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Reuters

Eleven killed as Syrian funeral becomes protest

By Khaled Yacoub Oweis

May 21, 2011

AMMAN (Reuters) – Syrian security forces shot dead 11 mourners in the central city of Homs on Saturday at a mass funeral for people killed in the latest crackdown on protests against President Bashar al-Assad, a rights campaigner said.

Human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouna said she had the names of at least 11 people killed when the funeral at Nasr cemetery for 10 pro-democracy demonstrators killed by security forces in Homs on Friday came under fire.

A witness who was at the funeral and spoke to Reuters by telephone said the mourners shouted "overthrow the regime" and that they came under fire as they were leaving the cemetery eight kilometres (five miles) north of the center of Homs.

"The shooting was in cold blood. People were streaming peacefully out of the cemetery," he said.

Tens of mourners were wounded in the attack that occurred at around 1200 GMT, he said, adding that he saw five people with gunshot wounds in their legs and arms being taken to hospital.

Syria has barred most international media since the protests broke out two months ago, making it impossible to verify independently accounts from activists and officials.

Another resident of Homs said heavy machinegun fire was heard at night from the Bab Amro area, where tanks deployed earlier this month to crush growing demonstrations against Assad's autocratic rule.

Security forces killed another protester, named Ziad al-Qadi, when they fired live rounds at a demonstration in the Damascus suburb of Saqba, a witness said by telephone from the suburb of 40,000.

"A large demonstration calling for the overthrow of the regime had been going on since the afternoon. It felt like the whole of Saqba took to the streets. Security forces entered in the evening and started firing," said the witness.

The latest violence came as the Syrian National Organization for Human Rights said security forces had killed at least 44 civilians on Friday in attacks on pro-democracy demonstrations across Syria.

Prominent rights campaigner Ammar Qurabi, who heads of the organization, said more than half were killed in the northwest province of Idlib, where tanks deployed on Friday to crush large demonstrations against Assad's rule.

The protests broke out in defiance of a military crackdown that another rights group says has killed more than 800 civilians in the past nine weeks.

Assad has largely dismissed the protests as serving a foreign-backed conspiracy to sow sectarian strife.

Syrian authorities blame most of the violence on armed groups, backed by Islamists and outside powers, who they say have killed more than 120 soldiers and police. They have recently suggested they believe the protests have peaked.

Syria said on Saturday armed groups killed 17 people on Friday in the provinces of Idlib and Homs to the south.

The state news agency said the civilians, police and security forces were killed after armed groups exploited the commitment of police forces to instructions by the Interior Ministry "not to shoot, to preserve the lives of civilians."

It said saboteurs burned public buildings and police stations in Idlib, injuring eight policemen.

U.S. CRITICISM

The unrest has posed the gravest challenge to Assad's rule. In response, he has lifted a 48-year state of emergency and granted citizenship to stateless Kurds, but also sent tanks to several cities to suppress the protests.

Friday's violence came a day after the United States, which had at first muted its criticism Assad's handling of the unrest, told him to lead reform or step aside.

"The president can still try to redeem himself by doing what a few leaders in Eastern Europe did, which is leading immediate transformation to a democracy and running himself in a fair elections if he wants," opposition figure Walid al-Bunni said.

"With all the blood the regime is spilling the protests have been growing and expanding in geographical scope ... The Syrians have been humiliated and they will no longer shut up," he added.

The main weekly Muslim prayers on Fridays are a rallying point for protesters because they offer the only opportunity for large gatherings, and have seen the worst death tolls.

Activists said protests broke out on Friday in the Damascus suburbs, Baniyas and Latakia on the Mediterranean, the oil producing region of Deir al-Zor, Qamishli in the east and the southern Hauran Plain.

Rights lawyer Zaitouna said on Friday at least 12 civilians were killed in Maaret al-Numan, in Idlib province, after tanks entered the town to disperse protesters. She said 11 were killed in the central city of Homs, while seven died in Deraa, Latakia, the Damascus suburbs and Hama.

Rights campaigners said Idlib, a relatively prosperous agricultural province, took the brunt of the crackdown on Friday, during which hundreds of Syrians were arrested.

They said those killed included at least five protesters shot by security forces while they were marching from the town of Ariha to join other protests in Idlib.

"They took their dead and went back to Ariha and burned security and Baath Party headquarters and a Syriatel office," said one rights campaigner in the area.

Syriatel, Syria's largest mobile phone operator, belongs to Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, who has expanded his control on various sectors of the economy since Assad succeeded his late father 11 years ago.