

**UN: Assad says crackdown ceased**  
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AMMAN, Aug 18 — Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has told UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that military and police operations against pro-democracy protesters have stopped, the United Nations said.

The announcement came as the Obama administration was expected to call on Assad to step down, sources speaking on condition of anonymity told Reuters. It could come as soon as today, with the European Union expected to follow suit, the sources said.

In a phone call with the Syrian leader yesterday, Ban "expressed alarm at the latest reports of continued widespread violations of human rights and excessive use of force by Syrian security forces against civilians across Syria, including in the Al Ramel district of Latakia, home to several thousands of Palestinian refugees," the UN said in a statement released late yesterday.

"The Secretary-General emphasised that all military operations and mass arrests must cease immediately. President Assad said that the military and police operations had stopped," the statement added.

The government crackdown is estimated to have killed at least 2,000 civilians since the protests began five months ago.

The UN human rights chief also is expected to suggest that the UN Security Council refer Syria's crackdown on pro-democracy protesters to the International Criminal Court, envoys said.

The developments were part of a flurry of diplomatic manoeuvres ramping up the pressure on Assad to stop his military and police crackdown on protesters against his rule.

Residents of the besieged port city of Latakia said yesterday that Syrian forces raided houses in a Sunni district, arresting hundreds of people and taking them to a stadium after a four-day tank assault to crush protests.

Assad's forces attacked al-Raml, a seafront area named after a Palestinian refugee camp built in the 1950s, on the weekend as part of a fierce campaign to crush a five-month-old uprising.

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, controls the city's port and its finances.

Some Palestinians have joined in demonstrations against Assad, even though Syria hosts exiled leaders of the Islamist Palestinian Hamas movement and other Palestinian groups.

"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 taken there," a resident said.

"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.

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

Chris Gunness, spokesman for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, said three refugees had been killed at the camp. Many had been wounded in the assault.

"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 said about 150 families had fled to the city of Homs, in central Syria, where anti-Assad unrest has also been put down.

Syrian forces killed nine people in Homs yesterday, activists said, including two protesters shot dead by pro-Assad militiamen, known as shabbiha, in front of the Fatima mosque in the district of al-Waar after Ramadan prayers.

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay will address the 15-nation UN Security Council in a closed-door session on Syria on Thursday, along with UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos.

"OHCHR (Pillay's office) have indicated that their Syria report will find evidence that Syria has committed grave violations of international human rights law in its actions dealing with protesters over the past five months," a diplomat told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

Pillay also will say a "thorough appropriate international investigation is needed," the envoy said about the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, or OHCHR, adding she was "likely to suggest that the ICC would be appropriate."

The ICC is a permanent war-crimes court based in The Hague.

The council has referred only two cases to the ICC — the situation in Sudan's conflict-torn Darfur region and, earlier this year, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's crackdown against anti-government demonstrators.

Council diplomats say veto powers Russia and China would be reluctant to vote for a referral of Syria's case to the ICC at the current time.

Local activists in Syria said an unknown number of refugees from Latakia had fled to the northwestern border with Turkey, which had received more than 10,000 refugees from earlier assaults by Assad's forces on Idlib province to the north of Latakia.

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."

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."

Assad, however, issued a hardline message, telling ruling Baath Party officials: "Reform in Syria springs from conviction... and not in response to any outside pressures.

The state news agency quoted him as saying Syria was being targeted "to weaken its role in the resistance (to Israel) and in defending legitimate Arab rights." — Reuters

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