

AI Index: PRE 01/628/2013
29 November 2013

Yemen: Authorities must rein in security forces ahead of protests

Yemen must ensure security forces refrain from using excessive force during protests planned this Saturday or risk further bloodshed, Amnesty International said.

Protests are planned in the southern sea-port city of Aden on 30 November to mark the 46th anniversary of South Yemen's independence from British occupation. Tensions in Yemen have escalated in recent years as large numbers of southerners continue to demand independence from the north.

"Protests in Yemen have always been dangerous for activists, with police routinely shooting and killing peaceful demonstrators. However, given the disagreements over the future of the south of Yemen and the charged symbolism of the date, we are particularly worried about what could happen on Saturday," said Philip Luther, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty International.

"The authorities must ensure the police respect people's right to demonstrate freely and peacefully. Even if some elements use violence, the police response must be limited to using the minimum force necessary to counter threats. Firearms may only be used in self-defence or defence of others against an imminent threat of death or serious injury."

On 9 June 2013, at least nine people died and a dozen were injured after security forces shot at demonstrators in Yemen's capital, Sana'a.

Earlier in the year, on 21 February 2013, Yemeni security forces opened fire on peaceful protesters gathered in a non-violent sit-in at Al-'Aroudh Square in Khormaksar, Aden. At least four people died and dozens were injured. According to activists, the death toll later reached 15. The status of the official investigation into the killings remains unclear.

On 18 March 2013, a sit-in and a general strike was harshly repressed in the city of Tarim in Hadramawt. A local activist who was recording the crackdown on camera was killed. A number of other peaceful demonstrators were injured when the security forces dispersed the gathering and removed the tent being used for the sit-in.

Security forces also often prevent demonstrations from taking place by harassing, intimidating and arresting activists in advance or by blocking access to areas where protests are planned.

"Yemen has a duty to uphold the right to peaceful assembly and to protect those exercising this right," said Philip Luther. "The authorities must ensure prompt, independent and impartial investigations when security forces attack peaceful protesters, in violation of international human rights standards."

Background

Yemen is facing a critical moment in the transition period that has followed the ousting of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012. A country-wide national dialogue that was launched on 18 March was supposed to conclude on 18 September, but disagreements over issues have hindered progress.

The status of the south of the country, specifically the area that was the independent state of South Yemen between the end of the British occupation in 1967 and its unification with North Yemen in 1990, is the key issue of disagreement. Yemenis are divided between those who essentially want to preserve the status quo, those who want greater autonomy for the south of the country and those who want it to secede from the north.

Disagreements over issues in the national dialogue have involved the central authorities in Sana'a, opposition groups in the north and south of the country who have a long history of grievances against those authorities and elements loyal to the former President. In recent months, these disagreements have been marred by violent acts, including assassinations and bombings targeting members of opposition groups.