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Syria imposes death penalty for arming “terrorists” as death toll soars

A new law introduced this week imposing the death penalty on anyone arming “terrorists” is only likely to worsen the bloodshed in Syria, Amnesty International warned today as the number of people killed this week soared.

In one of the deadliest weeks since pro-reform protests began, some 170 people – including around 70 army defectors – were reported to have been killed when government forces attacked the village of Kafr Awaid in the north-western province of Idlib. Dozens of Syrian military personnel are also reported to have been killed.

The official SANA news agency said on Tuesday that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had signed into effect a law providing for “the death penalty for anyone providing weapons or helping to provide weapons intended for the carrying out of terrorist acts”.

“The law could have serious consequences as the Syrian authorities claim that anti-government protests are the work of ‘armed terrorists’,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s interim Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The Syrian authorities must immediately repeal this law, which represents yet another brutal tool in their arsenal of repression,” he added.

An eyewitness speaking to Amnesty International described seeing the bodies of what he estimated to be around 100 residents following shelling in the western part of Kafr Awaid on Tuesday. He said they had fled their homes out of fear of arrest in their homes.

It is believed that some of those killed had previously been detained. Video footage obtained by Amnesty International and believed to be of the bodies of those killed shows some of them with their hands bound.

“Forty of those killed were fellow activists and close friends of mine,” the man told Amnesty International.

“The sight of those dead bodies was unimaginable. I ask myself why they died and I didn’t. The raids continue in Idlib today and we are begging for help,” he said.

Around 40 of the army defectors, the eyewitness said, had been hiding from security forces in a farm in the village and were gunned down on the spot. Their bodies were removed by security forces.

Thousands of other people have been arrested since pro-reform protests began in Syria in mid-March, with many held incommunicado at unknown locations in which torture and other ill-treatment are reported to be rife. Amnesty International has received the names of over 200 individuals who are

reported to have died in custody in Syria since April.

In a sign of growing international opposition to the bloodshed in Syria, the UN General Assembly voted on Monday overwhelmingly to condemn human rights violations by President Bashar al-Assad's government and called for an immediate end to violence.

Meanwhile, consultations are expected to resume today on a new draft resolution on Syria before the UN Security Council.

Since April this year, Amnesty International has called for the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, and to impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Syria and an assets freeze on President Bashar al-Assad and others involved in ordering or perpetrating serious human rights abuses.