

## **Syrian protesters chant 'Bye Gaddafi, Bashar next'**

**Reuters**

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AMMAN, Aug 26 — Syrian protesters chanted "Bye, bye Gaddafi, Bashar your turn is coming" overnight, but President Bashar al-Assad showed few signs of cracking after months of demonstrations and his forces raided an eastern tribal region again yesterday.

The new chant, inspired by the apparent collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's rule in Libya, was filmed by residents in the Damascus suburb of Duma after prayers on Wednesday.

But in eastern Syria, tanks and armoured vehicles entered Shuhail, a town southeast of the provincial capital of Deir al-Zor, where daily protests have taken place against Assad's rule since the start of the fasting month of Ramadan, they said.

"Initial reports by residents describe tens of tanks firing randomly as they stormed the town at dawn. Shuhail has been very active in protests and the regime is using overwhelming force to frighten the people," a local activist said.

Since Ramadan began on August 1, tanks have entered the cities of Hama, scene of a 1982 massacre by the military, Deir al-Zor and Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, trying to crush dissent after months of street protests.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an activist group based in Britain, said 11 civilians had been killed across Syria on Wednesday, including seven in the province of Homs.

State news agency SANA said "armed terrorist groups" killed eight soldiers when they ambushed two military vehicles near the towns of Rastan and Telbiseh.

Syria has expelled most independent journalists, making it difficult to verify accounts on the ground from authorities and activists.

Prominent cartoonist and Assad critic Ali Ferzat was beaten up in Damascus by a group of armed men and then dumped in the street, an opposition activist group said. SOHR said Ferzat was taken to hospital with bruises to his face and hands.

Ferzat, whose cartoons often mock repression and injustice in the Arab world, has criticised Assad's repression of protests. He told Al Arabiya television three weeks ago: "For the first time there is a genuine and free revolution in Syria."

EU oil sanctions possible

The defeat of Gaddafi may encourage Western nations to step up moves against Assad. He has pursued parallel policies of strengthening ties with Iran and Shi'ite Lebanese guerrilla group Hezbollah while seeking peace talks with Israel and accepting European and US overtures that were key in rehabilitating him on the international stage.

European Union diplomats said on Wednesday the bloc's governments were likely to impose an embargo on imports of Syrian oil by the end of next week, although new sanctions may

be less stringent than those imposed by Washington.

Syria exports over a third of its 385,000 barrels of daily crude oil output to Europe, mainly the Netherlands, Italy, France and Spain.

A disruption would cut off a major source of foreign currency that helps to finance the security apparatus, and restrict funds at Assad's disposal to reward loyalists and continue a crackdown in which the United Nations says 2,200 people have been killed.

In a sign the prospect of sanctions was already having an effect, traders said French oil major Total had not lifted a cargo of naphtha from Syria's Baniyas refinery which it had bought in a tender.

Arab League ministers will meet in Cairo tomorrow to discuss Syria. An official said they would discuss imposing a time frame for Assad to enact reforms.

But they would also call on "all parties to end the conflict," the official said, in an apparent acceptance of Syria's argument it faces armed opponents.

In an interview with state television this week, Assad said the unrest "has shifted towards armed acts." Authorities blame the violence on "armed terrorist groups," who they say have killed an unspecified number of civilians and 500 soldiers and police.

"No threat"

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said it was up to the Syrian authorities and people to find a way out of the unrest.

"The hope of the West is to attack Syria they way they intervned in Libya but the people and the government in Syria should sit down together and reach an understanding on reforms," he told al-Manar television channel.

"The people should have the right to elections, freedom and justice (so) they should set the timeline about it (together)."

Human Rights Watch said in a new report the vast majority of civilian deaths documented by Syrian human rights groups "have occurred in circumstances in which there was no threat to Syrian forces."

"President al-Assad has said he is pursuing a battle against 'terrorist groups' and 'armed gangs,' and Syrian authorities have claimed that they have 'exercised maximum restraint while trying to control the situation'. Neither claim is true," the report said.

It said Syrian forces had killed at least 49 people since Assad told UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on August 17 military and police operations had stopped, adding that on August 22 in Homs, Syrian forces "fired on a crowd of peaceful protesters shortly after a UN humanitarian assessment team left the area, killing four."

The official state news agency quoted Assad as telling clerics during a Ramadan "iftar" meal on Wednesday the West was pressuring Syria "to sell out, which will not happen because the Syrian people have chosen to have an independent will." — Reuters

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