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Deadly attack on Yemeni protesters undermines reform plans

Amnesty International has called for an urgent independent investigation into an attack yesterday by armed men believed to be affiliated to security forces which left at least 12 protesters dead in the capital, Sana'a.

Men in plainclothes reportedly fired at protesters as they marched past the May 22 Stadium in the capital Sana'a. Men described as 'thugs' also attacked protesters with batons.

A 14-year-old boy, Abdulrahman Muhammad al-Okairi, was among those killed. Scores of other protestors were injured.

"If real reform is to take place in Yemen, the current spiral of violence must be brought to an end and those responsible for killings such as those committed yesterday must be brought to justice," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Disturbingly, this is one of the deadliest attacks seen in Yemen in over a month and may have been intended to undermine plans to strike a political deal that will see President Saleh stand down and bring an end to the killings on the streets."

The men in plainclothes opened fire on protesters marching from the square outside Sana'a University, where many have been camped since February.

The men, who are believed to have been members of the security forces or militant government supporters, reportedly fired from rooftops and from inside the stadium.

When the march had reached the TV station near to the stadium, armed men lined up behind the protesters and began firing at them.

"There were bullets firing everywhere. They were shooting at everything and at anyone even old men and people who were not participating in the protests" Ala'a Jarban, an eyewitness, told Amnesty International.

"A guy was shot in the head right in front of me," he said.

Members of the security forces who were present guarding the stadium and the TV station are reported to have stood by and taken no action as the attacks were being perpetrated.

"Their failure to act to prevent the killings or arrest those carrying them out, suggests strongly that the security forces were complicit or, at the very least, acquiesced in the attack," said Malcolm Smart. "Their inaction needs to be thoroughly, urgently and impartially investigated."

Clashes began when pro-government supporters threw rocks at protesters whose march had reached the

May 22 stadium where pro-government supporters were camping.

Some anti-government protesters reportedly threw rocks back in response. After being fired upon, some protesters apparently burned tyres apparently to create a smokescreen to make it more difficult for snipers to shoot at them.

Eleven of those shot dead yesterday were named as Abdulrahman Muhammad al-Okairi, Muhammad Ali Rashed al-Ansi, Abdullah Ali al-Samri, Azmi Khaled Muhammad Shamsan al-Makramy, Abdulrahman Muhammad Ahmed Amran, Assim Abdulhamid al-Hammady, Abdulwahid Abdulrahman al-Mansoob, Murad Abdulhaq al-Ariqi, Aziz Khaled al-Qirshi, Ali Ahmed Hussein al-Ahqwal and Abdullatif Miqdam, according to Amnesty International's sources.

Another man, Nasser Mohammed Nasser Fadaq, died after reportedly being run over by a car, according to field hospital volunteers.

An ambulance car was also reportedly shot at as it was trying to reach the wounded protesters.

This latest killings bring the death toll to more than 130 since anti-government protests began in Yemen last January.

Protesters have demanded that President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power since 1978, should immediately step down and that members of his administration should stand trial for the killings of protesters in recent weeks.

A political deal proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council, which has been mediating between the President and the opposition, would have the President stand down after 30 days but give him and his key associates blanket immunity against prosecution.

"The Yemeni president and his political allies must not be given immunity from prosecution as the price for ending the country's continuing human rights crisis," said Malcolm Smart.