

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Georgia: Police reportedly use excessive force against the demonstrators**

Against a background of ongoing political tensions and continuing opposition demonstrations, and following the second incident in two months in which the authorities have reportedly used excessive force to disperse demonstrators, Amnesty international urges the Georgian government to ensure that law enforcement officials act in line with international standards when seeking to uphold public order. A number of demonstrators detained in the most recent incident also allege that they were beaten or otherwise ill-treated while in detention.

The first incident occurred on 6 May when police officers were reported to have used force in violation of human rights during a violent confrontation with opposition supporters outside the police headquarters in Tbilisi, the capital, a situation said to have escalated when a protester climbed over the fence into the police compound. In particular, there were reports that police fired impact projectiles at demonstrators in a reckless manner, resulting in several people sustaining injuries to the head.

In the second incident, on 15 June, approximately 50 members and supporters of a youth opposition group gathered outside the Tbilisi police headquarters to protest the arrest of opposition activists charged with assaulting members of parliament and a guard outside the parliament building on 12 June.

According to eyewitness reports, violence erupted once the police officers, some in masks and some in plain clothes, surrounded the demonstrators and started beating them indiscriminately with batons. Several eyewitness accounts, including from journalists, speak of there being no violence or provocation from the demonstrators prior to that point, and that the police officers started attacking the demonstrators without any warning or prior instructions to disperse. Video footage of the incident released by the Caucasus Internet Media Group shows police officers chasing demonstrators and beating them as they tried to flee; several police officers are also seen repeatedly kicking a man lying on the ground offering no resistance, and hitting them on the head with a baton.

Seventeen demonstrators reportedly sought medical assistance at a hospital for their injuries, including two -- Zurab Abashidze and Giorgi Bekauri -- who remained hospitalized with severe injuries. Among the injured were TV journalists and a camera crew who had their tapes and cameras confiscated, and as well as a representative of the Ombudsmen's office who was allegedly beaten and detained by the police officers.

Police officers detained 38 people, 33 of whom were fined and then released. The majority of those detained allege that they were beaten and ill-treated by the police officers while in custody. At the time of writing five members of the opposition -- Merab Chikashvili, Giorgi Chitarishvili, Georgia Sabanzdze, Micheil Meskhi, Dachi Tsaguria and David Patsatsia -- remain detained for 30 days on administrative charges. Representatives of the non-governmental Georgian Young Lawyers Association reported that they were prevented from visiting these five men in detention and from defending them in court. The

Ombudsman who visited the five where they were held in administrative detention on 17 June confirmed signs of injuries consistent with reports of beatings on their heads as well as their bodies.

Amnesty International acknowledges that law enforcement officials have both a responsibility and an obligation under international law to ensure the safety and security of people and property. However, in doing so, authorities should ensure that the policing of demonstrations is carried out in a manner that complies with international standards such as the duty to exercise restraint, to act in proportion to the seriousness of the offence and the legitimate objective to be achieved, to minimize damage and injury, and to respect and preserve human life. In dispersing the opposition members on 15 June, however, police officers reportedly used force in violation of the above standards. Amnesty International is aware that several police officers were also injured during the 15 June incident and that there have been reports of separate incidents of violence from opposition supporters, but it is concerned that these allegations should not be used as an excuse to ignore international standards on the use of force by police officers.

Amnesty International welcomes the immediate steps taken by the General Prosecutor's Office in opening an investigation regarding the 15 June incident and issuing reprimands to six police officers in relation to the ill-treatment of journalists. A public apology was also issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, Amnesty International regrets that both the reprimands and the public apology were limited to violations committed against journalists and did not address violations reported against those participating in the demonstration. Georgia has an international obligation to ensure that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law, including equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as political or other opinion.

Amnesty International calls on the Georgian authorities to uphold their international legal obligations, including by conducting full and impartial investigations into all individual allegations of the use of excessive force and other ill-treatment, to bring anyone reasonably suspected as being responsible to justice, and ensure reparation and redress for victims.

### **Background**

Anti-government demonstrations in Tbilisi began on 9 April this year and have continued almost daily calling for the resignation of President Mikheil Saakashvili. The government has pledged not to interfere with peaceful demonstrations. Since the demonstrations began however, there have been numerous allegations of isolated incidents of violence against opposition supporters by unknown attackers, which are pending investigation. The Ombudsman's office has expressed serious concern about what they see as the failure of the state authorities to protect demonstrators and carry out a full investigation into the incidents of violence.

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