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Bahrain set for renewed protests as state of emergency ends

Amnesty International has urged the Bahrain authorities not to again use excessive force against protesters, as activists called for mass anti-government demonstrations across the country on Wednesday.

The call for demonstrations comes as a repressive state of emergency imposed following previous protests, the State of National Safety, is set to be lifted by Bahrain's King on Wednesday.

"The Bahraini authorities must not make the same mistakes as in February and March, when largely peaceful protests were violently suppressed by government security forces," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

"As the state of emergency is lifted, the authorities must allow people to peacefully exercise their rights to freedom of expression and association," he added.

The protesters are calling on the government to end human rights abuses, and have been instigated by the February 14 youth coalition, the group which called for the first protests earlier this year to demand political reform.

The Bahrain authorities say at least 24 people, including four police officers, have died in clashes between police and demonstrators since they began in February.

At least 500 protesters have been detained and four have died in custody in suspicious circumstances. At least two thousand people have also been dismissed or suspended from their jobs, apparently for participating in the protests.

In a separate development, the military trial of 14 prominent opposition activists is set to continue on Wednesday.

The mainly Shi'a activists have been charged with alleged crimes in relation to the pro-reform protests that began in February.

"These defendants are likely to be prisoners of conscience detained simply for exercising their right to peacefully express their political views in public. If so, they must be released immediately and unconditionally," Malcolm Smart said.

The State of National Safety set up a military court with exclusive jurisdiction to try those accused of offences under the state of emergency although they are all or mostly civilians.

This court will continue to operate even after the State of National Safety is lifted tomorrow. It has already sentenced four people to death, two of whose sentences were reduced to life imprisonment on appeal, and jailed others for participating in peaceful protests in March.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the government of Bahrain not to try civilians in military courts because they lack independence and fail to respect international standards of fair trial.

