

Testimony of Assistant Secretary of State Michael H. Posner
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
House of Representatives
July 12, 2011 10 a.m.

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. I would like to thank you and the Members of the Commission for holding this important and timely hearing on the human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, and I appreciate this opportunity to testify.

Mr. Chairman, I ask that my full statement, and the written testimony, be made part of the record.

Mr. Chairman, as you are aware, the Government of Syria continues to carry out a pattern of gross human rights violations despite promises to stop. As Secretary Clinton said yesterday, from the U.S. perspective, President Assad “has lost legitimacy.” She said: “President Assad is not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power. Our goal is to see that the will of the Syrian people for a democratic transformation occurs.”

Let me begin with an overview of how the protest movement in Syria and the ensuing crackdown have evolved.

Large scale demonstrations started in mid-March in the southern town of Daraa, when security forces fired upon demonstrators calling for the release of children being held for weeks for writing political graffiti. That brutal act sparked the collective will of the Syrian people oppressed for decades. In response, average Syrians organized peaceful demonstrations on the streets of towns, villages, and cities throughout Syria which are now entering the fourth month.

President Assad and his regime responded to the Syrian people's peaceful protests with gunfire, mass arrests, torture and abuse. Human rights organizations report that over 1,300 -- and as many as 1,600 -- Syrians have been killed, thousands jailed and the Syrian people are held hostage to a widening crackdown by security forces.

But the Syrian people have lost their fear. They are not backing down in the face of continued brutality. They are continuing to take to the streets to demand freedom, respect for their basic rights, and a transition to democracy.

Syrian military and security forces have besieged communities, cut off water, internet and telephone services, conducted mass arrests, targeted emergency medical responders, and shot peaceful protestors with impunity. As the Syrian government largely barred independent media from Syria, these crimes have been reported mainly through images and videos taken by brave demonstrators and smuggled out.

Last week, President Assad sacked the governor and ordered his troops and tanks to surround the central city of Hama, where at least 10,000 Syrians and perhaps many more perished at the hands of his father, Hafez Assad, in 1982. Despite the city's tragic history, and despite provocations, the demonstrators in Hama have remained peaceful.

As you know, on July 7th and 8th Ambassador Ford visited the central city of Hama, where for six weeks demonstrators have been bravely protesting in a peaceful fashion to express their dissent. Ambassador Ford toured the city and reported seeing no protestors carrying weapons, nor damage to government buildings. There have been no attacks on government buildings, soldiers or government officials. However, the government has carried out sweeps and arrested dozens of peaceful demonstrators without judicial authority to do so and without due process. These roundups are contrary to the promises from President Assad that proper judicial procedures would be followed in dealing with the unrest.

Ambassador Ford traveled to Hama to demonstrate our solidarity with the people of the city, and our firm support for their right to assemble and express themselves peacefully. The lack of unfettered international media access in Syria has made the Ambassador's personal observations particularly important to Washington policymakers.

While the Syrian government accused Ambassador Ford of "gross interference" in internal Syrian affairs, the Ambassador was greeted with flowers and cheers by city residents.

Yesterday, a mob began assaulting the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. They smashed windows, threw rocks, raised the Syrian flag, and scrawled graffiti calling Ambassador Ford “a dog.” The Marine guards and our regional security officers reacted quickly and prevent the attackers from breaking into compound buildings or injuring embassy personnel. The attackers then moved on to the French embassy, whose ambassador had also visited Hama. Some used a battering ram to storm that embassy. Syrian security forces did not intervene in a timely fashion to stop these attacks.

The United States strongly condemns this outrageous violation of diplomatic protocol and has demanded that Syria uphold international treaty obligations to protect foreign diplomatic missions.

We view these incidents as further evidence that President Assad’s government continues to be the real source of instability within Syria. He has promised reforms but delivered no meaningful changes. He talks about dialogue, but continues to engage in violence that proves his rhetoric hollow. Even as he talks about dialogue, his security forces started new arrest sweeps in the third largest city, Homs where there also have been months of protests. Assad has made clear that he is determined to maintain power regardless of the cost. And the human toll is mounting.

Amnesty International has reported killings and torture by security forces in the town of Tell Kalakh near the Lebanese border in May. Residents reported seeing scores of males including some elderly and under 18 being rounded up. Detainees who were released and interviewed by Amnesty in Lebanon described brutal torture, including beatings, prolonged use of stress positions and the use of electric shock to the genitals. Relatives who were ordered to a military hospital to collect the corpses of eight detainees reported that the bodies bore the marks of torture.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 50 witnesses to the weeks of violence in Daraa, and reported that member of various branches of the *mukhabarat* security forces and snipers on rooftops deliberately targeted protestors and that victims had lethal head, neck and chest wounds. Among the deadliest incidents Human Rights Watch reported were an attack on protestors in al-Omari mosque from March 23-25, 25 demonstrators killed during two protests on April 8, and at least 34 people during a protest and funeral procession in the town of Izaraa on April 22 and 23.

There are also numerous reports of attacks on and killings of children. Perhaps the best known is the case of 13-year-old Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb, whose tortured and mutilated body was returned to his family by Syrian security forces after he was rounded up on April 29 in a village near Daraa.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Mr. Chairman, we denounce these horrific abuses in the strongest possible terms and call on the international community to do the same.

On May 19, President Obama said Assad could either lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. Hundreds of needless deaths later, it is now perfectly clear that a huge portion of the Syrian population perceives that Assad cannot or will not lead. If he has any respect for the people he purports to govern, he will stop his government's lawless, violent behavior. The government must stop shooting demonstrators, allow peaceful protests, release political prisoners, stop unjust arrests, give access to human rights monitors, and start an inclusive dialogue to advance a democratic transition.

Instead, however, President Assad and his leadership have apparently chosen to emulate the repressive tactics of Iran, and have received material help from Iran in doing so. We have condemned this course of action in the strongest terms, and have imposed sanctions on those responsible for the violence.

The United States has repeatedly raised our concerns about human rights to Syrian officials. From the moment he arrived, Ambassador Ford began raising the significant number of cases of prisoners of conscience with President Assad when he presented his credentials and then constantly with the Syrian Office of the President. Several prominent human rights defenders have since been released. They include Haythem Maleh, an 80-year-old former judge who was imprisoned for charges of "spreading false news that could weaken the national morale" and Muhannad Hassani, a former president of the Syrian Human Rights Organization. However, we are deeply concerned about the treatment of the thousands of detainees who remain in custody.

Amb. Ford also repeatedly pressed Syrian officials to allow the opposition freedom to operate, highlighting for example, the importance of the June 27th meeting of the opposition, which was permitted to take place.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to note that Ambassador Ford's steadfast commitment to human rights and his ability to press for change and report on developments like the situation in Hama underscores the value of having a U.S. Ambassador in the country, now more than ever.

U.S. GOVERNMENT SANCTIONSinternational community."

President Assad's future is the hands of the Syrian people. And the proper role for the United States and the international community is to support the Syrian people in their aspirations for political reform.

On May 18, President Obama signed an Executive Order imposing sanctions against President Assad and senior officials of the government responsible for human rights abuses. In addition to President Assad, the sanctions designated the Vice President, Prime Minister, ministers of interior and defense, the head of Syrian military intelligence, and director of the political security directorate. Other U.S. sanctions targets President Assad's brother and two cousins, the Syrian military and civilian intelligence services, its national security bureau and the air force intelligence, as well as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force and senior Quds force officers.

These individuals and entities were selected because they bear direct responsibility for crimes against their own people. The European Union and other nations have enacted similar sanctions on these key regime figures to hold Syria's leaders accountable for the violence.

INTERNATIONAL ACTION

In a Special Session in April, the UN Human Rights Council condemned the ongoing violations by the Syrian authorities. The Council called on Syrian authorities to release prisoners of conscience and those arbitrarily detained, and to end restrictions on Internet access and journalists. It also established an international investigation led by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In the June Human Rights Council session, the United States joined Canada and more than 50 other countries in a forceful joint statement that again condemned violations committed by the Syrian

authorities and called for credible, independent, and transparent investigations into these abuses, accountability for those who perpetrated such abuses, and unfettered access to the UN High Commissioner's mission to investigate the many allegations of human rights abuses. The High Commissioner will present a report on the human rights situation in Syria in the September session. However, President Assad continues to refuse to allow the monitors mandated by the Human Rights Council to enter Syria.

The United States continues to work with our partners on possible U.N. Security Council action condemning the Assad regime.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Inspired by the protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere, Syrian people are demanding their universal rights and rejecting a corrupt government that rules through fear. Syrian officials continue to complain about foreign influences. But as Secretary Clinton said yesterday, "They are clearly trying to deflect attention from their crackdown internally and to move the world's view away from what they're doing."

It is true that some Syrian soldiers have been killed. We have reports of about 200 such deaths. We regret the loss of those lives too. But the vast majority of casualties have been unarmed civilians. By continuing to ban foreign journalists and observers, the regime seeks to hide these facts.

A Syria that is unified, pluralistic, and democratic could play a positive and leading role in the region, but under President Assad the country is increasingly becoming a source of instability. UNHCR and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) last week estimated there were about 30,000 internally displaced Syrians because of the ongoing unrest. Almost 12,000 Syrians fled the violence to Turkey in the end of June and over 8,500 still remain in six camps run by the Red Crescent.

President Obama and Secretary Clinton have made clear time and again that respect for human rights and pursuit of national security interests are not in conflict; to the contrary, they are best advanced in tandem. A strong and prosperous Syria, governed with the consent of all of its people, would be a positive influence on the stability of the region.

SYRIAN OPPOSITION

The Administration has been clear since the protests began that Syria is headed toward a new political order — and the Syrian people will shape it.

There are growing signs that civil society and opposition groups inside and outside Syria are becoming more organized. However, minority populations, including Christians, Druze and Kurds, have legitimate concerns that uncertainty and insecurity surrounding a fall of the Assad regime could endanger them. A peaceful democratic transition will require the participation of and respect for all of Syria's ethnic and religious groups. We want to see a Syria that is unified and where tolerance and equality are the norm.

THE WAY FORWARD

The Syrian people have shown they will not cease their demands for dignity and a future free from intimidation and fear. The Syrian people deserve a government that respects its people, works to build a more stable and prosperous country, and doesn't rely on repression at home and antagonism abroad to maintain its grip on power. They deserve a government that serves them.

That would be good for Syria, good for the region and good for the world.

In the meantime, the United States will continue to press for an immediate end to all violence and the beginning of a peaceful democratic process. It is important for the United States that the Syrian people succeed in this endeavor, and we will support their efforts to build a peaceful and prosperous future

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