

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# POLAND: ARRESTS AND REFUSAL OF ENTRY TO ENVIRONMENTALISTS DURING THE COP24 CLIMATE TALKS

At least 13 staff members and activists of environmental organizations were refused entry to Poland over the weekend during the UN Conference on Climate Change, COP24, held in Katowice. In addition, three staff members of environmental organizations were questioned in their hotels about their IDs by the border police in Katowice. Two of them were arrested and detained for 12 hours.

Amnesty International is alarmed by what appears to be deliberate targeting of environmental human rights defenders during the climate conference in Katowice. The authorities in Poland must stop harassing environmentalists and activists with unjustified interventions against their right to participate in the climate conference.

These actions follow the adoption of a law in January 2018, which banned any spontaneous assemblies during the conference and enhanced surveillance powers. Under the law, the police or other law enforcement authorities can collect and use personal electronic and digital data. Five UN Special Rapporteurs as well as NGOs, including Amnesty International, raised concerns over the impact of the law on the right to freedom of assembly and expression during COP24.

Amnesty International has learned that in multiple cases, the border police accused the environmentalists of being a “threat to national security”. Poland’s border police denied entries to accredited civil society participants of COP24 talks as well as a member of the official delegation from Georgia.

In their weekend action against environmental human rights defenders, Poland’s border police relied on provisions of the law on foreigners that allow them to deny access to the territory of Poland if “it is necessary for the security of the country or the public order”. However, in cases documented by Amnesty International, the border police failed to explain to the participants of the COP24 talks how their presence in Poland amounted to such threat.

On Saturday 8 December at 9am, two staff members of a Ukrainian NGO, Ecoaction, were arrested by the border police in their hotel in Katowice, where they had been staying for almost a week. They were accredited observers at the COP24 conference and participated in a side event organized by the German Friends of the Earth. Saturday was supposed to be their last day in Poland.

“The border police knocked on my hotel room door while I was sleeping on Saturday morning. They asked to show my passport and told me to get ready to go out with them not giving any explanations,” Ecoaction staff member told Amnesty International.

As the border police took her through the reception, her colleague saw her in the hotel lobby.

“I was shocked when I saw my colleague being taken away in handcuffs. It was surreal, as if we were criminals although we have done nothing wrong. Considering that some of my friends and colleagues from environmental organizations were denied entry to Poland, the only logical conclusion is that the Polish government specifically targets civil society activists,” the second arrested staff member of Ecoaction told Amnesty International after their release.

The two environmentalists were placed in a detention cell and the border police opened proceedings, which could have resulted in the forcible return of the two environmentalists to Ukraine. Within the proceedings, the border police also requested information from the Schengen Information System regarding whether the environmentalists’ presence in Poland amounted to a “threat to security”. The detention lasted 12 hours, during which the Ecoaction staff members had no access to a lawyer. They were permitted to make their first phone call only six hours after arrest, at 2pm. The border

police eventually released both environmentalists due to a lack of evidence. They then met staff from the Ukrainian Consulate and then left Poland.

Nugzar Kokhreidze, due to attend COP24 as a civil society member accredited as part of the official delegation from Georgia, was among the 13 environmental human rights defenders who were denied entry in Poland on the grounds of “threat to national security”. He has been held at the airport in Katowice since Friday, 7 December.

“I don’t know what happened. My plane landed in Katowice and as I was going through the passport control, the border police told me that my name came up with an alert. They told me I had to go back because I am a security threat. This was strange; just two months ago I was in Poland as a speaker at a conference. The border police explained that the prohibition for my entry applies just for the duration of COP24,” Nugzar Kokhreidze told Amnesty International.

Nugzar Kokhreidze appealed the denial of entry and continues to stay in a hotel in the transit zone of the airport as he is waiting for his return flight today. The border police took his passport and if he wants to go to the shop, he must be escorted.

Zanna Vanrenterghem, a coordinator of the Climate Action Network Europe, was travelling to Katowice by train from Vienna on 7 December. After the train crossed the border between Czech Republic and Poland, Polish border police informed her that there was a system alert under her name and that she was a “security threat”. She had to get off the train and the border police told her she must take the next train back to Vienna. Several hours later, following the ambassador of Belgium’s intervention, the border police allowed her to enter the country.

Amnesty International considers that the targeting of environmental human rights defenders by the national security provisions during the COP24 conference amounts to harassment and intimidation. The failure of Poland’s border police to justify the returns and arrests of environmentalists raises concerns that they were in fact unjustified and arbitrary.

These acts represent a violation of the right to freedom of expression and participation in public matters. They are particularly concerning as, in the face of the existential threat that climate change poses, public participation is essential for achieving effective decisions that enjoy public support. These measures against activists and representatives of civil society organizations at COP24 come in the context of an escalating crackdown on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Poland. Amnesty International has [documented](#) that for more than two years now, peaceful protesters in Poland have been experiencing effects of restrictive legislation combined with heavy-handed policing, surveillance and harassment.