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Saudi Arabia urged to investigate Shi'a protester death

The Saudi Arabian authorities should launch an independent investigation into the death of a Shi'a protester who was killed during a demonstration in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

Issam Muhammad Ali Abu Abdullah, aged 22, was shot dead and three others were reported to be wounded at a protest on Thursday evening in the town of Awwamiya.

The Ministry of Interior said that the killing occurred during an exchange of gunfire between the security forces and individuals who had also attacked them with Molotov cocktails. Sources in the area told Amnesty International that Issam Mohammad Ali Abu Abdullah was killed by multiple bullet wounds fired by security forces.

Thursday's protest urged the authorities to release political prisoners and called for an end to discrimination against the Shi'a minority in the Kingdom.

"This is the latest of several disturbing protester deaths in Saudi Arabia in the last couple of months," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's interim Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"The need to immediately launch an independent investigation into the death of Issam Abu Abdullah is underlined by the fact that investigations that were announced into previous protester deaths in similar incidents do not appear to have gone anywhere," he added.

In November 2011, four members of the Shi'a minority were killed by the security forces in three separate incidents in the al-Qatif region, three of them during protests.

Sources told Amnesty International that riot police opened fire on the protesters – some of whom were also carrying firearms – while the Saudi Ministry of Interior said security forces had come under fire from "aggressors".

Although investigations were promised, no action appears to have been taken.

Issam Abu Abdullah's family has called for an independent investigation into his death.

Protests are banned in the Kingdom. Since February 2011, when sporadic demonstrations began, the Saudi Arabian government has carried out a crackdown that has included the arrest of hundreds of mostly Shi'a Muslims in the restive Eastern Province.

More than 300 people who took part in mostly peaceful protests in al-Qatif, al-Ahsa and Awwamiya have been detained, either at demonstrations or shortly afterwards. Most have been released, often after being forced to pledge not to protest again.

In a recent report, Saudi Arabia: Repression in the name of security, Amnesty International documented a

new wave of repression in the Kingdom as authorities cracked down on protesters and reformists on security grounds.

The report described how hundreds of people have been arrested for demonstrating, while the government has drafted an anti-terror law that would effectively criminalize dissent as a "terrorist crime" and further strip away rights from those accused of such offences.