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Al Jazeera

Syria's 'bloodiest day' leaves scores dead

At least 70 people reportedly killed over past 24 hours as security forces clash with defectors.

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At least 70 people have been killed in violence across Syria over the past 24 hours in one of the bloodiest days since an anti-government uprising began eight months ago, activists reported.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said on Tuesday that 27 civilians were shot dead by security forces while 34 soldiers and 12 suspected army deserters were killed in clashes.

Most of the victims were killed in the southern flashpoint province of Deraa, the observatory said in a statement.

"Twenty-three people were shot dead by security forces posted along the road between the towns of Kherbet Ghazale and Hirak," the statement said.

At least four other civilians were killed by security force fire in the city of Homs, a protest hub in central Syria, the rights group said.

Overcoming the crisis

The new death figures come as a delegation from the main Syrian opposition bloc visited Moscow for talks with Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, whose country has so far refused to back punitive measures against the Damascus government.

"We want the crisis to be overcome," Burhan Ghalioun, the Paris-based head of the Syrian National Council who led the delegation to Russia, was quoted as saying by the ITAR-Tass news agency.

"And we would like this without military interference from the outside," he said ahead of his talks with Lavrov.

Russia has repeatedly opposed Western efforts to impose sanctions against its traditional Middle Eastern ally over its lethal crackdown on protests, insisting on the need for dialogue.

The latest developments come ahead of an Arab League meeting in Cairo on Wednesday where the bloc could suspend Syria's membership over the government's crackdown on protests.

Walid al-Muallem, Syria's foreign minister condemned the League's announcement saying that "the suspension of the Arab League membership is illegal".

In a press conference in Damascus on Monday, he also criticised the Cairo-based regional bloc's relations with the United States, calling the US an "unofficial member" of the league.

'Step down'

Meanwhile, the Jordan's King Abdullah called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down in the interest of the Syrian people.

"I believe, if I were in his shoes, I would step down," Abdullah said on Monday. "I would step down and make sure whoever comes behind me has the ability to change the status quo that we're seeing."

In a separate development, EU ministers agreed to stop Syria accessing funds from the European Investment Bank (EIB).

They also blacklisted a further 18 Syrians, mostly members of the military, bringing to 74 the members of Assad's inner circle hit in past months by an EU assets freeze and travel ban.

EU foreign ministers said in a statement the continuing bloodshed called for international action, and "urges all members of the Security Council to assume their responsibilities".

The UN says 3,500 people have been killed in Assad's crackdown on the protests and human rights groups say security forces have carried out killings and torture which constitute crimes against humanity.

Authorities blame armed groups for the violence, saying at least 1,100 soldiers and police have been killed since the uprising broke out in March.