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Saudi demonstration highlights a year of failure to investigate protest deaths

As Saudi Arabians in the Eastern Province prepared to take to the streets to mark the deaths of at least 14 people in connection with protests there since last year, Amnesty International issued a call for the country's authorities to investigate the killings.

The organization also urged the authorities not to use excessive force against those taking part in the demonstration in the city of al-Qatif this evening.

"Despite promising to investigate deaths of people at the hands of the security forces, there has been no indication this ever happened," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"The authorities must end their silence and announce both the details and the outcome of any investigations and state whether any official suspected of unlawful killing has been brought to justice.

"They must also ensure that those people marching today are allowed to exercise their right to peaceful assembly and are not met with excessive force."

Today's protest is the start of commemorative action leading to the first anniversary of the first killing on 21 November 2011.

Reports vary as to how those killed in connection with the protests lost their lives. Eyewitnesses have said that some of those who died were either not taking part in demonstrations or, if they were, posed little or no risk to the security forces.

Official sources have indicated in general that the deaths occurred after protesters used violence against security forces, including firing at them, and said that, on one occasion, this resulted in the killing of two security officers.

All demonstrations are banned in Saudi Arabia.

But they have been taking place in Saudi Arabia's predominantly Shi'a Muslim Eastern Province since February 2011 to protest the arrest, imprisonment and harassment of members of the Shi'a community for holding collective prayer meetings, celebrating Shi'a religious festivals and for breaching restrictions on building Shi'a mosques and religious schools.

The demonstrations in the Eastern Province have been inspired in part by protests that swept the Middle East and North Africa region in 2011.

The Saudi Arabian authorities have responded with repressive measures against those suspected of taking

part in or supporting protests or of expressing views critical of the state.

Protesters have been held without charge and incommunicado for days or weeks at a time, and in some cases reportedly subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in detention.