

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Syria: Amnesty International calls on Syria to end repressive measures against Kurds and to set up an independent judicial enquiry into the recent clashes

Amnesty International today called on the Syrian authorities to establish an independent judicial enquiry into the recent clashes between Kurdish protesters and security forces and to urgently review the cases of hundreds of Syrian Kurds who have been detained after mass arrests across the country in March.

"Unless they are to be charged with recognisably criminal offences and brought to trial without undue delay, they should be released immediately," said the organisation today.

Amnesty International repeated its appeal, of 16 March, to the authorities to make known the whereabouts of hundreds of those people detained. As far as the organisation is aware, almost all of the people detained are being held incommunicado without charge and at unknown locations. A number of children are also detained: Mas'oud Ja'far, 16 years old, from al-Qahtaniya, is one of those reportedly still held.

"The incommunicado detention at unknown locations of many hundreds of Syrian Kurds is of serious concern, not least as it puts detainees at greater risk of torture or ill-treatment," added Amnesty International. Amnesty International has already received descriptions of torture of named individuals, including children. Seventeen year-old Qane'e Muhammad Ramadan was reportedly tortured with electric shocks while held for nine days.

The human rights organisation also called for the Syrian government to establish an independent judicial enquiry to investigate how friction at a football match escalated into the killings of tens of people, and a wave of protests, riots and arrests across much of the north of the country. Amnesty International believes that only an adequately resourced public, independent and impartial judicial enquiry can reveal the full truth.

"For justice to be done and to be seen to be done, the truth must be uncovered and the suspected perpetrators, whether from the security forces or the protestors, of serious crimes and human rights violations should be brought to justice. Such an enquiry should include investigation of the root causes of grievances, and propose recommendations to alleviate them, so as to prevent similar occurrences happening in the future," the organisation said.

The organization is also concerned about the expulsion of at least 24 Kurdish students who have been expelled from their universities and dormitories, including a number expelled from Damascus University on 18 March, reportedly for participating in peaceful protests. Amnesty International has received reports suggesting a pattern of increasing persecution of Kurdish people. Syrian Kurds are reportedly being arrested or attacked solely on the basis of their ethnicity or for speaking Kurdish.

Reportedly, a Kurdish army recruit named Khayri Jendu Bin Barjas died of his injuries in hospital, around 23 March, after being beaten by soldiers reportedly for having spoken Kurdish to a colleague.

BACKGROUND

On 12 March clashes broke out between Arab and Kurdish fans at a football stadium in Qamishli, in north-eastern Syria. Syrian security forces responded by firing shots into the crowd resulting in the deaths of at least 20 people and dozens of injuries. Police attacked Syrian Kurdish mourners the next day resulting in two days of rioting by Syrian Kurds in several towns in the mainly Kurdish north-eastern area of Syria. In 'Amouda around 13 March, the head of the town's police station was reportedly beaten up by Kurdish protesters. He later died of his injuries. Hundreds of individuals, mostly Syrian Kurds, including children, remain in detention. Most of these are being held in incommunicado detention and thereby are at risk of torture or ill-treatment.

An estimated 1.5 million Kurds live in Syria mostly in the Jazira area in the North East of Syria. Today, at least 150,000 Kurds in Syria are denied Syrian nationality and civil rights.

Torture and ill-treatment is routinely inflicted on political detainees, including Kurdish activists, while they are held incommunicado in Syrian prisons and detention centres. Eight Syrian Kurds are being held in solitary confinement in cruel and inhumane conditions in the political wing of 'Adra Prison, near the capital Damascus. Their detention followed their participation in a 25 June 2003 peaceful demonstration outside the UNICEF headquarters in Damascus, calling for civil and political rights for the Syrian Kurdish population, including the right of Syrian Kurdish children to be taught in the Kurdish language.

There has been previous violent confrontation between the Syrian authorities and Syrian Kurds. In March 1986, during the Festival of *Newruz*, clashes between both sides resulted in several deaths and injuries. In October 1992 Kurds marked the 30th anniversary of the census which deprived many Kurds of their Syrian nationality and basic civil rights. In response Syrian security forces carried out mass arrests. In 1995 the Syrian authorities banned the traditional *Newruz* celebrations and dozens of Kurds were arrested.