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Malawi set for fresh anti-government protests

Malawians participating in nationwide protests planned for 17 August risk being killed or injured unless the authorities halt the use of live ammunition against anti-government demonstrators, Amnesty International said today.

The protests come amid increased harassment and intimidation of activists and other dissenting voices in Malawi. In July, at least eighteen people were killed and scores of others injured when police opened fire on protesters in a number of Malawian cities.

“The Malawian authorities must allow people to express their opinions without fear of violent reprisals or arbitrary arrests,” said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International’s Deputy Programme Director.

“The police must refrain from using excessive force. Under UN policing standards, firearms should only be used when there is no other means of defending against threats of death or serious injury”.

While some of the July demonstrations had turned violent, most protesters were unarmed.

Around 500 people, including human rights defenders, were arrested.

The protests brought together students, human rights activists and religious groups over a range of issues including repressive legislation, poor governance and fuel shortages.

The Malawian government has intensified its harassment and intimidation of critics and dissidents over recent months, stifling freedom of expression and creating a climate of fear. During the July demonstrations, police deliberately targeted at least eight journalists, beating them with gun butts.

Human rights activists have also been targeted. Some have received death threats, others have been forced to go into hiding. Threats to activists appear to have been fuelled and perpetuated by persistent public criticism by high level government officials.

Recently, President Bingu wa Mutharika described July’s protests as “the work of Satan” and threatened to “smoke out the organisers”, prompting several more prominent human rights defenders to go into hiding.

Amnesty International again urges the Malawian authorities to open an immediate, impartial and thorough investigation into the lethal use of force during July’s protests.

“Such an investigation is now well overdue,” said Michelle Kagari.

“In the interim, we are calling on the Malawian authorities to exercise restraint and to respect their citizens’ rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. If Malawians want to exercise their right to peaceful demonstration, they should be allowed to do so in safety.”