

Pakistan: Civilians must be spared by all sides

Amnesty International today called on the Pakistani security forces and the leaders of groups organizing protests to exercise restraint and show respect for the human rights of civilians. In the last few days, violent protests have left four people dead and dozens injured.

"Protests planned for Friday must not result in the loss of more life -- both security personnel and protest organizers must do their utmost to avoid bloodshed," Amnesty International said.

On 9 October, three Afghan refugees were shot dead by police in Kuchlak, a small town close to Quetta. According to police sources, police fired in self-defence when thousands of protesters, including the Afghan refugees, attacked the police station. However local observers have told Amnesty International that police did not use teargas first to control the mob nor did they issue a warning before opening fire.

The government of Pakistan must ensure that all security personnel strictly abide by international standards on the use of force and firearms and act with restraint even during violent protests. Those responsible for using excessive force should be brought to justice.

Many civilians have also been targeted by violent protesters. Workers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been particularly targeted in the last few days as these organizations were perceived by Islamist groups to advance "Western" interests. Some NGOs have reportedly begun to withdraw their staff to safer areas as a result. On 9 October in Takhtbhai, North West Frontier Province, the offices of the Women and Children Welfare Organization, the Saalik Welfare

Organization and a community based hospital were set on fire and its workers fled to safety. In Quetta, UN buildings were attacked and the United Nations Children's Fund building was set on fire.

Amnesty International is calling on the Islamist groups organizing the protests to urge demonstrators to exercise restraint and to scrupulously respect the human rights of all civilians, including journalists, foreign nationals and NGO staff.

Background

On October 8, violent rallies in Quetta involving some 10,000 to 15,000 demonstrators, many of them Afghan refugees, led to many injuries. When protesters positioned on roof tops in Quetta reportedly fired at law enforcement personnel, police returned fire killing a protester and injuring several others. On the following day, four cinema houses were set on fire and a police station and several banks were attacked. Several fire engines were set on fire.

On October 9 in Quetta, two French journalists were beaten by police with sticks and rifle butts when they tried to cover a civilian death. Most journalists have been confined to a hotel which came under attack by angry protesters who threw stones and tried to storm it. Angry protesters threw stones at foreign correspondents who were covering protests in Islamabad injuring several.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>