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Nigeria: Police use of lethal force against demonstrators must be investigated

Amnesty International is urging Nigerian authorities to launch an independent public inquiry into the death of at least four people reported to have been killed in Lagos in clashes involving the police and civilians during demonstrations against an increase in the price of fuel. More than seven days after the people were announced dead, no investigation has been carried out.

A 27 year-old man, Obot Akpan Etim was among the people shot dead in what appeared to be a peaceful protest. In statements made on 7 July 2003, the police commissioner and the public relations officer of Lagos denied any wrongdoing by the police. They rather accused other demonstrators of fomenting the killing.

A 25-year-old woman who witnessed the police brutality told Amnesty International how, on her way to work on that Monday 7 morning, in Oshodi, a suburb of Lagos, she got caught up in the events which took place that day. *"I could see hundreds of people who were peacefully protesting in the street. They were chanting and shouting slogans. Suddenly and without warning, the police charged at us, throwing teargas in our direction. In the confusion, people were running in all directions; some were falling down. I lost consciousness for a while. When I woke up, I noticed that the explosions had affected my voice."*

In a report published in December 2002, Amnesty International expressed its concerns about the police brutality in the three years following the return to civilian rule in Nigeria. The police attempts to curb crime has been marred by the deaths of hundreds of people. Police violence sometimes appears to have been unleashed amid government complacency.

"The government should ensure that law enforcement officers do not exert any excessive use of lethal force in peaceful demonstrations," Amnesty International said.

Wherever a person sustains injuries or dies as a result of public unrest, especially when police or security forces are involved, there should be an immediate investigation.

"People should not be shot at for protesting peacefully and all those found responsible for such violations must be investigated and brought to justice according to international standards of fair trial," the organization said.

Background

A wave of protests led by the National Labour Congress (NLC) swept through many Nigerian towns, including Abuja and Lagos, following the government's decision in June 2003 to dramatically increase the price of fuel. The strikes which took place from 30 June to 9 July resulted in an excessive use of force by the police. They reportedly used live ammunition and tear gas against peaceful demonstrators in their attempt to end the strikes.

Public Document

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