

SYRIA OVER BLOODSHED

EIGHT-MONTH UPRISING

Group to monitor situation and revisit decision in a meeting Wednesday

BY AVA BATRAWY
The Associated Press

CAIRO — In a surprisingly sharp move, the Arab League voted Saturday to suspend Syria over the country's bloody crackdown on an eight-month uprising and stepped up calls on the army to stop killing civilians.

The decision was a humiliating blow to a regime that prides itself as a bastion of Arab nationalism, but it was unlikely to immediately end a wave of violence that the U.N. estimates has killed more than 3,500 people since mid-March.

"Syria is a dear country for all of us and it pains us to make this decision," Qatar's Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim told reporters. "We hope there will be a brave move from Syria to stop the violence and begin a real dialogue toward real reform."

In Damascus, pro-regime demonstrators threw eggs and tomatoes at the Qatari embassy to protest the vote.

The 22-member Arab League will monitor the situation and revisit the decision in a meeting Wednesday in the Moroccan capital Rabat.

bin Jassim said, a move that appeared to give Syrian President Bashar Assad time to avert the suspension.

But Syria has been unwilling to heed previous calls to end the violence. Saturday's vote came after Damascus failed to carry out a Nov. 2 peace deal brokered by the Arab League that called on Syria to halt the attacks and pull tanks out of cities.

More than 250 Syrian civilians have been killed so far this month, including 12 on Saturday in attacks in the restive city of Homs, the Damascus suburbs and elsewhere, according to activist groups.

President Obama praised the Arab League, highlighting what he called the group's leadership in seeking to end attacks on peaceful protesters. "These significant steps expose the increasing diplomatic isolation of a regime that has systematically violated human rights and repressed peaceful protests," he said in a statement.

Arab League diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief

Related developments

Yemen: A Yemeni security official says soldiers have killed six al-Qaida-linked fighters in the southern city of Zinjibar. Months of battles have failed to fully restore the government's control over the city. It is one of several places in the south seized by Islamic militants during the spiraling unrest triggered by the uprising against President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The security official says six soldiers were wounded in Saturday's fighting.

Times news services

reporters, said that if Syria does not adhere to its demands, the organization will work to unify the disparate Syrian opposition into a coalition similar to that of Libya's National Transitional Council.

Next steps would be to recognize the opposition as the sole representative of the Syrian people in a move that would symbolically isolate Assad's regime even further.

In his statement, bin Jassim called on all factions to meet later this week to unify their message as a step toward dialogue with the Syrian government, but many within the opposition refuse to negotiate with the regime.

Still, there is little to stop Assad now from calling upon the scorched-earth tactics that have kept his family in power for more than four decades. A longtime partner, Syria grew accustomed to shrugging off the world's reproach long before the regime started shooting unarmed protesters eight months ago.

An international military intervention has been all but ruled out, given the quagmire in Libya and the lack of any strong opposition leader in Syria to rally behind.

International sanctions, some of which target Assad personally, are not authorized to brief

AMR NABIL / THE

Youssef al-Ahmad, Syria's ambassador to the Arab League emergency session on Syria during the Arab League emergency session on Syria



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Neil Sammond said the unified Arab put more pressure on the Security Council to despite objections Russia and China non and Yemen v Arab League susp with Iraq abstaini "This will help pressure on the Se act, to show Russia they are out of steg and the rest of wor said.

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