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## **Oman must charge or release detained protesters**

The Omani authorities must say where and why they are holding some six people arrested during a recent peaceful protest in the capital Muscat, Amnesty International said today, as more than two dozen others faced trial on protest-related charges.

Fifteen people were arrested by Omani security forces on 14 May during a protest in Muscat calling for the release of others detained two days earlier in pro-reform protests.

Prominent female lawyer Basma al-Kiyumi was released on 16 May, and on 17 May some eight other activists were released, among them Muhammad al-Habssi and Ibrahim Sa'id al-Hajri. It is not known where the remaining six - including Nabhan al-Hanashi - are, or if any charges have been brought against them

“The authorities in Oman must immediately provide details on the whereabouts of all protesters being held and either charge them with a recognizable criminal offence or release them,” said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme Director.

“If they are being detained solely for participating in a peaceful public protest they should be released immediately and unconditionally.”

“Any charges should be made public, and trials against the accused must conform to international fair trial standards.”

Amnesty International is concerned that those who continue to be held following the protest in Muscat on 14 May are being detained incommunicado and may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment.

Basma al-Kiyumi was charged in connection with participating in an unlawful gathering and released on bail to await trial at future date. It is not clear if other protesters who were released on 17 May

were charged or not.

Another group of 27 men who had taken part in protests during March and April appeared before a Muscat court today and were charged with a number of offences including banditry, setting fire to government buildings, and insulting officials. The men pleaded not guilty and the case was adjourned until 23 May. Two of the men, Khaled al-Hantholi, and 'Ammar al-Hani'i, were not granted bail and remain detained at the Central Prison.

At least three people have been killed and others injured during recent public protests in Oman amid allegations that the security forces have used excessive force against protesters. Many people have been arrested, including dozens who were detained in the northern city of Sohar on 29 March.

The calls for political change in Oman take their inspiration from recent protests across the Middle East and North Africa, including in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Oman's neighbour Yemen.

In February and March, Oman's head of state Sultan Qaboos conceded to some demands, including creating more jobs, increasing unemployment benefits and sacking several ministers in his cabinet.

But protesters continue to call for more ministers to be held to account for alleged abuses of power, as well as for other promised reforms to be implemented, including a relaxation of Oman's tight restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.

"Oman's government must uphold and protect the right to peaceful protest and curtail attacks on anyone whose views it disagrees with," said Malcolm Smart.

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