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Syrian President misses opportunity as emergency powers remain

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has missed a crucial opportunity to lift the country's repressive state of emergency in a key speech today amid ongoing protests, Amnesty International has said.

“By pinning the blame for ongoing unrest on a foreign ‘conspiracy’, President al-Assad is snubbing the many Syrians who are bravely calling for reform,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“It is also a dangerous diversion. He should be addressing the real problem – which is that his security forces have been firing live ammunition on protesters, killing dozens over the last month.”

The Syrian President’s speech today was widely expected to contain plans for the lifting of the country’s 50-year state of emergency.

The President instead said that laws relating to the state of emergency, political parties and other issues were awaiting public debate before being referred to “the relevant institutions”.

He also said that Syria was the victim of a foreign “conspiracy” to destabilize the country.

“Although President al-Assad did acknowledge the need for reform, his failure to address head-on the lifting of the state of emergency smacks of procrastination,” said Philip Luther. “He could declare this tomorrow if he wanted.”

“He should have immediately ordered his security forces to stop using unwarranted force and announced steps towards implementing key human rights reforms.”

“We are disturbed by reports that security forces could already be shooting on demonstrators in Latakia who have been protesting against his speech.”