

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Hungary: Reports of excessive use of force by the police

Amnesty International is concerned about reports that police officers may have used excessive force during demonstrations which turned violent in the capital, Budapest, this week. The organization today urged the Hungarian authorities to ensure that the principles of necessity and proportionality of force are respected by law enforcement officers at all times.

The demonstrations began on 17 September 2006, and have continued for the fourth consecutive night, after it was revealed that the Hungarian Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany, had admitted lying to Hungarian voters during a speech to parliamentarians from his party in May this year. During the demonstration on the evening of 18 September some protesters reportedly stormed the headquarters of the Hungarian state television, attacked police with stones and set fire to several cars. Violent clashes again occurred on 19 and 20 September between police and groups of protesters. Some 200 people have been reported injured as a result of the clashes, including over 100 police officers. There have also been several reports emerging of alleged excessive use of force and ill-treatment by the police during the demonstrations, including of a journalist beaten around the head by police with batons on the evening of 19 September in spite of showing the officers his identification as a journalist.

Amnesty International acknowledges the difficulties faced by law enforcement officials while policing violent demonstrations, and notes that the Hungarian authorities have both a responsibility and an obligation under international law to ensure the safety and security of people and property. However, it is also their duty under international law to ensure that the policing of demonstrations is carried out in a manner that complies with international standards, including those on the use of force. Amnesty International today urged the government must ensure that police officers act in accordance with international standards, including Article 3 of the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials which states: "Law enforcement officials may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty".

Background

A speech given on 26 May 2006 by the Hungarian Prime Minister to members of parliament from his party was recorded and became accessible to the press on 17 September 2006. In the speech, the Prime Minister admitted that he had lied to Hungarian voters about the state of the country's finances in order to win the general elections. "I almost died when I had to pretend for one and a half years as if we were governing. Instead, we lied in the morning, we lied in the evening. I am through with this", he is reported to have said.

In reaction, there have been four consecutive nights of anti-government demonstrations in Budapest.

Violence again broke out on the third night, on 19 September, when a group of around 1,000 protesters were said to have broken away from a 10,000-strong peaceful protest outside parliament and clashed violently with police, who responded with tear gas and water cannons. On 20 September, over 10,000 demonstrators reportedly gathered outside parliament, and in the early hours of 21 September police are said to have used tear gas against a group of 200 to 300 people. Other non-violent demonstrations have also been reported from a number of other cities and towns in the country.