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Iraqi authorities must halt attacks on protesters

The Iraqi authorities must stop attacks on peaceful protesters calling for an end to unemployment, poor services, and corruption and demanding political reforms, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

Days of Rage: Protests and Repression in Iraq documents how Iraqi and Kurdish forces have shot and killed protesters, including three teenage boys, threatened, detained and tortured political activists, as well as targeting journalists covering the protests.

“The Iraqi authorities must end the use of intimidation and violence against those Iraqis peacefully calling for political and economic reforms,” said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International’s director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“Eight years on from the end of Saddam Hussain’s long and grossly oppressive rule, it is high time that Iraqis are allowed to exercise their rights to peaceful protest and expression free from violence at the hands of government security forces. The authorities in both Baghdad and the Kurdistan region must cease their violent crackdowns.”

Amnesty International has seen video evidence showing that security forces used excessive force on a number of occasions, firing live ammunition that reportedly killed several protesters.

Protests first erupted in mid-2010 over the federal government’s failure to provide basic services such as water and electricity. The Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Governments responded by issuing regulations effectively giving the authorities unlimited jurisdiction over who can demonstrate.

But the popular protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 encouraged Iraqis to defy the new restrictions.

On 16 February, a teenage boy was among those killed in the city of Kut, south-east of Baghdad, during initially peaceful protests advocating better basic services, including electricity and water supplies.

On 17 February, organizers obtained authorization for a protest in Sulaimaniya’s Sara Square, now referred to by protesters as Azady ‘Freedom Square.’ Live ammunition was fired at protesters, and a 15-year-old boy, Rezhwan ’Ali, was shot in the head and died instantly.

Protests reached their height on the “Day of Rage”, 25 February, when tens of thousands of demonstrators marched in cities across Iraq, including the Kurdistan region.

In Mosul alone, five people were reported to have been shot dead. One of them was Mu’ataz Muwafaq Waissi, married with one child, reportedly shot in the head by a sniper.

In the Kurdistan region, at least six people died as a result of excessive force by the Kurdish security forces.

Amnesty International also found disturbing evidence of targeted attacks on political activists, torture and other ill-treatment of people arrested in connection with the protests, and attacks or threats against journalists, media outlets, government critics, academics and students.

On 30 March Iraqi authorities in Baghdad announced that their security forces were under orders not to use firearms against demonstrators except for self defence. Yet only days later security forces used live fire against Iranian residents of Camp Ashraf, north of Baghdad – at least 30 are said to have been killed and many others injured.

“The governments in Baghdad and the Kurdistan region must take control of their security forces, investigate their use of excessive force, and the killings and injuries that this has caused, as well as the torture and other ill-treatment of protesters, and hold those responsible to account,” said Malcolm Smart.

“The way to begin defusing tensions across the country and restore public confidence is to deliver truth and justice, and to make reparation to those whose rights have been violated.”

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