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Yemen urged to halt escalating crackdown after two reported killed in capital

Amnesty International has today urged the Yemeni authorities to end its crackdown on anti-government demonstrations after two protesters were reported to have been killed in Sana'a.

They would be the first fatalities in the capital since the outbreak of unrest earlier this month and bring the total killed to 16, including 13 in the southern city of Aden.

The two protesters reportedly died after being shot on Tuesday night, when security forces, aided by men described by witnesses as "thugs", stormed a group of people who had set up a protest camp outside Sana'a University.

"This disturbing development indicates that the heavy-handed tactics which we have seen the security forces using with lethal effect against protesters in the south of Yemen are increasingly being employed elsewhere," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"If the authorities continue in this manner, more demonstrators will inevitably be killed, particularly as more protests are due to take place in cities across Yemen in the coming days. People must be allowed to assemble and protest in peace."

The situation in Aden remains tense with residents reporting an undeclared "state of emergency" amid a heavy security presence.

'Ali 'Abdu al-Khalafi became the latest fatality in Aden yesterday after he passed away after being shot in the head on 22 February, when security forces reportedly fired on protests in the Khormaksar district of the city.

Another person died in Ta'izz on 20 February after being wounded in a protest there on 18 February, when security forces were also reported to have opened fire on demonstrators.

Amnesty International has also learned that the leader of a political opposition group in southern Yemen has been detained.

Hassan Ba'oom, who is in his 70s and in poor health, was arrested by security forces on 20 February at an Aden hospital where he was being treated for a broken leg. He is reportedly being held incommunicado in the Central Prison in Sana'a.

One of the leaders of the opposition coalition Southern Movement, he had reportedly called for a "Day of Rage" against the Yemeni government to be held in the south.

“If Hassan Ba’oom is being held solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression and assembly, he is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally,” said Philip Luther.

“The authorities must also ensure he receives all necessary medical treatment without delay and that he is protected from torture and other ill-treatment.”

Scores of others have been arrested following protests in Aden on 16 February. They are believed to be held without charge or trial in al-Mansurah Central Prison.

Background information

Protests have been taking place in Aden and other places in southern Yemen since 2007 against perceived discrimination by the government against southerners and, increasingly, in favour of the secession of the south of the country.

Following demonstrations in the capital Sana’a and other cities in recent weeks calling for the president to stand down and regime change, protesters in Aden have started to make similar demands.

The Southern Movement is an umbrella movement of political groups, some of which want the south of the country to secede.