

Sri Lanka: Police must uphold the right to peaceful protest

The death of at least two people from bullet wounds and the injuring of well over 30 more as a result of police action against a predominantly peaceful demonstration in Colombo on Thursday constituted the use of excessive force on the part of the police, Amnesty International said today condemning the police action.

Achinte Perera from Algama and Manjula Prasad from Janpatha St, Colombo 15, both supporters of the United National Party (UNP), died whilst participating in a peaceful protest called by a coalition of opposition parties in Sri Lanka. The post mortem reportedly reveals that death was caused by live ammunition from a T56 automatic weapon, the type used by the police and the army.

Amnesty International also condemned the invoking of the 1981 Referendum Act by the government. The Act bans all processions between the calling of a referendum until after the result is announced, other than Mayday, religious or social processions, and the latter must not contain anything that may affect the referendum result.

"This is an absolute infringement of the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. People of all political persuasions must recognize and respect each other's right to gather peacefully and express their opinions without fear for their safety," Amnesty International said.

The organization is fearful that if these rights are not observed and guaranteed by the state that the period leading up to the referendum will become increasingly violent and polarised and result in many more serious human rights violations.

It is reported that the vast majority of people who took part in Thursday's demonstration were unarmed and peaceful. Amnesty International has no reports of arms being used or shots being fired by the demonstrators. Those who did indulge in violence threw stones from the street. However the police have admitted using live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas. There is also film footage of a police officer handing a large knife to a person in civilian clothes thought to be a member of the security forces or a member of one of the government parties.

Amnesty International reminds the Sri Lankan authorities of the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials which state: "In any event, intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life" and "Exceptional circumstances such as internal political instability or any other public emergency may not be invoked to justify any departure from these basic principles."

Amnesty International urges the President of Sri Lanka to instruct all law enforcement agencies to strictly observe these principles during the current tense political situation. It also calls on her to ensure that Sri Lanka observes the right to freedom of expression and assembly which will assist in diffusing the high tensions.

Background

The government banned Thursday's opposition march and rally called in protest at the President having prorogued Parliament for two months. The Parliament was closed on 10 July following the tabling of a no confidence motion that was gathering support. Following the closure, the President has called for a referendum on a new constitution and this is scheduled to take place on 21st August.

The government have invoked 20-year-old legislation, drafted and passed by the UNP when it was in power, to curtail opposition activities. A discredited UNP referendum of 1982 was held under this legislation.

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