

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: EUR 25/008/2011  
16 June 2011

### **Greece: Alleged abuses in the policing of the demonstration of 11 May 2011**

Amnesty International is urging the Greek authorities to conduct an independent, thorough and effective inquiry into the policing of a demonstration last month amidst continuing allegations that police used excessive force against peaceful protestors. These reports come against a backdrop of longstanding concerns about systemic failures in policing, including the failure by law enforcement officials to comply with international human rights standards.

The demonstration, against the austerity measures introduced by the government, took place in Athens on 11 May. Unofficial sources report that more than 30 protestors sought hospital treatment, including two who were seriously injured. Police sources report that 15 of their officers were injured.

Allegations that the police ill-treated and used excessive force against peaceful protestors have been to Amnesty International and various media sources by some of those injured as well as other protestors.

The flashpoint, according to these testimonies, occurred close to the end of the demonstration at around 14.00, when a large number of riot police officers encircled a large number of peaceful protestors, who were walking down Panepistimiou street and towards Propylaia, and started to beat them. At the same time, the police began spraying the protestors with what was described as an "excessive amount of chemicals". Allegedly, flash bang devices were thrown among and towards the protestors as well. Some of those injured describe how riot police officers aimed at their heads with their batons. There were also reports that the riot police were using the handle of their batons to hit the protestors. The use of batons in that manner is corroborated by pictures published in various media sources the following day, which also showed protestors with visible head injuries.

Furthermore, video footage displayed in various media sources shows a protester who had fallen to the ground in Panepistimiou street being beaten by one riot police officer on the head with his baton, by another riot police officer on his body with his shield and being kicked by two other riot police officers. The footage available does not display any violent behaviour by the protester.

Other reports include a trade union activist being ill-treated around 14:00 by between three to four riot police belonging to one of the two riot police units that had descended onto the platform of Sydagma metro station, and video footage taken that day and available on the internet said to have been recorded at Stournari and George street in Athens. In this incident the footage shows a riot police officer repeatedly kneeling a detained individual who is kneeling in front of a car, while other riot police fail to intervene.

According to information received by representatives of the Union of the Hospital Doctors of Athens and Pireus and the Federation of Hospital Doctors of Greece, following the incident in Panepistimiou street, more than 30 protestors were transferred to accident and emergency units of

hospitals, the majority with head injuries. Some protestors reportedly said that they had possibly been hit by riot police who were carrying instruments other than batons. Moreover, two of the protestors who ended up in hospital were very seriously injured. One of them, Yiannis Kafkas, suffered a very serious head injury, had an emergency operation and remained in a critical condition in intensive care until 20 May 2011. Yiannis Kafkas was reportedly released from hospital on 30 May 2011.

Amnesty International's profound concerns are further increased since this is the second demonstration within a period of six months where a large number of protestors reportedly sought hospital treatment with head and other injuries following alleged ill-treatment and excessive use of force by riot police. During this earlier incident excessive use of force against, and ill-treatment of, peaceful protestors was also reported during a commemorative demonstration to mark the second anniversary of the death of Alexandros Gregoropoulos on 6 December 2010. As a result, a number of protestors reportedly sought hospital treatment, including 45 with head and other injuries, and around 30 as a result of the excessive use of tear gas and other chemicals.

In a press release issued in the afternoon of the 11 May demonstration, the Athens General Police Directorate made reference to episodes caused following attacks against police officers by protestors throwing petrol bombs and stones, and announced that 30 protestors had been transferred to police stations. Twelve of those were reportedly arrested. The press release stated that 15 police officers had been injured during the episodes. No reference was made to any injured protestors. Later that day, the Hellenic Police stated amongst others that it had been notified about the case of a seriously injured protester, and that senior police officers were investigating the case.

On 12 May 2011, in relation to the same case, the authorities stated that "an investigation commenced under the supervision of a public prosecutor in order to identify the causes and conditions that led to the injury of the protester Yiannis Kafkas and the possibility that police officers were responsible for it". On the same day, the authorities also announced that following an investigation conducted in relation to the video footage showing riot police officers beating a demonstrator on the ground, the three officers involved had been suspended along with their head of unit. Amnesty International understands that a disciplinary investigation has commenced into the incident.

In a speech prompted by the incident that was given to representatives of law enforcement bodies, the Minister of Citizens' Protection observed among other things that there was an apparent democratic deficit in the law enforcement bodies, and spoke of the need to take all the necessary measures to create a new spirit in the manner that law enforcement bodies operate. These included strengthening the training programmes of law enforcement bodies, in particular those who are in the first line of policing, and exemplary punishment of law enforcement officials who exercised violence against civilians. While noting these statements, Amnesty International remains concerned that the Minister referred to isolated incidents of violence and arbitrariness by the police, rather than accepting that a deeper systemic problem existed.

Amnesty International acknowledges that law enforcement officials have both a responsibility and an obligation to ensure the safety and security of people and property. However, in doing so, the policing of demonstrations should be carried out in a manner that complies with international standards; standards that include the duty to exercise restraint, to act in proportion to the seriousness of the offence and the legitimate objective to be achieved, to minimize damage and injury, and to respect and preserve human life. In intervening in respect of the demonstrators on 11 May, however, police officers appear to have used force in violation of these standards.

Amnesty International calls for a prompt, independent, thorough and effective investigation into all allegations of ill-treatment by police officers and excessive use of force during the demonstration on 11 May and for anyone found responsible for human rights violations to be brought to justice.

In view of the seriousness of the allegations of ill-treatment and excessive use of force against peaceful protestors in Panepistimiou street, the organization also wishes to call for an independent, thorough and effective inquiry over the policing of the demonstration of 11 May 2011.

Amnesty International, on various occasions, has raised concerns over repeated and credible allegations of excessive use of force by the police and prevailing impunity in the context of police ill-treatment. The organization has therefore called for the establishment of an independent and effective police complaints mechanism to investigate all allegations of human rights violations by the police.

Amnesty International would like to reiterate its concerns over the independence and effectiveness of the mandate of the Bureau on incidents of arbitrariness by law enforcement officials as it is envisaged in recently adopted legislation.

Moreover, Amnesty International reiterates its call to the Greek authorities to address the longstanding systemic problems of policing and the failure of law enforcement officials to comply with international human rights standards.

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