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Tunisia: Open inquiry into killing of demonstrator against rising prices

Amnesty International calls upon the Tunisian authorities to launch immediately a thorough, independent, and impartial investigation into the killing of youth Hafnaoui Maghdhaoui on 6 June, as well as the injury of around 20 others and to make public the results of such an investigation. The organization is saddened by his death and fears that there might have been an excessive use of force by the police. It reminds the authorities that force and firearms should not be used by law enforcement officials except when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Hafnaoui Maghdhaoui was killed during clashes between protestors and police over unemployment and rising cost of living in Redeyef, Gafsa in the southwest of Tunisia. According to reports, police used tear gas to disperse the crowds and also used firearms. Tunisian authorities have set the number of wounded at 8 including 3 policemen, but Redeyef trade union leader Adnane Hajji told the media that up to 20 individuals had been wounded.

Tunisian Minister of Justice and Human Rights Bechir Tekkari said that he 'regrets this incident' but denied that there had been any unlawful action on the part of the police. He went on to say that the authorities 'would not tolerate any use of violence' and that the protestors had been throwing Molotov cocktails at the police. Amnesty International recalls that under international law the rights to freedom of expression and assembly are guaranteed. While recognizing the right of the authorities to maintain public order, the policing of demonstrations should be conducted in accordance with international standards governing policing activities, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials. Law enforcement officials must minimize damage and injury, and do the utmost to respect and preserve human life

In addition, international standards require that the investigation should look into abuses by the police, including the death of Hafnaoui Maghdhaoui, and the surrounding circumstances, as well as the alleged pattern of disproportionate or unnecessary use of force. The Tunisian authorities should ensure that all those officials responsible for committing, ordering or failing reasonably to prevent any human rights violations should be brought to justice. They should also ensure that witnesses are protected from any form of harassment or retaliation and that victims or their families receive adequate reparation.

The region of Gafsa in the southwest of Tunisia, around 350 km from the capital Tunis, has witnessed social unrest and sporadic protests over the past six months. A phosphate-rich area, unemployment together with rising cost of living have led to a number of protests calling for an end to corruption which they believe has contributed to the poverty in the area.

Tunisia reiterated its commitment to human rights today before the Human Rights Council in the final session of the Universal Periodic Review. Such a commitment should translate into the immediate establishment of an independent investigation into the events in Redeyef and the death of Hafnaoui Maghdhaoui.

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