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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR INQUIRY INTO REPORTED MASSACRES

BY SYRIAN MILITARY AND SYRIAN-BACKED FORCES IN LEBANON

Amnesty International said today (Thursday 12 March) it had called on the Syrian Government to investigate reports of revenge massacres of unarmed civilians - including women and children - by Syrian troops and militias supported by them in two Lebanese cities in the past three months.

The worldwide human rights organization says it has received reports of more than 200 killings in two incidents in the northern city of Tripoli and the capital, Beirut. Several hundred other people are reported to be missing after being taken away by Syrian troops, it says.

It adds that it is still investigating the allegations but that the available evidence suggests they are substantially true.

The first killings took place over 36 hours in Tripoli in December 1986 and followed the killing of 15 Syrian soldiers. The Syrians blamed elements within the Sunni Muslim Islamic Unification Movement and their troops immediately sealed off the Sunni district of al-Tabbaneh in west Tripoli.

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Amnesty International is an independent worldwide movement working impartially for the release of all prisoners of conscience, fair and prompt trials for political prisoners and an end to torture and executions. It is funded by donations from its members and supporters throughout the world. It has formal relations with the United Nations, Unesco, the Council of Europe, the Organization of African Unity and the Organization of American States.

At dawn on 20 December Syrian regular troops and Special Unit commandos entered the district with militias from the Arab Democratic Party and al-Muqawama al-Tarabulsiyya (Tripoli Resistance)

Amnesty International says that although some people died in ensuing armed clashes between these forces and the Islamic Unification Movement, there is evidence that many of the victims were unarmed civilians deliberately killed by the Syrian forces and their allies.

Eye-witnesses, victims' relatives, hospital and rescue workers and others gave the following account of events, Amnesty International says:

Syrian troops and commandos used machine-guns, rocket-propelled grenades and tanks during house-to-house searches throughout the district. Unarmed civilians were dragged from houses and executed outside. Women and children were among those found dead in the streets. Others died when two residential buildings were dynamited.

A number of people seized in al-Tabbaneh were taken to the Alawite district of Ba'al Muhsin in northeast Tripoli and summarily executed - over 40 bodies were later buried in the Alawite cemetery. Dozens of other bodies were buried in mass graves in al-Tabbaneh, including one at al-Ghuraba' cemetery.

Other bodies were taken to hospital morgues and more than 100 wrapped in plastic sheeting were left outside the Islamic Hospital waiting to be identified. Bodies were also found on the city's refuse dump.

Amnesty International says it is still trying to discover just how many people had been killed but reports have given consistent estimates of over 200 dead.

In addition to those killed, several hundred people seized in Tripoli and surrounding districts are reported to be still missing.

On 4 March Amnesty International referred to the Tripoli killings in a statement to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. A Syrian delegate there replied that the organization's report was not accurate and that "attacks by certain militias necessitate self-defence by Syrian troops."

Amnesty International has written to President Hafez al-Assad calling for a full investigation into these reports and for the findings to be published.

It has also called for an investigation into reports of the deliberate killing of 23 Hizbollah (Party of God) supporters by Syrian troops in Beirut on 25 February - they are said to have been lined up against a wall and shot

Amnesty International says it also wants to know what happened to dozens of people seized by the Syrian military in Beirut and hundreds of detainees reportedly handed into Syrian military custody by the Arafat movement in late February - their fate and whereabouts are still unknown.

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