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Georgian authorities pour cold water on opposition protest

Georgian authorities must allow opposition activists to peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression and assembly, Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International is concerned that city authorities in Kutaisi used water cannons to prevent opposition activists from carrying out a peaceful candle vigil to mark the city day celebration in Kutaisi.

At midnight on 2 May, approximately 50 opposition activists assembled in front of the *Georgian Dream* opposition party headquarters in Kutaisi before walking towards the statue of King David in the city centre. The procession then lit candles below the statue to mark the celebration of the Kutaisi city day. The activists wore tee-shirts with the name of the opposition party coalition "Georgian Dream" and chanted the slogan "long live the Georgian Dream!"

Once the activists arrived at the statue, several employees of the municipal cleaning services reportedly approached and asked them to leave the area as it had to be cleaned. The activists promised to end the action in an hour and to clean up afterwards. However, according to eye-witnesses, in less than half an hour a street cleaning truck appeared and without any warning, started spraying water at the lit candles and activists on the sidewalk.

Activists interviewed by Amnesty International also alleged that during the procession from their office to the statue they were followed and sprayed with water by the city street cleaning services. Video recordings available online show a truck with water cannons following and spraying water at the procession on the sidewalk, as well as two firemen aiming jets of water from their fire engine at the activists as they attempted to pass by Kutaisi city hall.¹

The opposition expressed concern to Amnesty International that the incident was a deliberate act by the city authorities to suppress the visibility of opposition groups. They believe the act was a message to opposition sympathisers that open support for the opposition will not be tolerated by those in power.

Amnesty International is concerned that by preventing the peaceful candle display action the Kutaisi city authorities have violated their obligation to ensure the exercise of free expression and free assembly to all persons regardless of their political views or association.

Amnesty International would like to remind the authorities that they must act without prejudice to the rights of individuals when carrying out their duties. The organization recognises that the city authorities have a duty to maintain public order and safety but these considerations should not trump fundamental rights such as the right to peaceful association and expression. While protestors may have temporarily disrupted or delayed the city cleaning services, such disturbances cannot be used to justify prevent peaceful protests from exercising their rights of freedom of expression and assembly.

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¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNdCVOocPIA&feature=youtu.be>