

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Bulgaria: Investigations into alleged excessive use of force during Sofia protests must be prompt and thorough**

Today Amnesty International wrote to the Bulgarian Minister of Interior, Tsvetlin Yovchev, and to the Prosecutor General, Sotir Tsatsarov, to express concerns about allegations of excessive use of force by police officers against protesters, on 23 July, outside the Bulgarian Parliament. Amnesty International urges the Bulgarian authorities to conduct a prompt, independent, thorough and effective investigation into all such allegations, and to bring anyone responsible for human rights violations to justice.

Protests have been going on in Sofia since 14 June calling for the resignation of the current government over allegations of corruption and early elections. Although generally peaceful, serious incidents of violence were reported on the evening of 23 July between protesters and police forces.

According to media reports and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), an NGO monitoring the protests, on 23 July at around 10.00 pm the police attempted to evacuate the 100 ministers and MPs who were being prevented from leaving the Parliament building by the protesters. During the operation, the police officers allegedly beat protesters indiscriminately, without being provoked or attacked by protesters. BHC monitors present at the protests have stated that the police issued no warning or prior request to protesters to make space for officials wishing to leave the Parliament building. While 17 people have been injured and reportedly sought medical help at hospitals, according to the BHC, dozens other people are reported to have been hit and pushed around by police officers.

According to information published by *Reporters without Borders*, five journalists were physically attacked by police officers. One of them was reportedly brought to the ground with kicks while filming violence by police officers and suffered serious injuries and internal bleeding. The other reporters were either hit in the torso and in the head, with batons and truncheons. In three cases, journalists reported that the police either destroyed or confiscated their equipment.

According to a statement issued on 25 July, the Sofia Regional Prosecutor has initiated an investigation to assess the allegations of excessive use of force. The Bulgarian Ombudsman has also written to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior requesting comprehensive and complete information and requesting an investigation into the events of the 23 July.

Amnesty International welcomes the announced investigations and reminds the Bulgarian authorities that under international human rights law, the use of force by the police must be proportionate, lawful and necessary. The policing of demonstrations should be carried out in a manner that complies with international law and standards, including the duty to exercise restraint, to act in proportion to the seriousness of the offence and the legitimate objective to be achieved, to minimize damage and injury, and to respect and preserve human life.

Amnesty International calls on the General Prosecutor to ensure that prompt, independent, thorough and effective investigations are carried out into the complaints registered as well as into all other cases of allegations of excessive use of force by police.

Amnesty International also calls on the Bulgarian authorities to ensure that, in the context of the continuing protests in Sofia, the policing of demonstrations complies at all times with their international human rights law obligations and with international standards on policing, including the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.