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India: Inquiry into land protest deaths must be thorough and fair

The Government of Maharashtra must ensure a thorough and fair inquiry into deaths during a protest by farmers, Amnesty International said today, after at least three people were killed when police fired on the demonstration on a highway in western India.

The deaths took place on Tuesday, on the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, when 500 farmers gathered to protest a pipeline bringing water to the industrial township of Pimpri-Chinchwad.

Eyewitnesses informed Amnesty International that initially more than 200 police officials baton-charged and used teargas to clear the demonstrators from the expressway, after some of the protestors started stone-pelting the police officials and their vehicles.

The police then used lethal force against the protestors.

“The government must investigate how it is that police opened fire with live ammunition on people throwing stones. Using firearms in a lethal manner should be the absolute last resort, and it is not clear at all that the police properly relied on other options,” said Sam Zarifi, Asia-Pacific Director at Amnesty International.

In all, about 80 protestors and 20 police officials sustained injuries and more than 250 protestors were arrested on various charges.

“While we welcome the authorities’ announcement of an inquiry, we urge investigators to at every step ensure that the inquiry is both thorough and fair,” added Sam Zarifi.

The demonstrations are the latest in a series of protests in India by farmers and adivasis (Indigenous communities) over attempts to acquire land for industry or infrastructure development.

Over the last six years, about 50 persons have been killed in clashes between authorities and those protesting over land use or development projects in various states in India.

“This incident is the latest in a worrying number of farmers’ protests across India in which local security forces have abused their authority.

“Authorities must seriously scrutinise policing of protests in order that these tragic incidents stop, and to restore public trust in the affected communities,” added Sam Zarifi.