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USA: Call for Inquiry into possible excessive force against anti-war protesters

Following the anti-war demonstration at Port of Oakland, California, on 7 April, where at least 21 people were injured, Amnesty International called today on the Chief of Police to conduct a full inquiry into allegations of excessive force by police.

Police reportedly fired non-lethal weapons, including bean bags, wooden bullets and sting ball grenades at demonstrators, causing injuries to at least twelve protesters, and nine by-standers who were not involved in the demonstration. Those injured were reportedly hit in the back, arms, necks and faces.

In a letter to the Chief of Police of Oakland Police Department, Amnesty International acknowledged the challenges presented to police officers when policing large demonstrations. "However, we are concerned at reports that police opened fire within 30 seconds of ordering demonstrators to disperse, and that they fired projectiles directly at demonstrators at close range, including wooden bullets."

"Evidence has shown that the weapons used can cause serious internal injuries, break bones, inflict blindness, and are potentially lethal. A full inquiry is needed to confirm whether any of these weapons were misused by the Oakland police on 7 April. Steps should also be taken to ensure that police do not subject further protesters to such treatment."

"If the allegations are true, the police actions in this case would clearly be incompatible with international standards requiring that law enforcement officials should use force only as a last resort, in proportion to the threat posed, and in a way to minimize damage or injury," Amnesty International said.

"These reports are particularly disturbing, given the potentially harmful effects of such weapons on small children or the elderly, or people suffering from weak hearts or other conditions."

In its letter, Amnesty International asked to see Oakland Police Department's guidelines for use of non-lethal weapons and to receive information on police training in place for use of these weapons.

"This is not the first time we have had to raise concerns with US law enforcement agencies about the use of non-lethal weapons. All law enforcement agencies across the USA must introduce strict guidelines and limitations on use of these weapons with clear monitoring procedures," concluded Amnesty International.

Background

Weapons used on 7 April include:

Bean Bags: Evidence has shown that bean bags can cause serious internal injuries as they can penetrate deep into the body. If fired from too close they can cause broken bones and are particularly dangerous if aimed at sensitive areas, as they make it difficult to quantify the level of pain inflicted to some parts of the body. Although originally considered to be a suitable "less-than-lethal" force option against potentially dangerous suspects, police departments in some US states are abandoning the use of bean bags after finding that they can be dangerously inaccurate and deadlier than manufacturers claim .

Sting ball grenades: According to some experts, these weapons are completely indiscriminate and inaccurate. They should not be fired at close range because they are potentially lethal. The small pellets released when the grenades explode may penetrate the skin and pose serious eye injury risk, including blindness.

Wooden bullets: These were deemed to be unacceptable by the British government in the 1970s in relation to use by British soldiers in Northern Ireland as they can cause serious head injuries as well as the possibility of inflicting blindness and may penetrate the skin.

Public Document

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