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Arab Nations Condemn Syria As Crackdown Mounts (AP)

By Elizabeth A. Kennedy
[Associated Press](#), August 9, 2011

BEIRUT (AP) — Arab nations joined the international chorus of condemnation against President Bashar Assad's regime Monday, with Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia pulling out their ambassadors as a besieged Syrian city came under fresh artillery fire.

The renewed violence in the eastern city of Deir el-Zour comes a day after at least 42 people were killed there in an intensifying government crackdown on protesters.

"We heard very loud explosions, and now there's intermittent gunfire," an activist in the city said, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. He said people were too terrified to take the wounded to government hospitals, instead treating them at home or in makeshift hospitals.

The international community has sharply condemned the government crackdown, imposing sanctions and demanding an immediate end to the attacks. France and Germany renewed their condemnation Monday.

But in a sign of growing outrage, Syria's Arab neighbors joined the mounting criticism, voicing their concerns about a crackdown that intensified on the eve of

the holy month of Ramadan — a time of introspection and piety characterized by a dawn-to-dusk fast.

Late Sunday, Saudi Arabia's king — whose country does not tolerate dissent and lent its military troops to repress anti-government protests in neighboring Bahrain — said he was recalling his ambassador in Damascus for consultations, and demanded "an end to the killing machine and bloodshed."

"Any sane Arab, Muslim or anyone else knows that this has nothing to do with religion, or ethics or morals; spilling the blood of the innocent for any reasons or pretext leads to no path to ... hope," King Abdullah said in a statement.

Bahrain, a U.S. ally that hosts the Navy's 5th Fleet, recalled its ambassador to Syria "for consultation," Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa announced on his official Twitter feed Monday. Bahraini officials couldn't immediately be reached for further comment.

Bahrain has faced the Gulf's largest uprisings since the start of the Arab Spring. Its larger Gulf neighbors, led by Saudi Arabia, sent in additional security forces to help Bahraini authorities put down widespread street protests under special emergency powers earlier this year.

Kuwait also recalled its ambassador to Syria, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheik Mohammad Sabah al-Salem Al Sabah said in a brief statement carried by the state news agency KUNA. He said Gulf foreign ministers planned to meet soon to discuss the situation in Syria.

In Deir el-Zour, about 280 miles (450 kilometers) east of the capital Damascus, machine-gun fire and artillery blasts resumed early Monday, according to the Local Coordinating Committees, which help organize the protests and track the uprising.

Deir el-Zour is in an oil-rich but largely impoverished region of Syria known for its well-armed clans and tribes whose ties extend across eastern Syrian and into Iraq. At least 42 people were killed Sunday in a pre-dawn raid, said Abdul-Karim Rihawi, the Damascus-based chief of the Syrian Human Rights League, and Ammar Qurabi, who heads the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria.

Syrian troops also stormed Maaret al-Numan in the northern province of Idlib at dawn, activists said.

"Forces entered the city from its eastern side and they are preventing the residents from entering or leaving the city," the LCC said in a statement.

More than 300 people have died in the past week, the bloodiest in the five-month uprising against Assad's authoritarian rule.

The government crackdown on mostly peaceful, unarmed protesters demanding political reforms and an end to the Assad family's 40-year rule has left more than 1,700

dead since March, according to activists and human rights groups. Assad's regime disputes the toll and blames a foreign conspiracy for the unrest, which at times has brought hundreds of thousands of protesters into the streets.

The central city of Hama had been the focus of the crackdown for most of the week. Reporters were taken on a tour of the government-run Hama National Hospital on Sunday night and shown the remains of 16 people, some decomposing.

On Monday, Syria's state-run news agency SANA, said the army began withdrawing from Hama as life began to return to normal in the city. It said the army's operation in the city aimed to "protect civilians."

Dr. Mohammed al-Omar said most of the bodies in the hospital were members of the Syrian security forces who were killed by armed groups. He didn't elaborate on how he had gathered this information.

"There are gunshot wounds mostly on their necks, also on the chest. We now have 17 bodies in the hospital," al-Omar told reporters as an unidentified member of the security services stood closely behind him.

Condemnation of the Syrian government spread to the Internet, where the hacking group known as Anonymous claimed credit for vandalizing the Syrian military's website. The site quickly became unavailable, but screenshots circulated online showed the group's trademark headless suit and a message addressed to the Syrian people saying that "the world stands with you against the brutal regime."

Assad has shrugged off months of criticism and sanctions, blaming armed gangs for the violence while offering reform measures that have failed to placate the protesters demanding sweeping changes.

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