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Yemen must halt attacks on protesters

Amnesty International has called on Yemen to stop its security forces using excessive force after protesters and journalists were today reportedly attacked at peaceful demonstrations around the country.

“Today is the sixth day in a row on which the Yemeni authorities have attacked protesters peacefully calling for political reform,” said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, on Thursday.

“Yemenis have a legitimate right to freedom of expression and assaults against both them and journalists covering their protests are totally unacceptable.”

At least 10 demonstrators in Sana’a were injured, several of them in the head reportedly after security forces in plain-clothes opened fire on them with live bullets as they called for the president to stand down, sources in Yemen told Amnesty International.

Plain-clothes security officers and attackers described by protesters as “thugs” also openly beat demonstrators, witnesses said.

Activists told Amnesty International that cameramen for Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were beaten by unidentified attackers who reportedly broke their cameras.

A cameraman for AP news was also said to have been attacked and his camera confiscated by men carrying knives.

The attacks came a day after four men were killed and dozens injured when security forces opened fire on peaceful protests in the al-Mansurah district of Aden as they called for reform and regime change.

Scores of protesters were also reported to have been arrested and detained incommunicado in al-Mansurah Prison, raising concern that they could be at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Families and relatives of the detainees are reported not to have been allowed to visit the detainees.

The district of al-Mansurah is reported to be surrounded by security forces who are denying residents of Aden entry to the area.

Some of those residents have reported hearing gunfire from the area again today.

The protest in Aden yesterday began peacefully and was taking place without serious incident while, at the beginning, it was being policed by members of the Civil Security forces, according to a contact in Yemen.

But the protesters came under attack after members of the Central Security forces arrived and opened fire,

the contact said.

An eyewitness told Amnesty International that following the attacks, plain-clothes men, believed to be members of the security forces or individuals colluding with them, caused damage to property.

“Men in civilian clothes attacked buildings and burnt cars, but this was just an attempt to justify the use of excessive force by the authorities,” he said.

“The authorities must investigate the shooting of protesters and immediately issue clear instructions to all security forces that the use of potentially lethal force when lives are not in danger will not be tolerated and that they will be held to account for their actions,” said Philip Luther.

Further protests organized by the lawyers’ union are planned in different parts of Yemen on Friday, 18 February, to voice concern over repression in the country.

Amnesty International reminds the Yemeni authorities of their obligation not to use force against protesters who are peacefully expressing their criticisms of the government.

Background

Protests in the south of Yemen against perceived discrimination by the government against southerners and, increasingly, in favour of the secession of the south of the country, have been taking place sporadically since 2007.

Since February 2011 and following demonstrations in Sana’a and other cities calling for the president to stand down, protesters in Aden in particular have also started calling for regime change. Protests calling for the secession of the south also continue to take place in Aden and other parts of south Yemen.

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by Yemen’s Constitution. However, this right is undermined by restrictive laws and practices, particularly the 1990 Press and Publications Law, and by the Specialized Press and Publications Court set up in May 2009. The court appears to be aimed at suppressing dissent by fast-tracking cases brought against government critics.

The Yemeni government has become increasingly intolerant of independent media and criticism directed towards it. Journalists, editors and publishers have been detained, held incommunicado, ill-treated and jailed on spurious charges after unfair trials.