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Syria death toll climbs as protests spread

At least 55 people are believed to have been killed during a week of unrest in and around the Syrian town of Dera'a, Amnesty International said today as protests spread across the country.

Security forces again opened fire on protesters in al-Sanamayn and carried out arrests in Damascus, according to reports on Friday, a day after the authorities pledged to investigate the violence.

"The excessive force apparently again being used by security forces is the latest example of the Syrian authorities' appalling and brutal response to recent dissent, and make their pledge to investigate the violence sound rather hollow " said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy director for Middle East and North Africa.

"If the words we heard from the Syrian government yesterday are to mean anything, they must immediately issue clear orders to restrain the security forces to prevent further loss of life."

The names of 55 people who were killed in the Dera'a area before Friday's protests have been passed to Amnesty International by credible organizations and contacts.

Media reports said that as many as 20 people had died today in protests in different parts of the country.

The circumstances of most of the deaths remain unclear. The first occurred during peaceful protests last Friday, 18 March, and several others followed over the next two days. Many more took place during the early hours of Wednesday 23 March when security forces attacked a sit-in at the town's 'Omari mosque.

Amnesty International also expressed scepticism over the authorities' pledge on Thursday to carry out reforms, including "studying" the country's long-standing emergency law.

"The government has made similar statements before, yet the repressive state of emergency has endured with little tolerance for dissenting views for nearly half a century," said Philip Luther.

"The Syrian authorities must lift the state of emergency as soon as possible."

According to Syrian human rights organizations, there are indications that almost all of those who had been arrested in and around Dera'a since 18 March were released.

Amnesty International was able to speak to one of those released. He said he had been detained in a military security office in Dera'a since 22 March and confirmed that he and others held in the same place in connection with the protests had been released by last night.

While several journalists and civil society activists recently arrested elsewhere in Syria were also released in the last 24 hours, Amnesty International is as yet unable to verify the release of all the scores of individuals detained during recent protests in Syria calling for reform.