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South Korea: Use of force against beef protestors should be investigated thoroughly

South Korean police used excessive force against peaceful protesters demonstrating against the government's trade policies, Amnesty International said today as it provided preliminary findings of its investigation into human rights violations during the protests against US beef imports that took place in central Seoul between 25 May and 10 July.

"The government should demonstrate its commitment to the rule of law by ensuring accountability for any police officers who used excessive force and providing due process for protesters who face criminal charges," said Norma Kang Muico, Amnesty International Researcher.

"Generally, both the protesters and the police showed remarkable organization and constraint. These protests, and the response to them, generally show the strength of South Korea's civil society as well as its legal institutions, but we have documented several instances of human rights violations."

Since early May, tens of thousands of protesters have demonstrated against the renewal of US beef imports over fears of BSE or mad cow disease. The protests, often involving crowds as large as 10,000, were largely peaceful, but there were incidents of violence as riot police sought to control surging crowds and some protesters attacked and vandalized police vehicles.

During candlelight vigils held on 31 May and 1 June, police used fire extinguishers and water cannons fired at close range against largely peaceful demonstrators, causing serious injuries such as blindness, broken bones and concussions.

Amnesty International's investigation indicated that:

- In some instances, police used excessive force and abused non-lethal riot control devices such as water cannons and fire extinguishers;
- Police engaged in arbitrary arrests of protesters and onlookers;
- Some detainees were subjected to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, including a lack of adequate medical care;
- The Korean government has not yet carried out adequate investigations of these claims.

In one case a 24-year-old female office worker fell down after the riot police suddenly charged into the crowd. She was surrounded by at least five police officers who hit her with batons and kicked her repeatedly on her head. To protect herself, she covered her face with her arms. As a result, she suffered a broken arm, her head was severely swollen, and she had cuts and bruises on her upper body. She has not been able to return to work and has been hospitalised since 30 June.

Another case involved a 14-year-old boy who participated in the vigils with his mother, fellow classmates and teachers. When the police surged into the crowd, they ran onto the pavement for safety. A police officer hit the boy with a shield in the back of his head while the boy was running away. He fainted and his head was bleeding heavily. He was taken to the Yonsei Severance Hospital where doctors stitched his cut.

"These protests involved citizens making their point strongly but in large part peacefully. What they were met with, however, was excessive force by their own government, and that deserves a more thorough investigation," said Norma Kang Muico.