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Yemen: Killing of civilians must be investigated

Amnesty International has written to the Yemeni Interior Minister calling for an investigation into the killing of civilians in light of the mounting death toll in the north of the country.

The organisation also insisted that Dr Rashad Muhammad Al-Alimi ensure the protection of detainees from torture, and strict observance of international standards on law enforcement and the use of force.

Amnesty International's appeal comes in the wake of armed clashes in the Sa'da Province, about 250 kilometres north of the capital Sana'a, between security forces and followers of Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a cleric from the Zaidi community.

The exact number of people killed since the clashes began on 21 June is not known. Last week the Minister of Interior was reported to have informed parliament that 118 people had been killed. However other sources fear that the number of deaths could be as high as 500. Most of the killings are said to have resulted from the use of heavy weaponry by government security forces, including helicopter gunships. In at least one case, a helicopter gunship reportedly attacked civilian targets and a number of people were killed. Amnesty International fears that excessive use of force and extrajudicial killing may have been the main or contributory factors in the mounting death toll.

In its letter, the organisation asked for details of any government investigation into the reported killings of civilians. If no such investigation had taken place, Amnesty international urged that this be carried out without delay, its findings made public, and anyone found responsible brought to justice.

In addition, the organisation has asked for assurances that security forces are strictly adhering to international standards, particularly the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials.

These international standards set out clearly the limitations that apply to the use of force in situations of law enforcement, most specifically that firearms should only be used if lives are in danger and if no other means are available. Basic Principle 9 states: "In any event, intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life." Principle 8 states: "exceptional circumstances such as internal political instability or any other public emergency may not be invoked to justify any departure from these basic principles."

Mass arrests are reported to have been carried out by security forces in Sa'da and other parts of the country particularly Sana'a. Those arrested include suspected followers of Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi as well as religious persons who have expressed their opposition to the continuing clashes in Sa'da. Those who continue to be held are reported to be detained incommunicado and may be at risk of torture.

Amnesty International has sought urgent assurances that detainees are protected from torture and

ill-treatment, and has called for the immediate release of anyone held solely for the non-violent expression of their conscientiously held beliefs. Anyone held on a recognizably criminal offence should be allowed access to lawyers, and be given a fair trial in accordance with international standards.

Background

Tension between the government and followers of Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a cleric from the Zaidi community, has been growing since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Hundreds of Badr al-Din al-Huthi's followers have been detained on a weekly basis for shouting anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans after Friday prayers. The escalation of the tension to armed clashes at the end of June 2004 began after the government asked Badr al-Din al-Huthi to hand himself to the security forces and he refused.

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