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Disturbing new evidence of Tunisian security forces brutality

Amnesty International has today revealed disturbing new evidence of the brutal methods used by Tunisian security forces to try to quell anti-Government protests in recent weeks.

An Amnesty International research team which has just returned from Tunisia found that security forces used disproportionate force to disperse protesters and in some cases fired on fleeing protesters and bystanders.

Doctors' testimonies seen by the Amnesty International research team show that some protesters in Kasserine and Thala were shot from behind, indicating that they were fleeing. Others in Kasserine, Thala, Tunis and Regueb were killed by single shots to the chest or head, suggesting deliberate intent to kill.

"This shocking evidence confirms that the Tunisian security forces were using lethal methods to quell discontent and to deter protesters," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East North Africa Programme.

"The fact that some of those killed were clearly running away shows flagrant disregard for the people's lives. It must be an urgent priority for the authorities to ensure that those under their command show restraint and respect for public safety."

The research team found that while some protesters acted violently, security forces used disproportionate force to disperse protesters and resorted to lethal force when it was not strictly necessary. Tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition were widely used even when protesters were peaceful, and protesters were beaten with batons.

Witnesses told Amnesty International that some of those killed could not have possibly posed a threat to the lives of security forces. Other victims were not involved in the protests at all.

Manal Bou'alagi, a 26-year-old mother of two was shot in the chest in the afternoon of 9 January in the city of Regueb, central Tunisia as she returned home from visiting her mother. A doctor who examined her told Amnesty International that the angle of her bullet wounds suggested she was shot by a sniper from a nearby building.

Manal's mother, Chadia, is determined to see justice: "I have lost a daughter and my grandchildren have been orphaned. I want the people responsible for Manal's killing to face real justice for what they have done to us."

The organization also found evidence that many of those arrested in connection to the unrest were tortured or otherwise ill-treated in custody. Detainees were beaten with batons or kicked, while others were forced to kneel facing walls for hours.

A 21-year-old man who wished to remain anonymous told Amnesty International that after he was

arrested in Tunis on 14 January, he was detained in the Ministry of Interior with 30 others, including 10 young women.

He told an Amnesty International researcher that security forces beat him with batons all over his body. He was eventually released without charge but was warned not to take part in any more protests. Former president Ben Ali had by this time already left the country.

Amnesty International has welcomed the caretaker government's announcement of an independent commission to investigate human rights violations committed by the security forces during recent weeks.

But it has called this week in a Human Rights Agenda for Change for other urgent and far-reaching action by the authorities, including fundamentally overhauling the country's repressive security apparatus and justice system.

"The families of those killed must have access to justice, which can only be achieved by a proper investigation with the power to compel officials to testify," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"In the meantime, any official reasonably suspected of human rights violations should be suspended from duties. Tunisians need to see that the culture of abuse is a thing of the past."

Background

An Amnesty International delegation visited Tunisia from 14 to 22 January, meeting with families of those killed in the unrest, individuals injured during protests, other witnesses, and former detainees, as well as lawyers, Human Rights Defenders, unionists and medical professionals. Researchers travelled to Hammamat, Bizerte, Regueb, Thala and Kasserine. The majority of the cases documented in this report took place between 8 and 13 January. The full report detailing their mission will be released in February.

Amnesty International on 24 January released its [Tunisia: Human Rights Agenda for Change](#), calling on the Tunisian authorities to make fundamental and lasting reforms and to break with Ben Ali's legacy of decades of abuse.