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Yemen violence surges as protesters are killed

The Yemeni authorities must immediately stop the killing of peaceful protesters by security forces, Amnesty International said today following reports that dozens of people have been shot dead in the capital Sana'a since Sunday.

Hundreds more are said to have been injured after security forces used snipers and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) against protesters marching to demand the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Around 26 people were killed on Sunday. The continuing violence has seen more killed in Sana'a today.

The situation is also worsening in the southern city of Ta'izz after security forces opened fire on protesters marching in solidarity with those killed in Sana'a.

"Yemen is on a knife edge. Those who have been protesting peacefully for change are increasingly frustrated by the political deadlock," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Meanwhile, eruptions of violence point to a growing risk of civil war. The Yemeni authorities must stop the use of excessive force before the violence spirals out of control."

Since February 2011 some 200 people have been killed and more than a thousand have been injured in protests across Yemen as security forces have repeatedly used excessive force, including by firing live ammunition at peacefully gathered protesters.

The Yemeni authorities have launched investigations into some of the killings. They have offered compensation to victims of the most serious incident of violence, an attack on a protest camp in Sana'a on 18 March that reportedly left more than 50 people dead.

Local residents have increasingly fallen victim to clashes between government forces and armed opponents including in cities of Sana'a and Ta'izz.

In the southern city Zinjibar, dozens of families are reported to have fled their homes following fighting there in June between the Yemeni army and armed opponents accused by the government of being al-Qa'ida elements. This situation has raised concerns over the worsening humanitarian situation in the country.

Amnesty International called on the United Nations Human Rights Council, which is debating the situation in Yemen in Geneva today, to urge the Yemeni authorities to order the security forces to immediately cease their use of live ammunition against peaceful protesters.

The organization called for an independent, impartial and thorough commission of inquiry to be set up with international assistance to investigate the killings and injury of protesters and others.

It also called for the immediate suspension of supplies of weapons and munitions that could be used for excessive force in the policing of protests.

"The international community cannot continue to put its security concerns and fears about al-Qa'ida before human rights considerations," said Philip Luther.

"It must be made clear to the Yemeni authorities that protesters should not be targeted for exercising their rights. The abuses being committed by Yemeni forces are totally unacceptable and must cease. And those responsible for human rights abuses must be held accountable."