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## **Libya must end protest crackdown**

Amnesty International is calling on the Libyan government to end its clampdown on peaceful political activists after violence erupted at demonstrations in the city of Benghazi following the arrest of activists ahead of a protest planned for Thursday.

Hundreds of people took part in demonstrations on Wednesday following the arrests of Fathi Terbel and Fraj Esharani, both members of the Abu Salim families' organising committee set up by relatives of victims of a prison massacre in 1996, and three other activists.

They were leading calls for a major demonstration on 17 February in support of calls for far-reaching political reforms, inspired by similar protests in Tunisia and Egypt.

"The Libyan authorities must allow peaceful protests, not try to stifle them with heavy-handed repression, said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Libyans have the same rights as Egyptians and Tunisians to express discontent and call for reform in their own country, and it is high time the Libyan government recognized that and respect it."

"People should not be locked up simply because they call for peaceful protests. Libyans have a right to expect reforms, not arrests, detentions and further state repression," said Malcolm Smart.

Fathi Terbel and Fraj Esharani were released after being detained for several hours. Boubaker Mohamed al-Alouani and Salem Mohamed al-Alouani, both members of the Abu Salim families' organizing committee, were also detained. It is unclear whether they have yet been released.

The arrests prompted an immediate popular response. Crowds gathered outside a security forces building in Benghazi calling for the release of Fathi Terbel and Fraj Esharani.

More than a dozen people were reported to have been injured after the protestors later clashed with supporters of the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, in power since 1969, in Benghazi's Shajara Square and Jamal Abdennacer street.

Security forces then used tear gas and water canons to disperse the protesters.

"The Libyan authorities have a responsibility to maintain public order, but they also have a responsibility to uphold human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly," said Malcolm Smart.

"The government must also rein in the security forces and make it clear to them that if they beat or otherwise ill-treat protestors or use excessive force they will be held fully to account.

"Libyans must be allowed to express themselves freely and hold peaceful protests in Libya."

Fathi Terbel, a member of the protest organizing committee, told Amnesty International that the arrests were linked to their calls for accountability over the deaths more than 1,000 inmates at Abu Salim prison in 1996 and for greater political and human rights freedoms in Libya.