups” attempting to overthrow the government.

Amnesty International has recently called on the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court as a nationwide crackdown on pro-reform protests has continued.