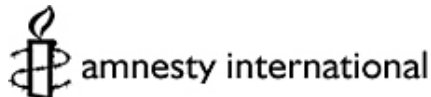


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Fears for missing Syrian protesters amid continued unrest

Amnesty International has urged the Syrian authorities to reveal the whereabouts of at least 21 protesters who have been missing since they were arrested following demonstrations earlier this week.

Seven of those missing were arrested after taking part in a small demonstration in Damascus on Wednesday to demand the release of political prisoners.

Another 33 arrested following Wednesday's protest were charged yesterday and could face up to 15 years in jail, amid continued demonstrations across the country.

"All of those detained merely for taking part in peaceful protests are prisoners of conscience and should be released immediately and unconditionally," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"We are particularly worried about the safety of at least 21 people who have not been seen since they were seized by security forces and fear they are being held in detention centres notorious for the use of torture."

Some of those missing are relatives of political prisoners. One of them, Hussein al-Labwani, a relative of prisoner of conscience Kamal al-Labwani, suffers from heart disease and needs daily medication.

The 33 protesters who have been charged - 23 men and 10 women - include several human rights activists and now await trial on charges of "weakening national sentiment" and "causing sectarian and racial strife".

The 33 have since announced a hunger strike.

Wednesday's demonstration, inspired by protests across the Middle East and North Africa, was led by relatives of political prisoners who gathered outside the Ministry of the Interior to submit a petition for the release of their relatives.

Shortly afterwards the group was violently dispersed by plain-clothed security officers wielding batons.

Amnesty International has received information that some of those detained were beaten in custody.

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