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South Korea: Stop excessive force against protestors

South Korean authorities should immediately investigate reports of excessive force against demonstrators protesting about US beef imports, said Amnesty International.

The authorities should also ensure people's safety at future protests - there are fears of more violence and arrests with the imminent 10 June rally marking the anniversary of the 1987 democratic uprising that led to free elections and political reforms.

"The police's resort to violence has angered a lot of peaceful protesters and increased the possibility of violence," said Norma Kang Muico, Amnesty International's Korea researcher. "The government should use the anniversary of the 1987 protests as an occasion to demonstrate its commitment to human rights and rule of law."

More than 300 people were arrested during candlelight vigils held on 31 May and 1 June. Police used fire extinguishers and water cannons fired at close range against largely peaceful demonstrators, causing serious injuries such as blindness, broken bones and concussions.

Amnesty International has received hundreds of reports of riot police rounding people up and arbitrarily arresting all those who happened to get caught in the process, including peaceful protesters, bystanders and passers-by. Several detainees reported police violence during and after their arrest.

Among those beaten and arrested was a 27-year-old man. Police officers kicked him and beat him with clubs and shields. When the Amnesty International South Korean section director, Kim Hee-jin, visited him at the Hyehwa Police Station on 2 June, his face was swollen and he had cuts and scratches on his face and arm. He was suffering head and chest pains from the beatings. Although injured and in visible pain, the police did not provide him with any medical attention during his 48-hour arrest.

Amnesty International called for anyone still detained to be properly charged and brought to court or released immediately.

Since early May, tens of thousands of protestors have demonstrated against the renewal of US beef imports over fears of BSE or mad cow disease.

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Norma Kang Muico, Amnesty International Korea researcher (London), on +44 (0)77 3902 7510

or

Kim Hee-jin, Director of Amnesty International South Korea +82 10 4229 0511

or

Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org