

Syria: UN Team Should Insist on Protection of Protestors Human Rights Watch 23 August 2011 T

The UN humanitarian assessment mission in Syria should demand guarantees from the government that security forces will fully respect the right to peaceful assembly in areas the UN team visits, Human Rights Watch said today.

Shortly after the UN mission left the area on August 21, 2011, security forces opened fire on protesters gathered near the Clock Tower Square in Homs. (...)

“Syria has demonstrated with gunfire and bloodshed that its promise to allow the UN to conduct a humanitarian mission without hindrance is hollow,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “The UN needs to get cast-iron guarantees that this will not happen again.” (...)

Syria allowed the UN team to visit some centers of the protests and repression to assess humanitarian needs, and had promised unhindered access. Anti-government activists had expressed concern to Human Rights Watch that the authorities would only take the UN team to pro-government areas.

“We learned that the UN team was coming to our city,” a Homs-based activist told Human Rights Watch, “so we organized a protest to tell them to visit our neighborhoods and not those that the government picks.”

A UN spokesman, Farhan Haq, told reporters in New York that “a protest situation developed” in Homs during the team’s visit “and the mission was advised to leave for security reasons.” He added that, “The mission did not come under fire.”

One protester told Human Rights Watch, “After they left, the security forces opened fire on us.”

Another activist based in Rastan, a town near Homs that suffered heavy fighting during the past few weeks, expressed disappointment that the UN team would not be visiting that site.

“The UN should insist that Syrian authorities allow it unhindered and independent access to the protest areas,” Whitson said. “Otherwise the mission risks being perceived as a government-sponsored guided tour.” (...)

“Just last week, President al-Assad was telling the UN Secretary-General that policing operations had stopped, and now Syrian forces are firing on protesters practically under the

UN's nose," Whitson said. "The Security Council should need no further evidence that stronger steps need to be taken to convince Syrian authorities to change their course." (...)

Protests erupted in other parts of Homs following the shootings near the clock tower. Residents reached by Skype reported that protests took place in Bab Sba`, Bab Dreeb, and al-Meedan neighborhoods and that security forces redeployed armored vehicles around much of the city after having withdrawn them ahead of the UN visit. (...)

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