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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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Subject: UN rights boss warns of possible civil war in Syria (Reuters)

GENEVA (Reuters) - The United Nations top human rights official called on Friday for international action to protect Syria's civilians, saying its "ruthless repression" of anti-government protesters could drive the country into full-blown civil war.

The death toll in the crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations that began in March against President Bashar al-Assad now exceeds 3,000, including at least 187 children, said U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay.

At least 100 people had been killed in the last 10 days alone.

"The onus is on all members of the international community to take protective action in a collective manner, before the continual ruthless repression and killings drive the country into a full-blown civil war," Pillay, a former U.N. war crimes judge, said in a statement.

"As more members of the military refuse to attack civilians and change sides, the crisis is already showing worrying signs of descending into an armed struggle," she added.

Thousands had been injured and arrested by Syrian forces, including many tortured in custody, Pillay said. "Family members inside and outside the country have been targeted for harassment, intimidation, threats and beatings."

Syria blames the violence on foreign-backed armed groups who it says have killed 1,100 people. Authorities have barred most foreign media, making it difficult to verify accounts by activists and officials.

Pillay stopped short of specifically calling for the U.N. Security Council to authorize the use of military force in Syria to protect civilians. Earlier this month, Russia and China vetoed a European-drafted resolution backed by Western powers urging Syria to halt its six-month crackdown.

Asked what kind of action should be taken, her spokesman Rupert Colville told a briefing: "That obviously is for states to decide. What has been done so far is not producing results and people continue to be killed virtually every single day."

Pressed on whether foreign military action should be taken, as in Libya against forces of former leader Muammar Gaddafi, he said: "That would be for the Security Council to say."

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