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Moroccan authorities criticized for cracking down on Témara protests

Amnesty International expressed concern today at reports of excessive use of force by the Moroccan security forces against peaceful protesters on 15 May 2011.

Demonstrators had been calling for a picnic as a protest to demand the closure of a secret detention centre in Témara, south of the capital, Rabat. The protests were part of a campaign condemning torture and other ill-treatment in Témara, initiated by former detainees and prisoners convicted of terrorism-related offences, journalists, human rights activists and human rights organizations in April and early May.

According to eyewitnesses to whom Amnesty International spoke, planned rallies and demonstrations in Rabat, Fes, Tangiers and Témara were forcibly dispersed by the Moroccan security forces, who used truncheons to break up the protests, as well as kicking and beating the demonstrators. Attempts by protesters to gather in Témara were also blocked by the security forces. As a result, scores of people suffered injuries, including head injuries. Dozens were apprehended by the security forces, detained for few hours and then released.

The demonstrations had been organized by the 20 February Movement, which calls for reform in Morocco, inspired by similar movements for change elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa.

The heavy-handed crackdown by the Moroccan security forces included soldiers, members of the riot police and the Moroccan Auxiliary Forces (Forces Auxiliaires Marocaines, FAM).

Victims and eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that scores of people were chased by the security forces before the rally started and they were prevented from reaching Témara, where the protest was supposed to take place.

In Témara, scores of security forces reportedly surrounded the protesters and beat them with sticks.

A coordinator of the 20 February Movement, Oussama el-Khelifi, told Amnesty International that he was knocked unconscious after security forces beat him with sticks from behind on his head and shoulder in Témara, approximately 1km from the Témara detention centre. He was transferred to a hospital in Témara after sustaining injuries to his head and nose before being discharged on 16 May 2011.

In Tangiers, families of prisoners convicted of terrorism-related offences, former prisoners and human rights activists tried to organize a rally to Témara, when they were stopped by security forces in the neighbourhood of Bir Ashifa and had their driving licences confiscated.

According to the information gathered by Amnesty International, several protesters in Tangiers were physically assaulted by the security forces in unclear circumstances, and possibly following an altercation between security forces and protesters. At least two protesters, brothers Ahmed and al-Mofadhhal Shahboun, were detained by the security forces and taken to

an unknown destination. Their families spent hours trying to contact police stations before the men appeared on 16 May 2011 at Tangier First Instance Court. The charges they are facing remain unclear.

In Fes, an attempted rally to join the protest in Témara was stopped by the security forces. Later in the day, at least two demonstrations were organized by the 20 February Movement, partly in response to the crackdown on protesters, as well as to demand greater freedoms. Several people were reportedly detained in police cars, assaulted and then released. Several sustained serious injuries.

Khadija Hemimis, a 55-year-old woman, sustained an ear injury and was admitted to hospital, where she received two stitches to her ear. Her two daughters were beaten with sticks and kicked by the security forces.

The National Trade Union of the Moroccan Press criticized the Moroccan authorities for the physical assaults of journalists at the Témara protest in Rabat. Security forces are said to have beaten at least five journalists during the protests.

In an official statement to the state news agency, Maghreb Arabe Presse (MAP), Minister of Communication Khalid Naciri stated that the demonstrations had not been authorized and so had been legitimately dispersed. The minister denied that the government ran secret detention centres, stating that the Témara facility was a DST administrative headquarters. He added that the Minister of Justice has instructed both the General Prosecutor and the National Human Rights Council (Conseil national des droits de l'homme, CNDH) to inspect the facility. However, he did not expand on the timeframe for such an inspection.

Amnesty International urges the Moroccan authorities to uphold the right to peaceful assembly, as guaranteed in Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Morocco is a state party. The organization condemns the excessive use of force to disperse peaceful protesters, and calls on the Moroccan authorities to conduct full, impartial and independent investigations into reports of the excessive use of force by the security forces and to ensure that those found responsible are held to account.

Amnesty International also calls on the authorities to disclose the truth about Témara detention centre and to close it down. Detainees should only be held in recognized place of detention – a key safeguard against torture and abuses.

Background

Demonstrations and planned rallies on 15 May 2011 were organized by groups supporting calls for political and human rights reform in Morocco. They followed countrywide demonstrations calling for reform on 20 February 2011 which were attended by thousands of people and which largely took place without reports of undue interference from the security forces and continued in March, April and May.

Early in May 2011, the 20 February Movement called for a protest to condemn practices of torture or other ill-treatment in the Témara detention centre and to demand its closure.

The detention centre of Témara, operated by the DST, is one of the main places where torture is reported to occur in Morocco. Amnesty International has documented dozens of cases of individuals arrested in the context of “counter-terrorism” measures who were allegedly subjected to torture or other ill-treatment while held there. Their detention at the centre has been both secret and unacknowledged, and consequently in breach of both Moroccan law and international human rights standards.