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4 shot dead as thousands join protests across Syria

Police fire on a crowd in a suburb of Damascus, killing four people, as activists organize a 'Day of Martyrs' to honor the more than 70 people killed in recent unrest.

April 01, 2011 | By Don Duncan and Garrett Therolf, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Damascus, Syria, and Cairo — Thousands of Syrians flooded the streets of several major cities Friday for a new round of antigovernment protests, defying security forces who used gunfire and tear gas to disperse them.

Four people were shot dead in Duma, a suburb of the capital, Damascus, when police fired on about 2,000 people gathered in a major square chanting "Freedom," according to a witness who withheld his name out of concern for his safety.

Activists had dubbed Friday the "Day of Martyrs" to commemorate the more than 70 people who have been killed during the unrest of recent weeks. They used Facebook, Twitter and other online social media to mobilize mass demonstrations.

The protesters, who are seeking economic relief and the end of nearly five decades of martial law, gathered in Damascus, the seaside cities of Latakia and Baniyas, and the southern city of Dara.

But President Bashar Assad, who heads one of the region's most repressive regimes, redoubled efforts to suffocate the dissent, which has persisted since his forces first fired on protesters March 18 in Dara.

In Damascus, the largest gathering was at the Rifai Mosque, where thousands of demonstrators were barricaded inside and tear-gassed by police. Leaders of the mosque reached a deal to allow everyone to go home peacefully, but police fired more tear gas as people left, witnesses said.

Elsewhere in the capital, the streets were unusually quiet and portraits of a stern-faced Assad in military fatigues and aviator glasses hung on walls and archways alongside the usual ones of him in civilian clothes.

At the square outside the historic Umayyad Mosque — site of a large antigovernment demonstration last week — more than 1,000 pro-government demonstrators chanted "God, Syria, Bashar" in front of news cameras.

"All the people would like to see some things change, but not the big things, like what the protesters want," said a 25-year-old onlooker.

On the road to Dara, security forces set up checkpoints and required travelers to sign papers pledging they would not participate in protests.

Nevertheless, thousands gathered in the restive city, chanting, "Freedom." Government forces fired warning shots, but were less aggressive than in recent days and no one was killed, witnesses said.

Dara, the epicenter of the protests, has been hit particularly hard, with a rise in commodity prices and economic suffering in a country where a third of the population earns less than \$2 a day.

A focal point of the unrest in Dara has been the arrest of teenagers who spray-painted antigovernment graffiti.

In his first public appearance since the demonstrations began, Assad went on state television Wednesday to lay out a gradual path to reform, but he declined to say when he would lift the 48-year-old emergency law that has been used to stifle opposition and justify detentions without trial.

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Special correspondent Duncan reported from Damascus and Times staff writer Therolf from Cairo. Special correspondents Alexandra Sandels in Beirut and Doha Al Zohairy in Cairo contributed to this report.

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