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New Grievances Broaden Syria's Protest Movement

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

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Syria's growing protest movement broadened on Wednesday as Aleppo, one of Syria's largest cities, had its first demonstrations against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, and a group of women from the coastal village of Bayda, where hundreds were detained this week, marched to demand the release of their husbands and sons.

At least 200 students protested at the University of Aleppo, witnesses and human rights advocates said, until security forces broke up the demonstration, hauling away dozens of students.

A literature student, who asked not to be named because of the risk to his safety, said that he was outside the main literature faculty building when a student near the entrance began shouting pro-democracy slogans.

“It started with one person,” the student said. “He was chanting ‘Peaceful! Peaceful! Freedom! Freedom!’ Security didn’t show up directly. It took them almost 10 minutes.”

Within those 10 minutes, the student said, about 200 other students had joined in, chanting slogans calling for freedom and expressing support for protesters in the cities of Baniyas, where

protests were violently suppressed this week, and Dara'a, where the protest movement began in mid-March after the arrest of a group of local schoolboys for writing antigovernment graffiti.

An Arabic literature student who also witnessed Wednesday's demonstration said that the students were shouting "God, Syria, freedom, and that's enough!" and "We sacrifice our souls and our blood for Dara'a and Baniyas!"

The student said that members of the University of Aleppo's student union, which is run by Syria's ruling Baath Party, quickly confronted the protesting students, "shouting at them and labeling them agents and spies for America and Israel."

Analysts say that the fact that protests have spread to the northern city of Aleppo is a critical step for Syria's rapidly maturing protest movement. Aleppo, a major manufacturing center that lies less than 40 miles from Syria's border with Turkey, has been a traditional area of resistance to the Assad government.

The central city of Hama was the focus of a 1982 battle between Hafez al-Assad, then the president, and the Muslim Brotherhood during which at least 10,000 residents were massacred, but Aleppo residents also still have painful memories of the crackdowns of that era, said Andrew Tabler, a Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Hafez al-Assad was succeeded by his son, Bashar, as president of Syria in 2000.

"In 1982, people were just rounded up and they disappeared, and this really drove up people's anxiety levels," Mr. Tabler said in a telephone interview. Aleppo residents, he said, have been closely watching the protests elsewhere in Syria, waiting for them to develop momentum before they join in.

"Aleppo and Hama have been holding off, waiting to place their chips, because they have borne the brunt before," he said. "But Aleppo, like Hama, is one of the traditional areas of resistance."

"Now you have a whole new group of Sunnis up and stomping," Mr. Tabler said. "The fact that Aleppo is mobilized hugely increases the scale of the problem that the Assad regime has on its hands. There are also large Kurdish populations and other minorities in Aleppo — it's a real tinderbox."

According to Razan Zeitouneh, a human rights advocate based in Damascus, Syria's capital, who has been in frequent touch with demonstrators in Syria's coastal region, hundreds of women

from Bayda, a small coastal farming community where large numbers of local men were detained Tuesday, marched along the main highway on Wednesday.

YouTube postings said to be of the protest showed women, most wearing head scarves, some wearing full veils and many with children, pumping their fists and calling for the release of their relatives.

A political activist from Baniyas, which is about six miles north of Bayda, called the protest “the first significant women’s demonstration in the country and an important sign of the expansion of the uprising.”

“The town’s women — whose brothers, fathers and husbands were arrested — went to the road that links Baniyas and Tartous,” the activist said. “They called on President Bashar al-Assad to release their men.”

“Some teenage girls were shouting, ‘We want our fathers back home now!’ ” the activist said.