

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: MDE 14/006/2011

Date: 24 February 2011

AUTHORITIES IN IRAQ URGED TO ALLOW PEACEFUL PROTESTS

Amnesty International has called on the Iraqi government and the authorities governing the northern Kurdistan region to allow peaceful protests and rein in their security forces ahead of nationwide demonstrations called for tomorrow, Friday, by groups calling for an end to corruption and better government services.

The organization made this call after Iraqi and Kurdish security forces were reported to have used excessive force against protests inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt in several parts of Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, leading to at least six deaths. In Baghdad, one activist involved in organizing a peaceful anti-corruption demonstration on 14 February, was detained and held at an unknown place for five days. There, Oday Alzaidy says, he was tortured with electric shocks.

Amnesty International urges the Iraqi and Kurdish authorities to ensure that excessive force is not used against protestors and, given the latest reports of abuses against detainees, to take concrete steps to end the pattern of torture that has so long persisted in Iraq.

Since the first demonstration on 14 February in Baghdad there have been spreading protests across Iraq by people calling for an end to corruption and for better public services, such as water and electricity supplies and other basic needs.

On 16 February three people were reported to have been killed and dozens injured when security forces opened fire on protesters in the city of Kut in Wasit governorate. There the protestors came onto the streets to demand an end to corruption and better services.

On 23 February, security forces raided the offices of the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory, a Baghdad-based NGO, after it called for a demonstration tomorrow in support of "free speech and media freedom".

In the northern Kurdistan region, three semi-autonomous provinces ruled by a coalition of Iraq's two main Kurdish parties, a 15-year-old boy was among three people killed by armed militia of one of those parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), in Sulaimaniya. Again, the protestors were demanding an end to corruption, said to be rife in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

There have also been attacks on the media – the headquarters of a newly established TV and radio station were burnt down - and further demonstrations took place in Suleimaniya on 23 February. This remained peaceful, despite a large security forces presence, after members of local NGOs known collectively as the White Group stood up between the army and the protestors and offered flowers to the soldiers.

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