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## **Saudi Arabia urged to reverse ban on peaceful protest**

Amnesty International has called on the Saudi Arabian authorities to reverse the ban on peaceful protest in the Kingdom, amid fears of a violent crackdown on mass demonstrations planned for Friday's "Day of Rage".

Prince Saud Al-Faisal, the country's foreign minister, said on Wednesday that "reform cannot be achieved through protests", while the protest ban, confirmed on Saturday, was backed by religious and security bodies.

"Instead of banning peaceful protests the Saudi Arabian authorities should address the need for major human rights reform in the country," said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"They must heed the growing calls for change within Saudi Arabia".

Saudi Arabia's "Day of Rage" was organized online using Facebook. One page has over 33,000 followers.

Media reports over the weekend suggested that some 10,000 Saudi troops would be deployed to crack down on any protests.

The ban was also backed by the president of the Mutawa'een (religious police), the Council of Senior Ulema (religious clerics) and the Shura Council (a consultative body appointed by the King).

"Reports that the Saudi authorities plan to deploy troops to police upcoming demonstrations are very worrying," said Philip Luther. "Rather than seeking to intimidate would-be demonstrators from coming out on the streets, the authorities should rein in the security forces and allow peaceful protests to take place."

Amnesty International has also called on the authorities to release or charge a man detained on Friday 4 March during a protest in the capital Riyadh.

Muhammad al-Wad'ani has been detained incommunicado since his arrest and is believed to be at risk of torture.

A video posted on YouTube two days before the demonstration showed Muhammad al-Wad'ani calling for the fall of the monarchy and for people to join the protest.

Around 24 people were detained on 3 and 4 March following protests in the city of al-Qatif, denouncing the prolonged detention without trial of Shi'a prisoners. They were released on 8 March without charge reportedly only after they signed a pledge not to protest again.

### **Background**

The Ministry of Interior was reported to have said in 2008 that protests in Saudi Arabia were banned, after a demonstration against Israel's military action in Gaza.

Although Amnesty International is not aware of any legal text banning demonstrations, in practice the Saudi Arabian authorities have not allowed them to take place.

Torture and other ill-treatment is frequently used to extract confessions from detainees, to punish them for refusing to “repent” or to force them not to criticize the government.

Incommunicado detention in Saudi Arabia often lasts until a confession is obtained, which can take months and occasionally years.