

AI Index: PRE 01/313/2008
09 December 2008

Greece: Failing system of police accountability

As anti-government demonstrations continue in Greece for the fourth day running, Amnesty International calls for a clear commitment by the authorities to end the unlawful and disproportionate use of force by police.

“Images in the international media and eyewitness statements to Amnesty International present mounting evidence of police beating and ill-treating peaceful demonstrators,” said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

Members of Amnesty International in Greece have reported that officers involved in policing the riots engaged in punitive violence against peaceful demonstrators, rather than targeting those who were inciting violence and destroying property. In this context, the organization is concerned about the ill-treatment of two of its members, who were beaten with batons by the police.

It is the duty of the police under international law to ensure that policing of demonstrations is carried out in a manner that complies with international standards, including those on the use of force. Amnesty International acknowledges the difficulties they face during the demonstrations in which hundreds of buildings have been torched and dozens of people injured and notes that the Greek authorities have both a responsibility and an obligation under international law to ensure the safety and security of people and property.

The riots started on the evening of 6 December after 15-year-old Alexandros-Andreas (Alexis) Gregoropoulos was killed by an officer serving in the “special guards” unit. Accounts of the events that led to his death vary.

According to the police, two police officers in a vehicle were initially attacked by a group of 20-30 youths. In a second encounter one of the officers threw a flash grenade while the other fired two shots in the air and one towards the ground; one of these shots ricocheted and fatally wounded the 15-year-old.

According to information received by Amnesty International, the teenager was out with his friends on Saturday evening. The group was approached at around 9.00pm by two police officers in a vehicle who engaged in a verbal exchange with the youths. As the officers left the scene, one of the youths threw a beer bottle towards the police vehicle. The police officers parked their vehicle, returned on foot and engaged in further verbal abuse with the youths. During this exchange, an other officer fired three shots, one of which fatally wounded Alexis Gregoropoulos.

“The statements made by police and eyewitnesses are contradictory. Only a prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation into the full circumstances of the shooting can establish the sequence of events and the responsibility for the youth’s death,” Nicola Duckworth said.

The officers have been suspended and that the officer who fired the shot currently faces charges of unlawful use of firearms and manslaughter with intent, while the second officer faces charges of

complicity.

“The killing of Alexis Gregoropoulos and the apparent disproportionate use of force in policing the demonstrations follow a distinct pattern of serious human rights violations by the police which includes excessive use of force, torture and other ill-treatment, misuse of firearms and impunity throughout law enforcement bodies,” Nicola Duckworth said.

Amnesty International has extensively researched human rights violations committed by law enforcement bodies in Greece and repeatedly called on the Greek authorities to undertake a thorough investigation of the system which allows them to happen. The organization urges the authorities to take immediate steps to break the chain of impunity by instituting independent mechanisms for investigating allegations of unlawful police conduct, reviewing policing of demonstrations, and ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment.