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Panama: Protester deaths need proper investigation

Panama's authorities must investigate allegations of excessive use of force by police after two protestors were killed during three days of clashes between security forces and the Ngäbe-Buglé people, Amnesty International said today.

Jerónimo Rodríguez Tugrí was allegedly shot dead by police in San Felix in eastern Chiriquí province on 5 February, and more than 40 others – including police officers – have reportedly been wounded during the demonstrations.

On 7 February the media reported the death of another demonstrator, Mauricio Méndez, in David, Chiriquí province. The circumstances of his death have yet to be confirmed.

“The authorities must carry out a full, independent, impartial and prompt investigation into the protestors' deaths and all those injured and bring those responsible to justice”, said Guadalupe Marengo, Deputy Americas Director at Amnesty International.

Members of the Ngäbe-Buglé indigenous people - who live in the west of the country in the provinces of Chiriquí, Veraguas, and Bocas del Toro - blocked the Pan-American Highway as part of a protest begun on 30 January over fears that an amendment to a bill could pave the way for hydroelectric projects on their lands.

Yesterday, after a week of mass protests throughout the country, the government and the Ngäbe-Buglé reached an agreement to start a dialogue on the protestors' demands and the immediate withdrawal of riot police from the areas where they had been deployed. The Ngäbe-Buglé on their part will abandon the roadblocks they had set.

“It is regrettable that two people died and scores were injured, as a result of the continued disregard by the Panamanian authorities to protect Indigenous Peoples rights. Indigenous Peoples have the right to be consulted and to give their free, prior and informed consent with regards to development projects and must be consulted in good faith before any legislative measures are adopted that may affect them.” said Guadalupe Marengo.

Panama supported the adoption in 2007 of the UN Declaration on the Rights for Indigenous Peoples, which clearly protects Indigenous Peoples against losing their land and resources in the name of development. The Declaration was adopted precisely to avoid loss of life and livelihood and to ensure that communities enjoy all their human rights without discrimination.

“It is time Panama honours this Declaration and shows its people and the world that they are serious about respecting and protecting the rights of all people. Development projects and the exploitation of natural resources must not become sources of abuse of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples have suffered years of abuse and discrimination, states have a duty to reverse this abuse,” said Guadalupe Marengo.