

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: PRE 01/102/2011
11 February 2011

Algeria urged to allow peaceful protests

Amnesty International is urging the Algerian authorities not to crack down on planned nationwide anti-government protests tomorrow, amid reports demonstrations in the capital, Algiers, have been banned.

Protests calling for "democratic change", the lifting of a 19-year state of emergency and greater freedom for civil society and the media, have been planned by the newly-formed Coordination for Change and Democracy, an umbrella group of opposition parties, trade unions and human rights organizations.

"Algerians must be allowed to express themselves freely and hold peaceful protests in Algiers and elsewhere. The Algerian authorities cannot hide behind a 19-year state of emergency to stifle dissent," said Amnesty International.

"We urge the Algerian authorities not to respond to these demands by using excessive force".

During January riots, according to Algerian officials, three people have been killed, 800 injured and a thousand arrested in riots at the beginning of January, when demonstrations triggered by price rises, unemployment and poor housing conditions turned violent. Riot police are reported to have used batons, tear gas and live bullets to contain rioting across the country.

One man died of a gunshot injury in the town of Ain El Hadjel on 8 January, in a confrontation with the police in the governorate of M'sila.

The same day an 18-year-old was shot dead as security forces tried to deter protesters from destroying a police station in Ain El Hadjel.

A third man died of his injuries on 7 January, in Bou Smail, in the governorate of Tipaza; according to medical sources he had been hit in the face by a tear gas grenade.

"The protesters are simply trying to peacefully express their grievances. Algerians expect reform not bullets.

"The Algerian authorities must also immediately launch a thorough and impartial investigation into all deaths and injuries. The authorities have a responsibility to maintain public order, but this should not be an excuse to prevent people from peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly".

The Coordination for Change and Democracy, formed in January to coordinate the upcoming protest, has been calling for the state of emergency, enforced since 1992, in the country to be lifted and for the release of prisoners of conscience and other detainees arrested during earlier protests.

The authorities have said that hundreds of detainees have been released, particularly minors, in recent weeks.

"These releases are welcome but the authorities must investigate reports that those detained were subject to torture and other ill-treatment."

On 3 February, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika said the state of emergency would be lifted in the "very near future", however no date has been announced.

A 12-month state of emergency was imposed by the Algerian authorities on 9 February 1992, following the cancellation of the second round of Algeria's first multi-party elections which the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS), looked set to win. A year later, the state of emergency was extended indefinitely.

Background

Under international law standards police may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty. In particular, they must not use firearms against persons except in self-defence or defence of others against the imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only when less extreme means are insufficient. This applies in all circumstances, including in policing demonstrations which have turned violent.