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Thousands March for Reform

Demonstrations End Peacefully as Police Stay Away
February 20, 2011

(Rabat) - Thousands of Moroccans in cities across the country demonstrated in favor of political reform on February 20, 2011, Human Rights Watch said today. Mostly peaceful demonstrations and marches took place in towns and villages largely without interference from police, who in some areas were barely in evidence.

Morocco's demonstrators encountered none of the deadly force utilized by the security forces against protesters in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen.

"Morocco's security forces have sometimes dispersed large demonstrations with considerable violence," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Today, the security forces allowed Moroccan citizens to march peacefully to demand profound changes in how their country is governed."

In Rabat, the capital, about 2,000 demonstrators massed at Bab al-Had Square and marched to parliament on Mohammed V Avenue, where they gathered to chant slogans calling for change: "Today or tomorrow, we will gain our rights," "Down with Tyranny," and "The people demand change." Some demonstrators called for constitutional changes, an independent judiciary, and a new cabinet.

Sources in Casablanca, Morocco's largest metropolis, and in Marrakesh and Agadir, told Human Rights Watch that hundreds of people demonstrated in each city. There were reports that protesters

set fire to a police station in Marrakesh. There were also demonstrations in towns in the Rif, the mountainous area in the north of the country. Witnesses there said police kept a low profile around the protesters.

In Rabat, no more than a dozen widely dispersed, unarmed uniformed policemen monitored the protests between Bab al-Had and parliament. A few clusters of plainclothes agents stood on the periphery of the demonstration. Observers were surprised that no vans filled with auxiliary forces or riot police were anywhere to be seen, even though these vans are a common sight when demonstrations take place. A pro-government counter-demonstration of about 40 people took place up the street from the mass of reform protesters, but the two groups kept their distance.

There were no reports of arrests in Rabat as of nightfall.

However, in Larache in northwest Morocco, groups of persons set fire to a police station, robbed stores and tried to break into banks, according to a representative of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights. In Hoceima, groups of protesters vandalized a stadium, two political party offices and a pair of hotels, activists in the city said. Security forces replied with teargas and rubber bullets. There were reports of injuries. In Sefrou, a town in north central Morocco, pro-reform demonstrators clashed with supporters of the government, according to a person injured in the melee. In Marrakesh, groups of protesters burned a police station and damaged private cars and traffic lights, a witness told Human Rights Watch.

Morocco's larger cities are the scene of frequent demonstrations. Protesters include well-organized groups of the unemployed who demand jobs, and families of political prisoners. There have also been solidarity demonstrations in favor of the Palestinian people. In one of the biggest demonstrations Casablanca has ever known, some half a million marched on March 12, 2000, to oppose plans to reform Morocco's Sharia-based family code. According to Moroccan law, organizers of an outdoor demonstration must provide advance notification to authorities, who may forbid the event if they deem it a threat to the public order.

The response of security forces to demonstrations varies widely; they sometimes allow the event to run its course undisturbed; sometimes they beat the protesters with batons, and assault journalists who photograph or film the events. Authorities have over the years charged hundreds of Moroccans with participating in "illegal" demonstrations, and courts have sentenced many of them to prison terms of a few to several months.

As today's protests wound down and Moroccans prepared for the beginning of the work week on Monday, organizers spoke of organizing another demonstration next weekend.

"Morocco's calm response to protests today should be the rule, not the exception for tolerating peaceful dissent," said Whitson.

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