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Yemen must rein in security forces as protests are violently repressed

Amnesty International today condemned the actions of Yemen's security forces after they beat protesters with sticks and reportedly shocked them with electric batons amid ongoing demonstrations inspired by protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt.

Security forces in uniform and plain clothes attacked a crowd of some 2,000 people protesting peacefully in Sana'a yesterday and also appear to have beaten protesters in both Sana'a and Ta'izz today.

"We are appalled by these reports of vicious attacks on peaceful protesters by security forces. Yemen needs to rein in its security forces immediately and stop excessive use of force," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Human rights activist and lawyer Khaled al-Ansi told Amnesty International security forces attacked him with electric shock batons during yesterday's demonstration in Sana'a and he heard other protesters screaming "Electricity!" as they were beaten.

"Security forces in Yemen cannot be trusted with electric shock batons, given the persistence of torture in the country. They can be too easily misused," said Philip Luther.

The batons can cause severe pain and repeatedly administer shocks at the push of a button without leaving substantial marks.

Eyewitnesses said they saw members of the security forces distributing what looked like batons to their colleagues ahead of the attacks, after they arrived towards the end of yesterday's demonstration in Sana'a.

Journalist Samia al-Ghabari told Amnesty International she was knocked unconscious after being shoved to the ground by a plain-clothes member of the security forces who had tried to take her away as the demonstration was repressed.

More than 120 people were reportedly arrested during demonstrations in Ta'izz's Tahrir Street over the weekend of 12 and 13 February as they celebrated political change in Egypt. Dozens more were said to have been arrested today in Ta'izz. Most have since been released.

Opposition parties announced on 13 February they had agreed to enter a national dialogue with President Ali Abdullah Saleh in order to defuse political tensions on the streets.

However, demonstrators have been continuing protests amid fears the talks may not produce meaningful changes.

“The Yemeni government cannot win the trust of its people by beating them with sticks or electric batons,” said Philip Luther. “The authorities must guarantee Yemen’s people the right to voice their opinions and protest peacefully without fear of attack as a bare minimum in order to show them that the government is ready for meaningful change.”