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Tunisians must be allowed to protest peacefully without fear

Amnesty International today condemned an ongoing crackdown by Tunisian authorities on a wave of protests sparked by the attempted suicide of a young fruit seller who later died of his injuries.

At least two protesters have been killed during demonstrations following the attempted suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed graduate who set himself on fire in front of a government building in the town of Sidi Bouzid in early December after police confiscated his fruit cart for selling without a permit. He died from his injuries in hospital on 4 January.

Mohamed Bouazizi's attempted suicide on 17 December sparked protests over rising prices, unemployment and corruption in Tunisia that have sometimes turned violent as they continue to spread.

"Tunisians must be allowed to express their grievances and freely protest. The authorities made empty promises of work opportunities which were followed by a crackdown on protestors," said Amnesty International

"The Tunisian authorities have a responsibility to maintain public order but this should be no excuse to target people simply peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly," said Amnesty International.

Mohamed Ammar, 18, was killed by police fire on 24 December 2010, following clashes between demonstrators and members of the security forces in Menzel Bouzayane, in Sidi Bouzid. Chawki Hidari, aged 44 died in hospital as a result of bullet injuries on 1 January. Ten other demonstrators were also injured during the confrontations.

On 22 December, Neji Flehi, 24, also committed suicide by electrocution after reportedly shouting "No unemployment, no misery!" during a demonstration also in Sidi Bouzid.

In recent days lawyers have been singled out for beating and arrest, following an attempted nationwide sit-in by them on 31 December in solidarity with the Sidi Bouzid protests.

In response, thousands of Tunisian lawyers carried out a strike on Thursday in protest against their treatment.

The Tunisian authorities have said their forces acted in self defence but are yet to confirm any investigations into the deaths and injuries of protesters.

"The Tunisian authorities must immediately launch a thorough and impartial investigation into the deaths and injuries during the protests and hold to account anyone found responsible for excessive use of force," said Amnesty International

Waves of arrests have taken place throughout the country as freedoms of expression and assembly are

curtailed and undermined. Exact figures of people still detained have not been released by the authorities who have a track record of holding people incommunicado. An activist, Ammar Amroussia, continues to be detained pending investigation. He was arrested on 29 December 2010 for participating in a sit-in in Gafsa.

The Tunisian authorities have also sought to prevent the spread of protests in Tunisia and the spreading of information on the protests, by enforcing a media blackout and by blocking websites and closing the email accounts of internet activists, in particular those using Facebook.

“The response of the authorities to the Sidi Bouzid demonstrations shows that the Tunisian authorities have not learnt their lessons of their handling of the 2008 Gafsa demonstrations. No one was held to account for the deaths of protestors and promises of accountability and economic opportunities never materialized.” said Amnesty International

Background

Under international law enforcement standards police may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty. In particular, they must not use firearms against persons except in self-defence or defence of others against the imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only when less extreme means are insufficient. This applies in all circumstances, including in policing demonstrations which have turned violent.