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Greece: Protection of human rights must be at the forefront

In the wake of arrests of suspected "17 November" members in Greece, Amnesty International today called on the Greek authorities to ensure that the respect for human rights is not put into question.

"In the aftermath of 11 September, the world has witnessed how human rights have been undermined in the name of ensuring security. Greece should set the standard, and not follow suit, in protecting human rights at all costs," Amnesty International said.

While the organization strongly condemns all acts of violence leading to the death and injury of civilians, it firmly believes that the Greek authorities must scrupulously observe the safeguards and standards for the protection of human rights enshrined in Greek and international law in their efforts to detect, arrest and prosecute suspected members of the "17 November" group and any other persons suspected of acts of political violence.

"The Greek authorities' actions now, including any related arrests or prosecutions, will be seen as setting a precedent in the handling by the Greek justice system of cases involving people suspected of association with, or involvement in, acts of political violence," Amnesty International said.

"This makes it all the more important that not only the letter of the law, but also its spirit, is strictly respected."

Savvas Xiros is currently in the "Evangelismos" hospital after being severely injured in Piraeus on the night of 29 June 2002, when a bomb he was apparently carrying exploded. Amnesty International understands that although the authorities reportedly suspect that Savvas Xiros may be linked to the "17 November" organization, he has not been arrested or charged.

However, according to reports received by Amnesty International he is under armed police guard, and his contacts with his family were until recently, drastically restricted. However, a prosecutor has on a number of occasions questioned him, apparently in the capacity of a witness. A lawyer engaged by his family was not given access to him. The authorities have reportedly justified these restrictions on the grounds of his health and safety.

"Although concerns for his health and safety may be valid, these should not permit the authorities to deprive him of any of the rights enjoyed by persons who are not under arrest and have not been charged with any criminal offence," Amnesty International said.

The organization is calling on the authorities to ensure that all restrictions on access to Savvas Xiros, which are not determined exclusively by the needs of his health or safety, be lifted.

"In order to ensure that human rights are not undermined, the Greek authorities should ensure transparent procedures and full respect for human rights," Amnesty International said.

The organization asked the Greek authorities to make clear the legal status of any suspect or witness, and to guarantee the full rights and safeguards of any defendants during investigation and trial in conformity with domestic and international standards for the protection of human rights.

As the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe confirmed on 15 July 2002: "it is not only possible, but also absolutely necessary, to fight terrorism while respecting human rights (and) the rule of law.

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