

Reports reveal state massacre of Tunisian protesters

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12 January 2011

A series of reports emerged yesterday of large-scale killings by Tunisian security forces of protesters rioting against joblessness and poor social conditions under the dictatorial regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Riots have shaken Tunisia after Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian university graduate working as a street vendor, killed himself last month to protest police confiscation of his entire stock of fruits and vegetables.

Similar protests shook neighboring Algeria last week, after the government tried to force through price increases in subsidized food items including flour, sugar, and oil.

Though the official death toll in Tunisia stood at 18 yesterday, reports have emerged of dozens of protesters killed in the city of Kasserine alone. Sadok Mahmoudi, a member of the regional offices of the UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Workers) union, told AFP: “It’s chaos in Kasserine after a night of violence, sniper fire, and looting and raiding of businesses and homes by police in civilian clothing who have since retreated.”

Mahmoudi said the number of dead was at least 50, citing contacts at the Kasserine regional hospital. AFP noted that its other sources in the area backed up Mahmoudi’s account.

Medical personnel at the Kasserine hospital struck for one hour in protest, according to a local official who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity. He confirmed that police were targeting victims with lethal violence, saying that large numbers of people were arriving at the hospital morgue with “their stomachs torn out and their brains exploded.”

Mokhter Triffi of Tunisia’s League for Human Rights said: “A commando operation was mounted last night to pillage the city and lend credence to the government’s conspiracy theories.” Triffi noted that

Tunisian authorities had “blamed this weekend’s riots on looters in the population.”

President Ben Ali gave a speech yesterday repeating such brazen slanders against the protesters. He blamed “hostile elements paid from abroad, who have sold their souls to extremism and terrorism, who are manipulated from outside the country and who do not want what is best for a country determined to persevere and to work.”

He claimed that the “events were the work of masked gangs that attacked at night government buildings and even civilians inside their homes in a terrorist act that cannot be overlooked.” The reports cited above suggest, however, that “masked gangs” may have been Tunisian commandos working under Ben Ali’s command.

The Tunisian Interior Ministry confirmed that lethal violence was being used against protesters. Its communiqué stated that in Kasserine, “police used their weapons in an act of legitimate defense, when assailants mounted numerous attacks, throwing flaming tires to force open the police station whose contents were burned.” The ministry said that this had caused “the death of four attackers.”

A UGTT official in the nearby city of Thala told the BBC that police were warning residents not to gather in groups, even of two. He said the town was running out of food and heating oil.

On Monday another young Tunisian—Allaa Hidouri, age 23—killed himself in protest, electrocuting himself by climbing on high-tension cables.

There were several reports that protests, centered in the poorer areas of central and western Tunisia, were spreading to the coastal cities where Tunisia’s tourism industry is based. Police violently dispersed a demonstration by artists in the capital, Tunis, yesterday.

AFP sources wrote: “Tension was palpable in the capital, as calls for mass demonstrations are spreading on the Facebook social network.”

After banning football matches, the Tunisian government on Monday closed all schools and universities indefinitely, to prevent large numbers of youth from gathering together. Tunisian youth face an unemployment rate of 30 percent. The French daily *Libération* carried pictures of Tunis students sitting in a pattern spelling out “no to assassinations” in Arabic lettering.

A class confrontation between the workers and the Ben Ali regime is rapidly developing, with potentially explosive consequences internationally—a prospect that is heightening fears in the ruling class. The bourgeois press is warning that mass discontent, protests, and strikes could spread from Tunisia throughout the Arab world and beyond. This is especially the case as wholesalers and banks are now rapidly driving up food prices beyond what many families can afford to pay.

In *Asharq Al-Awsat*, Saudi columnist Rahman al-Rashed warned of a potential “domino effect” as protests spread throughout the region. He wrote: “Has the fear barrier been broken? It seems this is the most important issue ... the psychological barrier that has prevented protests may have been removed.”

The *Financial Times* reported that Internet social networks in US-allied dictatorships like Egypt and Saudi Arabia are spreading messages of solidarity with Tunisian and Algerian protesters.

In the United States, *Time* magazine noted a “wave of protests and violence against two US-friendly authoritarian regimes in North Africa.” It explained that Washington had not objected to their practices so far, “not least because the authoritarian governments of Algeria and Tunisia are allies in the fight against Islamist terrorism.”

Time added that if these regimes failed to line up with the requirements of the US “war on terror,” Washington might consider replacing them with other, pro-US figures it thinks are more able to keep their populations in line: “The social instability their policies have provoked can actually work to the advantage of regional extremists. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on a visit to the Gulf states this week, plans to call publicly for political reform in the Arab world.”

There are certain attempts by the Tunisian political establishment and various imperialist powers to provide a cynical, pseudo-democratic veneer to the Tunisian regime’s actions and encourage it to consider somewhat scaling back the killings.

One of these is a shift in the position of the UGTT—Tunisia’s only union, and a long-time supporter of Ben Ali. According to material on its web site, it publicly endorsed him in the 2009 presidential elections, stating its agreement with Ben Ali’s “reform” policy. This policy included large-scale cuts in public sector jobs, which have played a major role in driving up unemployment and producing the social desperation driving the current protests.

Since the current protests started last month, the union has not abandoned its political support for Ben Ali. The UGTT national leadership has refused to call strike action by the working class in solidarity with the mass protests, or to halt the killings, and reportedly criticized individual UGTT officials who had participated in the protests.

Over the weekend, however, UGTT deputy general secretary Abd Brigui said that it was “not normal to respond with bullets” to protests. Opposition politician Mahmoud Ben Romdhane hailed Brigui’s declaration as “a great about-turn” for the UGTT.

More brazenly, Michèle Alliot-Marie—the foreign minister of France, the former colonial power in Tunisia—proposed that the French police might share its “French know-how” with the Tunisian security forces. She explained: “We are indeed proposing that our two countries could, in the context of the cooperation that exists between them, act so that the right to demonstrate would go together with the assurance of security.”



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