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Bahrain's use of tear gas against protesters increasingly deadly

Bahrain must investigate more than a dozen deaths that followed the misuse of tear gas by security forces, Amnesty International has said after another person was seriously injured by a tear gas canister in Manama this week.

On Tuesday, 20-year-old Mohammad al-Muwali was seriously injured and hospitalized after being hit in the head by a tear gas canister launched by riot police responding to an anti-government protest in the capital city's Karrana neighbourhood.

A Bahraini human rights group has reported at least 13 deaths resulting from the security forces' use of tear gas against peaceful protesters as well as inside people's homes since February 2011, with a rise in such deaths in recent months.

"The rise in fatalities and eyewitness accounts suggest that tear gas is being used inappropriately by Bahraini security forces, including in people's homes and other confined spaces," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director.

"The Bahraini authorities must investigate and account for the reports of more than a dozen deaths following tear gas use. The security forces must be instructed on how to use tear gas in line with international policing standards."

Tear gas is used by law enforcement agencies in many countries as a riot control agent, to disperse violent gatherings that pose a threat to law and order.

But when used inappropriately, including in enclosed areas or on unarmed protesters who are simply exercising their freedoms of expression and assembly, deploying tear gas can constitute a human rights violation.

Amnesty International calls on the Bahraini authorities to make public the instructions that were given to security forces involved in policing demonstrations.

Eyewitnesses have told Amnesty International that Bahraini security forces have intentionally fired tear gas canisters into private homes, often with devastating results for those inside.

Bahraini lawyer Fatima Khudair described how anti-riot police used tear gas after arriving at her house in Sitra village, south of the capital, on 5 January.

She said around 12 women and children were inside her home when some 30 officers burst in and began to beat them.

Fatima Khudair described how one of the officers threw a tear gas canister into a room inside the house before launching another five canisters into an adjacent courtyard.

The tear gas seriously affected the lawyer's seven-year-old daughter Maryam 'Issam Ghanem, who suffers from asthma. Her condition is still unstable.

Zaynab 'Ali Ghanim, Fatima Khudair's sister-in-law, was also hospitalized with an eye inflammation brought on by the tear gas, among other injuries inflicted by the police.

Human rights activists and recent media reports have pointed to several deaths resulting from the Bahrain security forces using tear gas inside people's homes.

Salma Mohsin Abbas, 81, died after a security officer threw a tear gas canister into her home in the village of Barbar on 13 January. According to her son, the canister was hurled into the open door of the house after security forces had already dispersed an earlier protest in the village.

On 20 January, Yaseen AlAsfoor, 14, died, three weeks after being hospitalized when the security forces fired three tear gas canisters against his house in the village of Ma'ameer, south of Manama. He was suffering from asthma and moved to the intensive care unit at Manama's Salmaniya Medical Complex when his lungs failed.

Sayyed Hashem Saeed, 15, was killed when a tear gas canister hit him at close range during the security forces' response to a protest in Sitra, south of Manama, on 31 December 2011. Security forces later also used tear gas to disperse mourners at his funeral.

Amnesty International has called on the US government to suspend transfers of tear gas and other riot control equipment to the Bahraini authorities. US-made tear gas canisters and baton rounds were found in the aftermath of the 17 February 2011 raid by riot police on peaceful protests at what was then called Pearl Roundabout in Manama.

The USA halted a pending arms shipment to Bahrain in October 2011 amid outcry about ongoing human rights concerns.

Meanwhile the Brazilian government has reportedly set up an inquiry into reports that Brazilian companies were selling tear gas to the Bahraini government.

Amnesty International also calls for tear gas and other weaponry, munitions and equipment used for law enforcement operations to be included among the conventional arms to be regulated by an international Arms Trade Treaty being negotiated later this year.