

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

7 September 2018 MDE 14/9055/2018

IRAQ: EFFECTIVE INVESTIGATIONS NEEDED INTO DEATHS OF PROTESTERS IN BASRA

Amnesty International today called on the Iraqi authorities to ensure that investigations into the violence, including security forces' use of firearms, which resulted in the deaths of protesters in the city of Basra, southern Iraq, are thorough, independent, impartial and effective. The organization further called on the authorities to bring those suspected to be responsible to justice in fair trials.

Amnesty International also urged Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi to publicly instruct security forces to avoid the use of excessive force when policing protests and to reiterate that the heavy handed and use of excessive force will not be tolerated.

Protests in the city of Basra, fueled by demands for improved public services, including water, electricity and better medical services re-erupted at the beginning of this month for a second time since July this year. In the initial days of the protests, the response of the security forces turned increasingly violent in dispersing peaceful protesters a number of whom in turn resorted to violent acts such as throwing "petrol bombs" as protests escalated.

Witnesses told Amnesty International that security forces released tear gas and opened fire on protesters, and in some cases chased them down and beat them as they were fleeing the scene. Up until 5 September, at least seven protesters were reported to have been killed due to excessive force, including by live ammunition. On 6 September, three more protesters were reported to have been killed as protesters took to burning government and political party buildings. At least one of those killed on 6 September was reported by activists on the ground to have been shot by an armed guard of a political party building that was being attacked by other protesters at the time. At the time of writing, at least ten protesters have died according to health authorities' public statements.

Amnesty International spoke to several witnesses including protesters, activists and media workers and analyzed images and video footage from Basra. The organization continues to closely monitor security forces' response to the protests. On the morning of 5 September, Basra Operations Command speaking to local media alleged that "unknown assailants in two cars" were responsible for the deaths of protesters. But a witness speaking to Amnesty International on 6 September from a local hospital in Basra refuted this: "We see them [security forces] shooting at us. They throw tear gas and trap us in the streets and fire at the protesters."

On 4 September, protests in central Basra escalated significantly when a number of protesters allegedly set fire to a government building in the evening. According to testimony, security forces responded by using tear gas and live ammunition before a curfew was imposed at approximately 10pm. According to a statement made to the media by local health authorities in Basra, at least five protesters were killed on Tuesday evening and a number of protesters and members of security forces injured, with some left in critical condition.

A witness present on that night described the scene to Amnesty International:

"A small number of protesters were very angry because of Makki [protester killed on 2 September]. They wanted to get to the government building. Security forces had cut off the roads but the large number of people made it possible for some people to slip through the side roads. When the fire started the security forces opened fire and started trapping people in the streets. We were stuck in Abbasiya. People wanted to run away before the curfew was set. We couldn't go check on our injured friends in the hospital."

On 2 September, activists on the ground as well as local and regional media reported the death of Makki Yaser Ashour al-Kaabi, a resident of al-Khaliliya, in Basra. Footage verified by Amnesty International depicts al-Kaabi's body in a morgue, clearly showing a bullet wound on his shoulder and what seems to be chest wounds.

The same witness added:

"We cannot always take photos. They [security forces] chase you and identify you. Even journalists, not just regular protesters, are chased down. We want to take videos of how they chase people and beat them, but we don't want to be caught and face the same fate."

Images viewed and verified by Amnesty International depicting a protester killed on 4 September clearly shows a large wound to the head.

Iraq's prime minister, Haider Al-Abadi, subsequently called for investigations into the death of al-Kaabi and later called for investigations into violence during the protest on 4 September. In a statement released on 5 September, the United Nations Special Representative in Iraq [called](#) on the Iraqi authorities to "avoid using disproportionate, lethal force against the demonstrators."

The Iraqi authorities are obligated to respect the right to peaceful protests, and even if violence may occur, only the minimum force necessary to address it can be used. When policing protests, the security forces may only resort to force for a legitimate purpose, and only when other means remain ineffective.

The organization is also concerned by tactics that were used by security forces in dispersing protests and blocking roads to prevent access to government buildings. A local witness described such a scene of SWAT forces using tear gas and firing live ammunition into protesters:

"I was there. There are some people who seek revenge because they have lost all hope. They did try to enter the blocked road leading directly to the governorate building. They [protesters] were throwing rocks and shouted at the security forces. SWAT tried to stop them and then released tear gas from their hummers towards all of us. Then SWAT [members] came out of about five hummers and started beating people with poles and thick hoses. They hit everyone randomly. They took about ten people. Whoever they grabbed they beat up and then took them in the cars. I think they were taken to Basra Operations Command. That's where they take all the protesters."

A witness described events that unfolded outside a government building on 1 September similar to those seen during the July protests:

"At about 7:30 pm SWAT started beating protesters that were standing outside the building and then we retreated to the next street. SWAT members dressed in black and security forces started shooting in the air and some shots were aimed towards people. Some people started running away and they [SWAT] started chasing us to the next street and caught up with the protesters and beat them up. Those who were caught were beaten. It was very sad because they beat them so much. Some people fainted from the tear gas. The injured were taken to hospital by other protesters. We saw no ambulance."

Protests gained momentum for the second time since early July in the southern governorate of Basra on 31 August:

"Last time we protested in the north of Basra because young men had no jobs and they watched all these oil companies come and go without ever creating a job opportunity for local people. Now, we protest because we have no drinking water. Thousands of people have died from drinking the contaminated water since Abadi came and gave us his false promises in July. We are shocked at what the SWAT is willing to do against us. It's as if they have orders to oppress us by any means necessary."

According to testimonies from witnesses and images and footage circulated on social media since Friday, protesters had at times set fires to tires and thrown stones directed at security forces. One protester, whom Amnesty International spoke with, explained:

"The violent acts, burning and attacks are carried out by a small number of young men. They are angry. They are not paid agents or acting on behalf of political parties or militias. Fifteen years of Basra's situation going from bad to worse has led to this... People, entire families in parts of the Basra governorate are suffering from the water contamination. They are scattered in hospitals across Basra. It has now reached outside the city. This is why people are on the street. Basra has seen no promises come to fruition."

He added: “*What they [authorities] are discussing and deciding on in their meetings do not reflect what people on the street want. We are asking for water to drink, not to be lied to.*”