

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: EUR 45/026/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 261
19 November 2003

Embargo Date: 19 November 2003 00:01 GMT

United Kingdom: Policing operations for President Bush's visit must respect right to peaceful protest

In the run-up to President Bush's visit to London, Amnesty International has urged the United Kingdom (UK) authorities to ensure that the right to peaceful demonstration is protected and international human rights standards fully observed during policing operations.

"There have been reports that the special powers to 'stop and search' people without suspicion, let alone a reasonable one, granted to the police under the Terrorism Act 2000 will be used during policing of the demonstrations expected to coincide with President Bush's visit to London," Amnesty International said.

"The use of special powers in the context of peaceful demonstrations may have a chilling effect on the rights to freedom of assembly and expression."

In March of this year, these powers were used in the context of law enforcement operations in England in connection with peace demonstrations. Dozens of people were stopped and searched. Buses were prevented from approaching a US airbase on the grounds that the passengers might breach the peace. Police powers were used to return the passengers of the buses to London under police escort.

The same powers were also used in London in September of this year in the context of demonstrations at the Defence Systems and Equipment International Fair in London.

"Clearly the UK authorities have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of President Bush and his entourage, as well as that of demonstrators, local inhabitants and property. However, it is also their duty to ensure that people are able to peacefully exercise their rights to freedom of assembly and expression," the human rights organization said.

In a letter sent today to the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, Amnesty International also drew attention to the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention; the fundamental rights of people deprived of their liberty; and international standards on the use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials.

"The UK authorities must ensure that law enforcement officials act in accordance with international standards, including on the use of force, arrest and detention, in the policing of demonstrations," the human rights organization concluded.

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