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Moroccan authorities must uphold freedom of assembly

Amnesty International today condemned the Moroccan security forces' violent dispersal of peaceful protestors in the capital, Rabat, on 21 and 22 February 2011. The organization is calling for the Moroccan authorities to investigate the incidents, which left many protestors needing hospital treatment.

On the evening of 21 February 2011, security forces dispersed a group of around 30 people who had gathered in Bab El Had Square to demand reforms. Protestors reported being beaten and at least seven were hospitalized, including Khadija Riyadi, President of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (Association Marocaine des Droits Humains, AMDH), who had been punched in the stomach.

Other demonstrators were said to need treatment for wounds including a fractured rib and a head injury. One demonstrator who required hospital treatment was reported to be over 60 years old.

The security forces which dispersed the demonstration were reported to belong to the Moroccan Auxiliary Forces (Forces Auxiliaires Marocaines, FAM), a law enforcement agency in charge of certain public order functions, and the Mobile Intervention Unit (Corps mobile d'intervention, CMI). These units have often been used by the Moroccan authorities to break up peaceful demonstrations.

The following day, another attempt to hold a peaceful demonstration in Bab El Had Square was also dispersed by the CMI. Protestors reported that they had been beaten with truncheons, kicked, punched and insulted.

Five protestors were taken to hospital following the incident, including Abdelhalek Benzekri, Vice-President of the AMDH, who suffered an arm injury.

Amnesty International is concerned that in both instances the security forces resorted to force without warning and without need. Under international standards, such as the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials (the Code of Conduct), police may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty.

Amnesty International is calling on the Moroccan authorities to conduct full, impartial and independent investigations into reports of the excessive use of force by the security forces on 21 and 22 February 2011 and to ensure that those found responsible are held to account.

Such investigations should make recommendations regarding appropriate disciplinary or other action to be taken against any officials found to have used excessive force or committed abuses, compensation for those injured and measures to prevent use of excessive force in the future.

The organization is further urging the Moroccan authorities to publicly issue clear instructions to all branches of the security forces that the use of excessive force is unacceptable.

Background information

Both demonstrations on 21 and 22 February 2011 had been organized by groups supporting calls for political and human rights reform in Morocco. They followed countrywide demonstrations calling for reform on 20 February 2011 which were attended by thousands of people and which largely passed without reports of undue interference from the security forces.