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South Korea: Improve policing practices during protests

South Korean police used excessive force in some instances against demonstrators protesting earlier this year against the government's decision to resume beef imports from the US, Amnesty International concluded in a report released today.

The report - - including interviews with protesters, human rights monitors and journalists - - documents instances where the police misused crowd control equipment, such as water cannons, and arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals. The report also highlights a lack of adequate police training and police accountability.

“While we recognise that the riot police for the most part acted professionally and with restraint, there are worrying examples of how protesters and even onlookers, not involved directly in the protests, were ill-treated,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific Programme Director.

“Protesters, and in some instances even members of the police force, were needlessly subjected to violence because of inadequate training on the part of police. There should be an independent, thorough and impartial investigation into allegations of human rights violations by police officials, and those responsible should be held accountable.”

Amnesty International interviewed people involved in the protests who had sustained injuries mainly to the head or face after, they said, being kicked, punched or hit with a shield or baton by police or fired upon with water cannons.

The police reported that 489 riot police were also injured during the protests. There are no official figures for the number of civilians injured.

These included:

- Lee E, a 22-year-old university student, was beaten severely by riot police. One police official grabbed her by her hair and pushed her to the ground. He kicked her repeatedly in the head with his combat boots. Lee E managed to crawl underneath a bus for safety and when she came out, another official – or the same one – grabbed and pushed her to the ground again. This time she was hit many more times in the head. Lee E suffered a concussion and had to be hospitalised for three weeks. She vomited and suffered from dizzy spells.
- Kim C, a 31-year-old translator, told Amnesty International that a riot police official hit him in the eye with a shield. Kim C fainted from the impact and when he came to, several riot police were beating him with batons. Another official slammed his shield on Kim C's head. He needed stitches

for cuts on his head and eyelid, and an imprint of a baton on his back remained visible even after two weeks.

- Lee Hack-young, National General Director of the YMCA, was injured with 60 other protesters while peacefully lying down on the street as 200 riot police came charging through them, slamming their shields on their bodies and hitting them with batons. The police broke Lee Hack-young's arm. He also suffered head injuries and was kept in hospital for two weeks for monitoring.
- Kim B, a 35-year-old technician, told Amnesty International that he was hit in the face when the police turned a water cannon on him and knocked him off his feet. Kim B suffered temporary blindness and his sight is still severely impaired.

Amnesty International calls on the South Korean government to review its current policing practices on the use of force, including the training and deployment of all police officials, in particular riot police. The organization also asks the authorities to consider phasing out the use of military conscripts.

"Instead of simply turning a blind eye to the violations that took place during these protests, the South Korean government must ensure that law enforcement officials, including riot police, are adequately trained, instructed and equipped with the skills necessary to police difficult and potentially violent protests, including training on relevant international human rights standards," said Sam Zarifi.

Background

The candlelight protests in central Seoul against the resumption of US beef imports due to fears of BSE or 'mad cow disease' began on 2 May 2008 and continued almost daily for more than two months. Tens of thousands of people from all walks of life attended the demonstrations, with at least 100,000 on 10 June, the 21st anniversary of South Korea's pro-democracy movement. The protesters voiced their discontent not only with the US beef trade issue, but with a broad range of President Lee Myung-bak's other policies.

The majority of the protesters were peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, which are enshrined in South Korea's constitution, as well as international human rights law. However, various provisions under South Korean law limit the right to demonstrate and protesters continued to defy government calls to disperse.

The protests were for the most part peaceful and given their size and duration, both the protesters and the police showed notable organization and restraint. However, there were sporadic incidents of violence, as riot police and protesters clashed. The two main flashpoints of violence occurred on 31 May/1 June, when the police first used water cannons and fire extinguishers, and 28/29 June, the weekend following the government's announcement that US beef imports would resume.

The report [*Policing the Candlelight Protests in South Korea*](#) (AI Index: ASA 25/008/2008) is based on interviews with protestors, police, journalists and human rights monitors. It follows the publication of preliminary findings on the policing of the protests on 18 July 2008.