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Bolivia: There can be no justification for human rights violations

"The current social conflict will lead to even more deaths and injuries if the Bolivian authorities do not take all necessary measures to prevent human rights violations by the security forces," Amnesty International said today.

The situation is serious. The security forces and police have reportedly used excessive and arbitrary force against various groups of demonstrators who have been blockading the main roads of the country since 20 September. So far at least 10 people have died and over 100 have been injured. The organization has also received reports of numerous arbitrary detentions and ill-treatment of demonstrators by the security forces and police.

Amnesty International recently wrote to the Bolivian authorities to express its deep concern about the serious human rights violations that have occurred during this crisis in the region of El Chapare and surrounding areas. The organization is now publicly appealing to the authorities to halt the excessive and arbitrary use of force by the security forces. "It is essential that the authorities fully investigate these violations and bring those responsible to justice," said the organization. "They must send a clear message that such abuses will not be tolerated."

Despite the fact that progress is being made in some of the negotiations between the government and the demonstrators, the organization is extremely concerned that the authorities have apparently threatened to use the army to break the blockade by force. Amnesty International wishes to remind the authorities of their obligation to guarantee that their officers behave in accordance with international standards governing the conduct of members of the security forces.

"If the authorities decide to increase the use of violence by the security forces in order to bring the blockade to an end, without respecting the fundamental rights of the demonstrators, it would be a tragic and retrograde step in human rights protection in Bolivia."

Background

On 20 September 2000, coca growers in the El Chapare region set up roadblocks in the area to protest at government policies. The main peasants union joined the blockade calling for changes in legislation which adversely affects its members. Teachers from the countryside on strike over their conditions of employment also joined the protest.

Over the past few days, several leaders of the groups mounting the roadblocks have opened negotiations with the government and have reportedly reached agreement.

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