

## **Syria Forces Hold Hundreds In Latakia Sports Stadium**

**Bernama**

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**By Khaled Yacoub Oweis**

AMMAN, Aug 18 (Reuters) - Syrian troops raided houses in a Sunni district of the besieged port of Latakia on Wednesday, residents said, arresting hundreds of people and taking them to a stadium after a four-day tank assault to crush protests against President Bashar al-Assad.

Assad forces at the weekend attacked al-Raml, a shore area named after a Palestinian refugee camp built in the 1950s, as part of a campaign to crush a five-month uprising, which has intensified against major urban centres of protest since the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan on Aug. 1.

Latakia is of particular significance to Assad, from Syria's minority Alawite community. The 45-year-old president, a self-declared champion of the Palestinian cause, comes from a village to the southeast, where his father is buried. The Assad family, along with friends, control the city's port and its finances.

"Shelling and the sound of tank machineguns subsided today. They are bussing hundreds to the Sports City from al-Raml. People who are picked up randomly from elsewhere in Latakia are also being take there," said a resident, referring to a complex that was venue for the Mediterranean Games in the 1980s.

"Tanks are continuing to deploy, they are now in the main Thawra (revolution) street," said the resident, a university student who did not want to be identified.

Chris Gunness, spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, said three refugees had been killed at the camp since the assault, with "many injuries and damage to property."

"UNRWA's information indicates that most of the inhabitants have indeed left and that there are only five to 10 vulnerable families remaining, unable to physically leave," Gunness said.

He added that around 150 families had fled the district to the city of Homs, in central Syria, where anti-Assad protests have also been put down.

A diplomat in the Syrian capital said: "The reports about detention conditions and torture are increasingly alarming. Assad is backing himself more into a corner by using more and more violence and turning more Syrians against him."

Syria has expelled most independent media since the unrest began, making it difficult to verify reports from the country.

Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan compared the situation in Syria with that in Libya, where rebels have been fighting forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi since February.

"We have done our best on Libya, but haven't been able to generate any results. So it's an international issue now. Gaddafi could not meet our expectations, and the outcome was obvious," Erdogan told reporters.

"Now the same situation is going on in Syria. I've sent my foreign minister, and personally

got in touch many times, the last of them three days ago on the phone. In spite of all this, civilians are still getting killed."

Assad, however issued a hardline message on Wednesday, telling ruling Baath Party apparatchiks that "reform in Syria springs from conviction... and not in response to any outside pressures.

"Syria is being targeted... by different means, to weaken its role in the resistance (to Israel) and in defending legitimate Arab rights," Assad was quoted as saying by the official state news agency.

Citing witnesses in Latakia, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a force of around 700 security personnel fanned across the al-Raml district, with houses demolished there "on the pretext they lacked construction permits".

"The Sports City's stadiums are serving to house refugees and prevent them from fleeing outside Latakia, and as we have seen in other cities that were assaulted, as a detention centre," Observatory Director Rami Abdelrahman told Reuters.

A Palestinian official described the military offensive in Latakia as "a crime against humanity", adding to Arab and international outrage at Assad's crackdown on popular demonstrations calling for an end to his autocratic rule.

#### CHORUS OF CONDEMNATION

Assad had sought to improve his image internationally in recent years by emphasising economic reforms, engaging in peace talks with Israel and accepting Western overtures to lessen his isolation in return for cooperating on Lebanon and Iraq.

But he has also strengthened ties with Iran's clerical rulers and the militant Lebanese Shi'ite guerrilla group Hezbollah, his two remaining solid allies, to the disquiet of Syria's Sunni Muslim population.

Some Palestinians in Syria have even joined the demonstrations, although Assad hosts Hamas' exiled leaders and other Palestinian militant groups.

Assad's crackdown has caused a chorus of international condemnation. "The bloodshed has to stop, first and foremost," Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said. "If the operations continue in Syria and the operations become a regional problem Turkey can naturally not remain indifferent."

The Syrian Revolution Coordinating Union, an activists' group, said Assad's forces killed at least two people in Latakia on Wednesday, including a woman called Badriya al-Najjar and a 28-year-old Palestinian refugee, bringing the death toll to 38 in five days.

The activists' group said the death toll was probably higher, but roadblocks and disrupted communications made it hard to gather information.

Assad, who inherited power in 2000 from his father, clearly believes overwhelming force will extinguish calls for the dismantling of the police state and the Assad clan's power monopoly, free elections and an end to corruption.

For Assad to enact the reforms he has been promising since he came to power, he would

have to purge his strongest allies and end the control of the security apparatus over the state. Since they are the pillars of his power, that appears unlikely.

Assad, who says the protests are largely a foreign conspiracy to divide Syria, has been told by the United States, European Union and Turkey to halt the bloodshed but said last week his army would "not relent in pursuing terrorist groups".

A security official cited by Syria's official state news agency said security forces backed by an army unit had completed a mission in Latakia's al-Raml neighbourhood against "armed terrorist groups who have terrorised the citizens".

Unlike most of the rest of Syria, which is predominately Sunni, Latakia has a big Alawite population, encouraged to move there by offers from the ruling minority family of cheap land and jobs in the security apparatus and public sector. PALESTINIANS FLEE CAMP

A senior Palestinian official condemned the Latakia violence, which the United Nations said had forced between 5,000 and 10,000 Palestinians to flee the al-Raml refugee camp.

"The shelling is taking place using gunships and tanks on houses built from tin, on people who have no place to run to or even a shelter to hide in," Yasser Abed Rabbo, the West Bank-based PLO secretary general, told Reuters on Tuesday.

"This is a crime against humanity."

The United Nations agency which cares for Palestinian refugees said on Monday four had been killed and 17 wounded.

Apart from Deir al-Zor and Latakia, Syrian forces have already stormed Hama, scene of a 1982 massacre by the military under Assad's father, the southern city of Deraa and several northwestern towns in a province bordering Turkey.

Syrian authorities blame others for the violence, saying terrorist groups" have killed 500 soldiers and police. Rights organisations say at least 1,700 civilians have been killed by security forces since protests erupted in March.

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