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Dominican Republic: A backlash against protesters

The economic crisis in the Dominican Republic has had devastating consequences. The serious decline in the value of the Dominican peso accompanied by large price rises for basic necessities and increasing problems with power supply in the country have led to escalating public protests against government economic policy. During many of those protests, security forces have been accused of arbitrary arrests of activists, excessive use of force and unlawful killings of demonstrators and bystanders, a report by Amnesty International concludes.

"The Dominican authorities must issue clear and public instructions to the security forces that they should not use unlawful levels of force or violence to respond to peaceful protests," the organization said.

Although reports of serious human rights violations by security forces are widespread, those accused of committing them are rarely brought to justice. In July shopkeeper Juan Lin was reportedly shot in the head by police officers as they began indiscriminately firing their weapons to disperse demonstrators marching against the impact of the government economic policies. Juan was not taking part in the protests.

"Juan's case is only one of scores of reports of excessive and disproportionate use of force by the security forces. The authorities must not permit a backlash against ordinary civilians in the context of these protests," Amnesty International stressed.

The crisis has also contributed to a situation in which reported curbs on freedom of the press have become more frequent, as the authorities have tried to prevent critics of their policies from airing their views.

In July two local radio broadcasters in Montecristi province, Horacio Emilio Lemoine and Carlos Martínez, were detained for several days, during which time they were taken to National Police headquarters in Santo Domingo and interrogated. Their "crime" was reportedly to stage an informal poll to see who listeners would vote for in the next presidential race; several callers said they would prefer the devil to current President, Hipólito Mejía, as a candidate.

"Amnesty International has taken note of, and welcomed, commitments by the Dominican authorities to fully respect human rights. However, those expressions of commitment appear to be greatly at odds with the actual situation in the country today", the organization said.

"Authorities must also ensure that all reports of human rights violations are fully and impartially investigated. Impunity is a very real problem and the Dominican Republic is suffering its practical impact."

For a full copy of the report: "Dominica Republic: Human rights violations in the context of the economic crisis", please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR270012004>

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