

URGENT ACTION

PROTESTERS DETAINED IN YEMEN, RISK OF TORTURE

Scores of protesters arrested following demonstrations in the city of Aden, in southern Yemen, are being held incommunicado and are at risk of torture or other ill-treatment. Amnesty International is concerned that they may be held solely for the peaceful expression of their right to freedom of expression and assembly, and therefore may be prisoners of conscience.

Scores were arrested by security forces following peaceful protests calling for reform and regime change that took place in the al-Mansurah area of the southern city of Aden on 16 February. At least four men are reported to have been killed, and dozens injured when security forces opened fire on protesters.

Protests had already been taking place in Aden and other places in southern Yemen, calling for the south of the country to separate from the north. However, following demonstrations in the capital Sana'a and other cities calling for the president to stand down, protesters in Aden have also started to call for regime change. Those arrested are reported to be held in incommunicado detention in al-Mansurah Central Prison and are at risk of torture or other ill-treatment. The al-Mansurah area has since been surrounded by security forces preventing people from coming in or out. Further protests are said to be continuing to take place in the area today.

According to a contact in Yemen, the protest on 16 February in Aden began peacefully and was taking place without serious incident, while policed by members of the Civil Security forces. However, when Central Security forces arrived at the scene, they opened fire on protesters, the contact said. An eyewitness told Amnesty International that following the attacks plain-clothes men believed to be members of the security forces or individuals colluding with them caused damage to property. "Men in civilian clothes attacked buildings and burnt cars, but this was just an attempt to justify the use of excessive force by the authorities," he said.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Urging the authorities to ensure that those held following protests on 16 February in Aden are protected from torture and other ill-treatment, and are allowed prompt and regular access to lawyers of their choosing, their family and any medical treatment they may require;
- Calling on the authorities to disclose any charges that have been brought against them and to ensure that any legal proceedings against them conform to international fair trial standards;
- Expressing concern that they may be held solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and assembly and noting that, if this is the case, Amnesty International would consider them to be prisoners of conscience and call for their immediate and unconditional release.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 31 MARCH 2011 TO:

President

His Excellency Ali Abdullah Saleh
Office of the President of the Republic
of Yemen
Sana'a
Republic of Yemen
Fax: +967 1 274 147
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Interior

His Excellency Mutaheer Rashad al-
Masri
Ministry of Interior
Sana'a, Republic of Yemen
**Fax: +967 1 332 511 /
+967 1 331 899**
Email: moi@yemen.net.ye
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:

Minister of Human Rights

Her Excellency Dr Huda Ali Abdullatef
Alban
Ministry for Human Rights
Sana'a, Republic of Yemen
Fax: +967 1 419 700 (please keep
trying)
Email: mshr@y.net.ye
Salutation: Your Excellency

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Protests in the south of Yemen against perceived discrimination by the government against southerners and, increasingly, in favour of the secession of the south of the country have been taking place sporadically since 2007. They began with protests by retired soldiers from the south, who have increasingly been complaining that they do not receive the same treatment in employment, salary and pensions as soldiers from the north of the country. Most of the retired soldiers are from the army of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), commonly known as South Yemen. Following the unification of the country in 1990, the armies of both the PDRY and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), commonly known as North Yemen, were merged into a single army for the new Republic of Yemen. However, after the civil war in 1994, which ended in the defeat of the South, many of the soldiers of the former PDRY were dismissed from the army. They, as well as those who remained in the current unified army, allege that they are subject to discrimination compared to soldiers originally from the army of the YAR. The Southern Movement appears to have emerged following these protests as well as being sparked by the general discrimination that the people in the south believe they face.

The Southern Movement has organized a number of protests over what it perceives to be the government's failure to address discrimination against people from the south of the country. The government's response to these protests has been heavy-handed. Dozens of demonstrators have been killed in or near demonstrations; in many cases they appear to have been shot dead unlawfully when were posing no risk to the lives of the security forces or others. Since the protests began in 2007, the security forces have arrested and detained, in many cases arbitrarily, thousands of demonstrators and bystanders, as well as leaders and activists of the Southern Movement.

Since February 2011 and following calls for the president to stand down, protesters in Aden in particular have started calling for regime change and for the president to stand down. Protests calling for the south to separate from the rest of the country also continue to take place in Aden and other parts of south Yemen.

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by Yemen's Constitution. However, this right is undermined by restrictive laws and practices, particularly the 1990 Press and Publications Law, and by the Specialized Press and Publications Court set up in May 2009. The court appears to be aimed at suppressing dissent by fast-tracking cases brought against government critics.

Amnesty International delegates experienced first-hand the authorities' hostility towards coverage of protests in defence of free speech. As they watched a peaceful demonstration in Sana'a in March 2010, organized by Women Journalists Without Chains, police threatened to arrest and bring charges against an Amnesty International delegate who was carrying a camera if any attempt was made to photograph the peaceful march. They said it was illegal for the delegates even to be present, even though the women journalists were holding their protest peacefully and in a public place. The Amnesty International delegates also witnessed the arrest of a protester who was carrying a camera, though he was released, without his camera, when other protesters complained about this. Meanwhile, men in plain clothes who appeared to be security personnel filmed and photographed people involved in the demonstration.

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