

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Greece: Need for investigation of police conduct towards residents of town objecting gold mining operations**

Amnesty International calls on the Greek authorities to conduct prompt, impartial and effective investigations into allegations of human rights violations by police in the village of Ierissos in Chalkidiki (Northern Greece) during the past month. Among the allegations are that chemical irritants were used by police against protesters in Ierissos in an unnecessary or disproportionate fashion causing injury, that DNA samples were collected from residents in an inappropriate manner, and persons questioned by the police, apparently on suspicion of possible involvement in an arson attack on the work site of the mining company Hellas Gold, were denied access to a lawyer before or during questioning.

In the past year, many of the residents of Ierissos and other nearby towns have protested against a gold mining operation in the area of Skouries on mount Kakavos and its environmental impact. On 17 February 2013, an arson attack took place on the work site of the gold mining company.

In the following weeks, more than a hundred residents of Ierissos and the nearby village of Megali Panagia were interviewed by the police about the arson case. In one of the cases, on 20 February 2013, two of the residents were transferred without their consent to the Polygyros police headquarters and held there for several hours without charge while the police allegedly said to relatives and their lawyers that they did not have information about their whereabouts. The residents interviewed by the police reportedly were not allowed to have their lawyers present despite requesting so and remained at the police stations for several hours. Furthermore, their lawyers reported that many of them were intimidated into giving a DNA sample including by being told that they would face charges for disobedience if they refused to give their DNA, that they would be held longer, and/or other threats. Those residents whose DNA was obtained subsequently were reportedly given a paper to sign stating that they had given their consent. Ten residents who refused to give their DNA were allegedly coerced to do so. Some of the residents also alleged that they were ill-treated during their interviews.

In addition, among those requested to be interviewed by the police, were two high school female students who were minors. The minors were reportedly not allowed to have a lawyer and/or their parents present during their interview by the police.

Amnesty International wishes to express its serious concerns about these allegations, including reports regarding the manner in which the DNA samples were obtained. The Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to the Automatic Processing of Personal Data, to which Greece is a State Party, states amongst others that “personal data undergoing automatic processing shall be obtained and processed fairly and lawfully”. Moreover, Amnesty International is concerned about the fact that these persons were not granted access to their lawyers despite the fact that actions such as the collection of DNA samples appear to indicate that they were being treated as suspects in an ongoing criminal investigation.

Furthermore, on 7 March 2013, around 10 am dozens of riot police officers along with public prosecutors tried to enter the village of Ierissos in order to search some of the residents' houses for the purpose of the criminal investigation conducted into the arson attack.

The residents objected to the riot police entering the village and many of them gathered at the entrance to the village where they placed burning tyres. In response the police used chemical irritants to disperse them. In addition, according to testimonies of teachers and students, chemical irritants were thrown also inside the yard of the high school that was nearby resulting to one student being injured on the head from a piece of a tear gas grenade and requiring hospital treatment while other students suffered breathing problems.

In their response, police said that it had made a moderate use of chemicals irritants to disperse the residents, that it did not throw chemicals at the school and the house and that two officers were injured when some of the residents threw stones at them.

Amnesty International calls on the Greek authorities to take all necessary measures to ensure law enforcement officials do not use unnecessary or excessive force, including in relation to demonstrations and other types of assemblies. They should carefully consider the type of equipment used and use it only when lawful, necessary and proportional. Policing and security equipment – such as rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades, often described as “less-lethal” weapons – can result in serious injury and even death. Chemical irritants, such as tear gas, should not be used where people are confined in an area and not in a way that can cause lasting harm (such as at too close range, or directly aimed at people's faces).

#### **BACKGROUND**

In August 2012, police used tear gas and reportedly fired rubber bullets and other impact rounds at peaceful protestors opposing the gold mining operations. On 21 October 2012, riot police reportedly chased and beat protestors of all ages gathered peacefully outside the area where gold mining operations were planned. According to testimonies received, police threw chemical irritants inside protestors' cars as they tried to flee. A 63-year old woman told Amnesty International that a riot police officer dragged her out of her car, made her kneel and trampled on her left ankle with his boot causing a nerve injury in her leg.

#### **For Amnesty International's concerns see:**

Don't beat protestors EU countries warned, 25 October 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/don-t-beat-protesters-eu-countries-warned-2012-10-25>.

Europe: Policing of Demonstrations in the European Union, 25 October 2012, EUR 01/022/2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/don-t-beat-protesters-eu-countries-warned-2012-10-25>.

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