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Syrian military assault against protesters must end

The Syrian government's brutal reaction to its people's demand for change has reached a new and outrageous low, Amnesty International said today, as army tanks continued to shell residential areas in the southern city of Dera'a.

After the Syrian army deployed in Dera'a early on Monday, tanks were used to shell civilian buildings, sources told Amnesty International.

"By resorting to the use of artillery against its own people today, the Syrian government has shown its determination to crush the peaceful protests at virtually any cost, whatever the price in Syrians' lives," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

"President Bashar al-Assad must call a stop to this now. He must pull back his army from Dera'a immediately and ensure that basic services to the city are restored. Humanitarian assistance must be allowed to reach the victims of this latest totally unacceptable onslaught."

All water and electricity services have been cut off to the town, which has been at the centre of protests that have swept the country since mid-March and was where the first protesters were killed by security forces.

Amnesty International has received the names of 23 people who are reported to have died in today's attack on Dera'a by the Syrian army, but the total number of dead is feared to be much higher. Many of the dead are said to have been killed by shelling.

Government snipers are also reported to have been deployed and to have targeted those trying to assist wounded people lying in the streets, according to Amnesty International's sources.

Some dead bodies were left lying in the streets near the 'Omari mosque and elsewhere as people were prevented from collecting them.

The army was also believed to be using similar heavy-handed tactics in the Damascus suburb of al-Muadamiya and there were media reports of further killings of protesters in Douma.

Amnesty International believes that at least 393 people have been killed by Syrian security forces since protests began five weeks ago.

"This is a government that seems to be running scared of its own people and their demands for political and other reform," said Malcolm Smart.

"The concessions offered by President al-Assad were too little, too late for the protesters, and now the government seems intent on reminding them of its true, repressive nature, in the hope that this will force them into submission. Yet this new brutality may simply serve to redouble the protesters' determination to

stand up and demand their rights."