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## **Saudi authorities urged to allow peaceful protests**

Amnesty International has called on the Saudi Arabian government to allow peaceful protests after the authorities confirmed a ban on all demonstrations in the Kingdom.

On Saturday, The Ministry of Interior said that security forces would take “all necessary steps against those who attempt to disrupt order.”

Confirmation of the ban, which was first referred to in 2008, comes amid growing calls for reform in the country. Further protests are planned for Friday 11 March.

“The Saudi Arabian authorities have a duty to ensure freedom of assembly and are obliged under international law to allow peaceful protests to take place,” said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“They must act immediately to end this outrageous restriction on the right to legitimate protest.”

Some 24 people were detained on 3 and 4 March following protests in the city of al-Qatif, denouncing the prolonged detention of Shi’a prisoners.

Police in al-Qatif kicked and beat with batons at least three of the protesters, who were taking part in an apparently peaceful demonstration supporting nine Shi’a community members who have been detained without trial for over 14 years.

The arrests came a week after prominent Shi’a cleric Sheikh Tawfiq Jaber Ibrahim al-’Amr was arrested following a sermon calling for reforms in Saudi Arabia. He was released without charge on 6 March.

“The Saudi authorities must investigate reports of beatings of protesters by security forces. They should also ensure that those detained are either charged with recognizable offences and tried fairly or released,” said Philip Luther.

“While in detention they must be protected from torture and other ill-treatment, and given regular access to their family, lawyers and medical.”

Most of the protesters are believed to be held in a police station in al-Dhahran, a city in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province.

Among those arrested are Shi’a activists Hussain al-Yusef and Hussein al-’Alq, who have written for the Shi’a website [www.rasid.com](http://www.rasid.com), which often details arrests of and discrimination against members of the Shi’a community.

The nine members of the Shi’a community in prolonged detention were arrested in connection with the 1996 bombing of a US military complex in al-Khobar in which 20 people were killed and hundreds injured.

According to reports, they were interrogated, tortured and denied access to lawyers together with the opportunity to challenge the legality of their detention.

Calls for reform, including for a constitutional monarchy and greater political freedoms, and for the release of people detained without charge or trial in Saudi Arabia have grown louder in recent weeks amid protests spreading across the Middle East and North Africa.

## **Background**

In 2008, following a protest against Israel's military action in Gaza, the Ministry of Interior, was reported to have said that protests in Saudi Arabia were banned.

Those who defy this ban are often held incommunicado without charge and denied access to the courts to challenge the legality of their detention.

Critics of the Saudi Arabian government face gross human rights violations at the hands of security forces under the control of the Ministry of Interior.

They are often held incommunicado without charge, sometimes in solitary confinement, prevented from consulting lawyers and denied access to the courts to challenge the lawfulness of their detention.

Torture or other ill-treatment is frequently used to extract confessions from detainees, to punish them for refusing to "repent", or to force them to make undertakings not to criticize the government. Incommunicado detention in Saudi Arabia often lasts until a confession is obtained, which can take months and occasionally years.