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ANNEX 8.46



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Libya: Arrests, Assaults in Advance of Planned Protests

Halt Attacks on Peaceful Demonstrators and Free Those Arrested

February 16, 2011

(New York) - Libyan Internal Security forces have arrested at least 14 people as protests began in connection with peaceful demonstrations planned for February 17, 2011, Human Rights Watch said today. The Libyan authorities should immediately free all activists, writers, and protesters detained solely for their role in preparing for the February 17 protest and allow Libyans the right to protest peacefully, Human Rights Watch said.

On the evening of February 15, authorities used teargas and batons, as well as attackers in street clothes, to disperse protesters in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, injuring 14 people, the online daily Quryna reported. Sources in Libya told Human Rights Watch that one person was killed in the ensuing violence.

"With people from Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain and Iran asserting their right to protest, the Libyan government is responding in exactly the wrong way," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Colonel Muammar Gaddafi should learn from his former neighbors that stability has to include respect for peaceful protest."

In the wake of the widespread protests in Tunisia and Egypt, Libyan websites posted calls for a "Day of Anger" on February 17, the anniversary of a 2006 peaceful demonstration in which security forces killed at least 12 protesters.

Sources in Libya who wished not to be named for security reasons told Human Rights Watch that the February 15 demonstration started after authorities arrested two key members of the families of victims of the 1996 Abu Salim prison massacre. The group has organized regular public protests over the past two years calling for an independent investigation into the prison killings and the prosecution of those responsible.

At around 3:30 p.m., five Internal Security officers went to the house of the committee spokesman and lawyer, Fathi Terbil, arresting him and confiscating his laptop. He said they later arrested another prominent spokesman for the group, Farag Sharany, and detained both at Internal Security headquarters in Benghazi.

By 9 p.m., dozens of other family members had gathered outside the Internal Security office to call for their release. They were soon joined by several hundred others, including writers and activists. At around 11 p.m., Internal Security forces arrested Mohamed al-Sareet, a journalist who writes for the independent website Jeel Libya. Idris al-Mismari, a writer and former political prisoner, told Al Jazeera that plainclothes security officers dispersed protesters "using tear gas, batons, and hot water."

One protester told Human Rights Watch: "This is the same scenario as Egypt, they are sending in the *baltagiyya* (thugs) to beat us." Internal Security officers eventually released Terbil and Sharany at around 1 a.m. on February 16, but al-Sareet remains detained.



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The arrests continued on February 16. At 5 a.m., al-Mismari was doing a live telephone interview with Al Jazeera when the line suddenly went dead. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that security forces arrested al-Mismari then.

At around 7 a.m., Internal Security agents arrested Mohamed al-Sahim at his home. Al-Sahim, who regularly writes for independent Libyan websites such as Al Manara, had attended the protest the night before and posted video footage on his Facebook profile. The video quickly spread online. Agents also went to the home of two brothers, Salem and Abu Bakr al-Elwani, and arrested them. They were also among the families of the Abu Salim victims who had participated in the protest the night before. Later in the day, in Misrata, Internal Security arrested brothers Habib and Mohamed al-Amin, whose brother Hassan runs the opposition website Libya Al Mostakbal out of London.

Sources in Libya told Human Rights Watch that on February 16, Internal Security officers also arrested four other former political prisoners - the brothers Farag, Al-Mahdi, Sadek, and Ali Hmeid in Tripoli. Authorities had detained them in February 2007 when they, along with 10 others, published an online call for a peaceful protest on February 17 that year. Internal Security officers arrested all 14 men the day before and "disappeared" them for several months before finally bringing them before the Tripoli State Security Court.

On June 10, 2008, the court sentenced the men to between 6 and 25 years in prison. They were released over the following months after the Gaddafi Foundation, headed by Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi the son of the Libyan leader, intervened. Jamal al-Haji was the last to be released and was subsequently, arbitrarily arrested on two further occasions, most recently on February 1 after calling for the February 17 demonstration.

"February 17 is a date that resonates in Libya because it has come to symbolize peaceful protest in the face of police brutality," Stork said. "This time Libyan authorities should protect - not violate - the right to peaceful protest."

List of those arrested so far:

Jamal al-Haji [arrested Feb. 1]

Farag Hmeid

Ali Hmeid

Al Mahdi Hmeid

Al Sadek Hmeid

Mohamed El Sareet

Habib al-Amin

Mohamed al-Amin

Idriss al Mismari

Mohamed al-Sahim

Abu Bakr al-Elwani

Salem al-Elwani

Fathi Terbil [released]

Farag Sharany [released]

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