

Amnesty condemns crackdown on protesters in Tunisia

Mohammad Bouazizi's suicide sparked protests over rising prices, unemployment and corruption in Tunisia that have sometimes turned violent as they continue to spread.

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Dubai: Amnesty International on Friday condemned an ongoing crackdown by Tunisian authorities on a wave of protests sparked by Mohammad Bouazizi, a vegetable seller, who died on Wednesday.

At least two other protesters have been killed during demonstrations following the suicide of Mohamad Bouazizi, an unemployed graduate who set himself on fire in front of a government building in the town of Sidi Bouzid in early December after police confiscated his fruit cart for selling without a permit. He died from his injuries in hospital on January 4.

Mohammad Bouazizi's suicide sparked protests over rising prices, unemployment and corruption in Tunisia that have sometimes turned violent as they continue to spread.

"Tunisians must be allowed to express their grievances and freely protest. The authorities made empty promises of work opportunities which were followed by a crackdown on protesters." said Amnesty International

"The Tunisian authorities have a responsibility to maintain public order but this should be no excuse to target people simply peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly," said Amnesty International.

Mohammad Ammar, 18, was killed by police fire on December 24, following clashes between demonstrators and members of the security forces in Menzel Bouzayane, in Sidi Bouzid. Chawki Hidari, aged 44, died in hospital as a result of bullet injuries. Ten other demonstrators were also injured during the confrontations.

On 22 December, Neji Flehi, 24, also committed suicide by electrocution after reportedly shouting "No unemployment, no misery!" during a demonstration also in Sidi Bouzid.

In recent days lawyers have been singled out for beating and arrests, following a nationwide sit-in by them on December 31 in solidarity with the Sidi Bouzid protests.

In response, thousands of Tunisian lawyers carried out a strike on Thursday in protest against their treatment.

The Tunisian authorities have said their forces acted in self defence but are yet to confirm any investigations into the deaths and injuries of protesters.

"The Tunisian authorities must immediately launch a thorough and impartial investigation into the deaths and injuries during the protests and hold to account anyone found responsible for excessive use of force." said Amnesty International

Waves of arrests have taken place throughout the country as freedoms of expression and assembly are curtailed and undermined. Exact figures of people still detained have not been released by the authorities who have a track record of holding people incommunicado. An activist, Ammar Amroussia, continues to be detained pending investigation. He was arrested on December 29 for participating in a sit-in in Gafsa.

The Tunisian authorities have also sought to prevent the spread of protests and the spreading of information on the protests, by enforcing a media blackout and by blocking websites and closing the email accounts of internet activists, in particular those using Facebook.

"The response of the authorities to the Sidi Bouzid demonstrations shows that the Tunisian authorities have not learnt their lessons of their handling of the 2008 Gafsa demonstrations. No one was held to account for the deaths of protestors and promises of accountability and economic opportunities never materialised." said Amnesty International .

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