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Iraqi authorities must not block peaceful protests

A day ahead of planned country-wide protests in Baghdad and across Iraq, Amnesty International calls on the Iraqi authorities to respect and protect protesters' rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.

The Iraqi authorities have appeared determined to stop large demonstrations taking place in central Baghdad since anti-government protests erupted across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011.

"People in Iraq have the right to express their views freely and to protest peacefully without the threat of violence," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"Rather than preventing peaceful assemblies, the government should be taking steps to ensure people can exercise their right to protest in safety and security."

Demonstrators are planning protests across the country on Saturday 31 August against existing regulations that grant Iraqi Members of Parliament high pensions – even after only a few years of service. In light of the economic difficulties faced by many Iraqis, the generous parliamentary pension scheme has drawn widespread criticism.

On 18 and 20 August organizers of the demonstration applied for permission with the Office of the Governor of Baghdad and the Ministry of Interior, respectively. Their requests were refused. Since then Iraqi authorities, including the Ministry of Interior and the General Prosecutor, have called for the demonstration in Baghdad to be postponed due to security concerns. However, protesters plan to go ahead with the demonstration.

Hundreds of people continue to be killed every month in violent attacks by armed groups across Iraq. On 28 August scores of civilians were killed in a wave of bomb attacks targeting Shi'a neighbourhoods of Baghdad.

"The perpetrators of such attacks are committing gross human rights abuses. Amnesty International utterly condemns all such acts," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"However, the ongoing violence in the country must not be used as a pretext for continuing a blanket ban on peaceful anti-government demonstrations in central Baghdad or any other public spaces, anywhere in the country. Iraqi authorities must uphold the rights to freedom of assembly and expression, which are protected in international human rights law and Iraq's constitution. This obligation includes, wherever necessary, providing security at protests."

Background

At the end of last year, tens of thousands of Iraqi opposition activists took to the streets, mainly in

provinces with a Sunni majority, to demonstrate against the continuing violations of detainees' rights. However, the authorities prevented any such protests taking place in central Baghdad.

On 2 August 2013 more than 100 people attempted to demonstrate against corruption and violence at Tahrir Square in Baghdad. Thirteen were arrested by security forces. Several detained protesters later reported being beaten in custody. Amnesty International has seen images purporting to show bruises sustained during these beatings.

In several provinces outside Baghdad, including in Babel and Diyala, authorities have reportedly granted permission for demonstrations to be held this weekend. On 29 August the Iraqi Bar Association held demonstrations against the MPs pension scheme in several of its branches, including outside its head office in Baghdad.

For more information on the protests in Iraq in 2011 and Iraq's constitutional and international obligations with regard to freedom of assembly and expression see Amnesty International: [Days of rage, Protests and repression in Iraq, April 2011](#)