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Calls for investigation into deaths in Western Sahara protest camp

The Moroccan authorities must open an independent investigation into events that led to a number of deaths and injuries at Gadaym Izik, a protest camp near Laayoune, Western Sahara, Amnesty International said today.

The government says nine people were killed during Monday's operation and in its aftermath, including eight members of the security forces. Local human rights activists have told Amnesty International that 11 camp residents were seen lying injured on the ground, some of whom were bleeding while others had been burnt.

According to reports, thousands of Sahrawis were also forcibly removed from the protest camp by Moroccan security forces.

"This was clearly a very serious incident and one that threatens to fuel further tension in Western Sahara," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director Middle East and North Africa.

"The Moroccan authorities must launch an immediate, independent inquiry and get to the bottom of what occurred and consider asking the UN to assist"

"We need to know what sparked the security forces' action and whether the force they used was reasonable and proportionate or excessive. If excessive force was used, those responsible must be held to account."

According to accounts received by Amnesty International, the first residents knew of the impending security forces' action was at about 6am on Monday when a helicopter flew over the camp ordering the residents to leave.

Minutes later, the security forces are said to have forced their way into the camp, beating residents and using tear gas and cannons firing hot water to force them out of their tents which were then burnt or bulldozed.

The Moroccan authorities say that the operation was necessary to free camp residents who were being held there against their will. They say too that the security forces encountered serious resistance.

Morocco's official news agency has reported that five police or other security officials were killed and three others died on Tuesday from injuries they had sustained, and that one Sahrawi man was accidentally killed by a speeding police car in Laayoune. His death is being investigated, according to the authorities.

Little information has yet emerged directly from residents who were removed from the camp and the site itself has been effectively sealed off by Moroccan security forces.

In Laayoune itself, a few kilometres west of the camp, demonstrators are reported to have attacked and

damaged public buildings, banks, shops and other properties in the aftermath of the security force operation.

The Gadaym Izik camp, an informal settlement of tents and makeshift dwellings containing thousands of people, was established last month by Sahrawis angered by what they say is their marginalization by the Moroccan authorities and in support of their demand for jobs and adequate housing.

The Sahrawis say that though they are indigenous to Western Sahara, they do not receive a fair share of the benefits from the region's natural resources and land, and that the local authorities have failed to respond to their demands for better socio-economic conditions.

Monday's violence coincided with the start of new informal talks about the future of Western Sahara between the Moroccan authorities and the Polisario Front, a group which calls for the independence of Western Sahara and runs a self-declared government in exile - the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The talks were convened in New York at the behest of the UN's special envoy for Western Sahara, Christopher Ross.

"This latest incident highlights once again the urgent need to include a human rights monitoring component in the Mandate of MINURSO, the UN body which monitors the cease-fire agreement between Morocco and the Polisario Front reached almost 20 years ago in 1991," said Malcolm Smart.

"The absence of a specific human rights monitoring component has undermined MINURSO's effectiveness and allowed human rights abuses to pass without adequate investigation."