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Haiti: allegations of excessive use of force during demonstrations must be thoroughly investigated

The Haitian National Police and the UN peacekeeping force must avoid unnecessary and excessive use of force when patrolling and dispersing demonstrations and thoroughly investigate all allegations of human rights violations during protests, Amnesty International said today after incidents were reported in the demonstrations which took place in Haiti on 12 and 13 December.

According to media reports, two people were injured by firearms during a demonstration in the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince on 12 December while another person was allegedly shot and killed the following day in another protest. Although the circumstances of the incidents are yet to be clarified, reports indicate that in both cases the police might have used live ammunitions against the demonstrators.

Haitian media also released a video showing a UN peacekeeper shooting several times at demonstrators after some of them had thrown rocks at the UN troops. The UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) promptly issued a statement acknowledging the allegations of excessive use of force and informing that an investigation had been immediately opened "to establish the facts".

"The political climate in Haiti is getting tenser and tenser. It is imperative that the Haitian National Police and the MINUSTAH are able to cope with the situation in a way that ensure protection of human rights. People must be allowed to exercise their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, without fear of being shot at", said Chiara Liguori, Caribbean researcher at Amnesty International.

"In such a context it is crucial that MINUSTAH fulfils its peacekeeping mandate, which is to contribute to the security in Haiti, while strictly respecting and protecting human rights."

These demonstrations occurred in the context of escalating political instability in Haiti, as the mandate of the two-thirds of Senators and of all members of the lower Chamber is due to expire on 12 January 2015. Political opposition blames the government for failing to hold the long-overdue legislative and local elections.

In the evening of 12 December, the Prime Minister announced his resignation after a consultative commission appointed by the President had recommended his resignation among a number of measures to be taken to appease tensions and create a positive political environment enabling the holding of elections.

In the last two years, Amnesty International has received a growing number of reports of unnecessary or excessive use of force by police to disperse demonstrations, often resulting in a high number of people injured and occasionally fatally injured. No police officer is known to have faced criminal investigations for their involvement in any of these incidents.

The rising number of people killed by police and the lack of accountability of the police force raised the concern of the UN Human Rights Committee, which in October 2014, recommended that the Haitian authorities carry out timely and effective investigations on all killings by the police and to bring those responsible to justice. The Committee also recommended that Haiti continue training its security forces in order to ensure compliance with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms.

"In a context in which demonstrations are likely to continue, both Haitian authorities and the MINUSTAH

must show that they are committed to hold officers accountable for human rights violations and to prevent future abuses. A failure to do so would be reneging on the human rights obligations of the Haitian authorities and the MINUSTAH”, said Chiara Liguori.