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Syrian Arab Republic: Syria says 11,000 freed in prisoner amnesty

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Syria has freed around 11,000 detainees since President Bashar al-Assad declared a general amnesty in June, the country's National Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar said.

However, rights groups including the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights say 200,000 people are still languishing in government jails.

Speaking to AFP in Damascus on Monday, Haidar said "11,000 people have benefitted from the amnesty and been released from prison."

He was referring to a "general amnesty" announced by Assad a week after his controversial re-election as president.

Haidar said the figure was rising gradually as the justice ministry, which is in charge of applying the presidential decree, examined prisoner files.

The Syrian government presented the amnesty as the largest since the outbreak of the country's conflict in 2011.

It was also the first to include those accused of crimes under a controversial "anti-terrorism" law that has in fact been used to jail thousands of peaceful and armed opponents alike.

But the Observatory disputed the government's figures, saying the number of people released was closer to 7,000 people.

"Between 70,000 and 80,000 detainees were supposed to benefit from the amnesty, and only 10 percent of them have been released," Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

And a number of high-profile activists, journalists and lawyers, including Khalil Maatuq and Mazen Darwish, remain behind bars despite the amnesty.

Rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni told AFP that many of those released were not political prisoners but rather accused common criminals who were not meant to be covered by the amnesty.

Additionally, he said, "security services have refused to meet with the committees charged with applying the amnesty."

"In fact, the amnesty decree has benefitted very few people," he said.

In some cases, he said, tribunals considering prisoners for release simply changed the allegations against them so they would no longer be covered by the terms of the amnesty.

Asked about the reported 200,000 people being held in Syrian prisons, Haidar insisted the figure was "exaggerated."

"They have no documents. We have asked them multiple times to give us the names so we could cooperate together to solve the problem," he said.

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