

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Amnesty International condemns excessive use of force by Kosovo police

Amnesty International today condemned the excessive use of force by Kosovo police against apparently non violent protestors at two demonstrations on Saturday 14 January.

The demonstrations, organized by the political party *Levizja Vetevendosje* (Self Determination), took place near two border crossings with Serbia - Merdar/Merdare and Dheu i Bardhe/ Bela Zemlja - in protest against the Kosovo government's recent agreement with Serbia on border management.

Demonstrators were stopped at a cross roads in Besian, five km from the Merdar border crossing where demonstrators sat in the road during the morning, on one occasion moving to allow a number of vehicles to pass. However, at around 2pm they were asked to leave by the Kosovo Police in order to enable "the freedom of movement of people, goods and vehicles" but refused to do so.

Between 50- 80 people were reportedly injured when the Kosovo Police then intervened to disperse the protestors. The Kosovo Police used tear gas, pepper spray, rubber batons and – in freezing temperatures – water cannons, in an attempt to disperse the crowd. Ten demonstrators were seriously injured, including two members of *Vetevendosje*, who were reportedly beaten by the police after being arrested. Four demonstrators were hospitalized.

The Kosovo police also intervened later in the day at the second protest near the Dheu i Bardhë border crossing, where protestors had blocked one carriageway. Protestors report being kicked and stamped on.

According to police figures, some 1,500 people took part in the protests; *Vetevendosje* suggests that there were around 5,000. Some 146 arrests have been confirmed by the police for both sites, while *Vetevendosje* report that 101 protestors were arrested at Merdar and 38 at Dhe te Bardhe, including five *Vetevendosje* deputies, members of the Kosovo Assembly. Some nine of those arrested remain in detention.

Some media reported that protestors started to throw plastic bottles and other objects at the police at Besian, but all reports confirmed this took place only after the Kosovo police had intervened.

International standards on policing call for the use of force to be proportionate, and consistent with national law and international human rights law and standards, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, which states, "In the dispersal of assemblies that are unlawful but non-violent, law enforcement officials shall avoid the use of force or, where that is not practicable, shall restrict such force to the minimum extent necessary".

Amnesty International has previously expressed concerns about the excessive use of force in 2011 by the NATO-led Kosovo force (KFOR) against Kosovo Serbs protesting against the Kosovo government's opening of border posts in the northern municipalities.

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