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Ukraine: Arrest of peaceful protesters a worrying step backwards

The Ukrainian authorities must immediately drop criminal charges against three persons arrested for organising a peaceful protest outside the General Prosecutor's office in Kyiv Monday morning, Amnesty International said today.

The organisation is concerned that the arrests represent a step backwards for Ukraine, which has made significant progress in respecting the right to freedom of assembly over the past 10 years.

In the last decade, Ukrainians seized and secured their right to peaceful assembly. The government has a duty to protect this right and must ensure the charges against these protest organisers are dropped.

A group of between 20 and 30 demonstrators arrived outside the General Prosecutors office to protest against the prosecution of human rights defender Dymytro Groysman, who has been accused of 'distributing pornography'. He posted a link to a widely available video of Russian politicians having sex as a part of a satirical commentary on his blog. The final verdict in his trial was due on Monday and Amnesty International has called for the charges to be dropped.

The protesters were notified during the protest that a blanket ban had been issued via court order, outlawing all protests outside the General Prosecutor's office. Authorities claim the court order was brought in response to complaints about protests by local residents.

On arrival the peaceful demonstrators were met by an official from the Prosecutor's office, who read out the court order..When the demonstrators did not leave, the four organisers - Yevgeniya Zakrevska, Ihor Lutsenko, Mykhaylo Kamyenev and Mykhaylo Lebed - were arrested and detained for three hours.

Yevgeniya Zakrevska, Mykhaylo Kamyenev and Mykhaylo Lebed were informed that an investigation had been opened against them under article 382 of Ukraine's criminal code – 'wilful disobedience of a court order'. If convicted, they could face up to three years in prison.

International standards are clear that peaceful protests cannot be met with blanket bans just because they offend or upset others. While Amnesty International is aware that the General Prosecutor's Office is subject to numerous protests, these are usually small-scale and peaceful. The regular presence of peaceful protesters outside a government office, even if their presence is annoying to neighbours, cannot justify a blanket ban on such gatherings.

The court order is ostensibly to protect local residents from disturbance, but its blanket nature denies citizens any opportunity to peacefully demonstrate outside a public office. It is disproportionate and must be overturned.