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Yemen: Renewed violence in Sa'da threatens human rights

Amnesty International has written to President 'Ali 'Abdullah Saleh urging him to take all possible steps to ensure that the recent upsurge in clashes between government forces and supporters of the late Zaidi Shi'a cleric Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi do not result in a repeat of the gross human rights abuses which occurred during earlier unrest in Sa'da governorate.

Since armed clashes resumed some four weeks ago, thousands of inhabitants of Sa'da and surrounding areas, are reported to have been displaced from their homes and now to face difficulties in accessing humanitarian assistance as the area has been largely closed to journalists and humanitarian organizations by government forces. Reports suggest that dozens of civilians have been killed, some as a result of aerial bombardment by government forces. Meanwhile, security forces are reported to have rounded up suspected supporters of al-Huthi in Sa'da and to be detaining them incommunicado, raising fears of torture or other ill-treatment. Dozens of people are said to have been killed in armed clashes, including government soldiers, but the circumstances in all cases are currently unclear.

In its letter to President Saleh, Amnesty International said it fully recognized the government's responsibility to protect public safety and to punish crimes, but when doing so must abide at all times by the requirements of international law, including the prohibition of torture and respect for the right to life. In particular, it urged the President to ensure that all members of Yemen's security forces are instructed to abide by key international standards such as the UN Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms and the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, and that those who commit unlawful killings or other breaches will be held to account.

Amnesty international also requested information about the number of people being detained in Sa'da and where they are being held, urging that they be safeguarded against possible torture or other ill-treatment and either brought to trial promptly and fairly or released.

Earlier clashes between government forces and al-Huthi supporters, which began in 2004 and have continued since then interspersed with periods of relative peace, caused significant loss of life and were accompanied by serious human rights violations, with government forces accused of using excessive lethal force and carrying out deliberate killings.

Since 2007, protests in Aden and other towns such as al-Dali' and al-Mukalla against alleged government discrimination against people living in southern Yemen have resulted in a government clampdown in which dozens of protesters have been killed by the security forces in highly questionable circumstances and the arrests of many others.

Background

Long-standing tensions between followers of the al-Huthi family from the Zaidi Shi'a community and the Yemeni government were heightened by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. During and after the US-led invasion, followers of al-Huthi carried on the protests after Friday prayers every week outside mosques, particularly the Grand Mosque in Sana'a, during which they shouted anti-US and anti-Israel slogans. The protests were invariably followed by arrests and detentions. In June 2004 the government called on Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi, one of those leading the criticism of the US-led invasion, to hand himself over to the authorities. When he refused, tension between the two sides escalated into armed clashes. In September 2004, Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi was killed and there was then a truce until March 2005, when the clashes again erupted. In September 2005 the government issued a presidential amnesty for al-Huthi followers which was followed by the release in March 2006 of dozens of those detained during the clashes. Most of them had been held without charge or trial. The exact number of those who remained in detention was never disclosed by the government, but local human rights workers suggested that they could number several hundred. They included at least 37 who were convicted by the Specialised Criminal Court after an unfair trial and sentenced to prison terms or death. In January 2007, the clashes again resumed, continuing until August 2008 when the government announced an agreement to end the fighting had been achieved through mediation by the Qatar government. Hundreds of prisoners were then released by the two sides.

Peaceful protests in the southern part of the country began in 2007 with demonstrations by mainly retired soldiers from the army of former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Following the unification of the country in 1990, both armies of the PDRY (South Yemen) and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) (North Yemen), were merged into a single army force for the new Republic of Yemen. However, following the civil war of 1994, many of the soldiers of the former PDRY were dismissed from the army. These, as well as those who remained in the current army, complained of being subjected to discrimination when compared to soldiers originally from the North. The protests have since grown into a movement campaigning on issues of discriminations beyond employment and retirement in the army for southerners to other aspects of political, economic and social life.

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