

THE BLOODBATH IN SYRIA

Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story focuses on the violent uprising in Syria against the government of President Bashar al-Assad—a government known for corruption and restriction of human rights. This story explains how this revolution has cost thousands of lives and threatens to escalate into a full-scale civil war in this Middle Eastern nation and how the international community is responding to it.

For almost a year, a wave of popular protest against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad has swept through Syria. Demonstrators in a number of cities have demanded the end of Assad's dictatorship and its replacement by an elected government that they hope will restore freedom of speech and implement long-overdue political reforms.

Inspired by similar uprisings in other Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the protestors have used social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to communicate with each other and inform the outside world about the upheaval taking place inside their country. But unlike these revolts, which eventually led to the toppling of the existing regimes, the Syrian revolution has so far been unsuccessful in ousting Assad, who grimly holds on to power, not hesitating to use military force to suppress the demonstrations with extreme violence.

Assad has attempted to downplay the seriousness of the popular uprising against his rule, claiming that it is part of an international conspiracy orchestrated by his regime's long-standing enemies, primarily the United States and Israel. He also blamed a handful of domestic malcontents, including radical Islamist groups such as the banned Muslim Brotherhood, for being behind the demonstrations. He continued to claim that his government was very popular with most Syrians and he strongly denied that his army and police had used excessive force against unarmed civilian demonstrators.

Did you know . . .

It is estimated that as many as 5 000 Syrians have been killed during the current revolt against Assad.

As of January 2012, the situation in Syria was developing into a bloody stalemate between government and rebel forces. Although the United States and the European Union imposed economic sanctions against Syria, and the Arab League dispatched observers to try to force a halt to the violence, no amount of international pressure appeared persuasive enough to break the deadlock. And because two members of the United Nations Security Council—Russia and China—are both strong allies of Assad's regime, it is very unlikely that any UN-authorized, multi-national military action will be launched against Syria (as was the case in Libya, where NATO's bombing campaign played a key role in helping rebels defeat the regime of Colonel Moammar Gadhafi in 2011).

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Video Review

Pre-viewing Question

Why do you think it is difficult for Canadians to imagine a situation where a government would use military force to kill thousands of its own people?

Further Research

For the latest information about the political situation in Syria, visit www.cbc.ca/news/.

Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. What three Arab countries witnessed successful revolutions against dictatorial leaders in 2011? What were the names of those leaders?

2. What Middle Eastern country is now the scene of a violent uprising against its government? What is the population of this country?

3. Who is the president of Syria? For how long has he held power?

4. Why is it difficult for the outside world to learn about what is taking place inside Syria?

5. What organization has sent monitors to Syria to observe and report on events there?

6. What criticisms have been made against the leader of this mission?

7. How many people are believed to have lost their lives in the uprising since it began in March 2011?

8. What is the capital city of Syria? Why is it a stronghold of support for the regime?

9. What religious group forms the majority of Syria's population?

10. What religious minority group holds important positions in the government and military?

11. Why do members of Syria's Christian minority fear persecution if the government changes?

12. What concessions has the Syrian government offered to the opposition? Why are opposition leaders skeptical of such measures?

Post-viewing Question

What actions, if any, should Canada take in response to the uprising in Syria and the government's violent suppression of it?
