

## **Syria under fire for detaining opposition activists**

**By Agence France Presse (AFP)**

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DAMASCUS: Syria is cracking down on secular opposition figures who demand democratic reforms, non-governmental groups charged on Tuesday, as Washington demanded the immediate release of political detainees. "The authorities have chosen the security option to deal with activists," said Abdel-Karim Rihawi, president of the Syrian League for the Defense of Human Rights.

Seven opposition figures who signed a "Damascus Declaration" calling for radical change that united communist, nationalist, liberal and Kurdish parties were arrested on Sunday in a crackdown that began on December 9. They included Fidaa Horani, 42, a gynecologist who chairs the Damascus Declaration grouping, Akram Bunni who has already spent 17 years in jail, writer Ali Abdullah and doctors Walid Bunni and Mohammad Yasser.

Such moves were "incompatible with international human rights accords signed by Syria," said Rihawi.

On Sunday, the police also used force to disperse a demonstration by Kurds in front of the higher state security court in Damascus in protest at its trial of five fellow Kurds.

For several months, the authorities have been putting pressure on opposition figures and rights activists, issuing summonses and slapping travel restrictions and bans on meetings.

A total of 163 supporters of the Damascus Declaration took part in a protest on December 1, angering the Baath party-dominated regime that has ruled under a state of emergency since 1963.

US President George W. Bush called on Friday for the immediate release of the detained dissidents.

He applauded the formation of the opposition grouping, saying "the brave men and women who formed this council reflect the desires of the majority of Syrian people to live in freedom, democracy, and peace."

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Monday called for the immediate release of the activists rounded up since the meeting, including Jabr al-Shufi and Ahmad Tohme, both detained leaders of the movement.

"The Syrian government claims that it wants to engage with the outside world, but its only engagement with peaceful critics inside the country is with the boot of repression," said Sarah Leah Whitson, HRW's Middle East director. "Calling for democratic and peaceful change should not be treated as a criminal offence."