

AI Index: PRE 01/138/2011
16 March 2011

Arrests as Syria cracks down on prisoner protests

A small demonstration gathered today outside the Ministry of the Interior to submit a petition for the release of political prisoners, led by relatives of the imprisoned. Shortly afterwards the group was violently dispersed by plain-clothed security officers wielding batons.

Witnesses told Amnesty International that at least 30 people were arrested and taken to unknown locations.

Several people were also arrested after protesting yesterday in Damascus and Aleppo during peaceful demonstrations calling for more freedoms. At least two have reportedly been released.

“Like many of the political prisoners whose release they were calling for, protestors appear to have been arrested simply for the peaceful expression of their views,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The Syrian authorities must immediately release all those arrested in the last two days for merely attending peaceful protests, and stop these attacks on freedom of expression and assembly.”

At the protest today, children, the elderly and women were among those beaten, witnesses said. Demonstrators who tried to flee the assault were reportedly chased down and arrested.

Security forces arrested family members of prisoners of conscience Kamal al-Labwani, Raghda Hassan, Tareq al-Ghorani and Mesh’al al-Tammo.

Others believed to be detained are the human rights activists Mazen Darwich, Suhair al-Atassi and Serene Khouri, former prisoners of conscience Nehad Badawiyah, Hassiba ‘Abd al-Rahman and Kamal Sheikho, and philosopher Tayib Tayzini.

One man being treated for a serious head wound was reportedly arrested at a hospital and also taken to an unknown location.

“These protests have been real acts of bravery in a country known for its intolerance of dissent. The authorities must heed these peaceful calls for change,” said Philip Luther.