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PUBLIC STATEMENT LEBANON

Use of military court against student demonstrators a violation of rights

Amnesty International said today that the use of the Military Court in Lebanon to try and sentence students and others involved in demonstrations and the excessive use of force against demonstrators raises serious concerns on human rights violations.

On 19 April nine students were brought before the Military Court charged with assaulting the police or obstructing the highway. The students denied the charges, but were sentenced to between 10 and 45 days' imprisonment. Three other students are still awaiting trial.

Demonstrations, supported mostly by student members of the Free Patriotic Movement, a group which supports the exiled army commander Michel 'Aoun, took place on 17 and 18 April 2000. Students were initially protesting against the arrest of two 'Aoun supporters, who were later released without charge, and shouted slogans against the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

The demonstrations apparently started as peaceful but developed into violent confrontations with the police. Riot police broke up a demonstration on 17 April outside the Palace of Justice using water cannon, tear gas and truncheons. Nine students were arrested during the demonstration or later.

On 18 April the army used water cannon, truncheons and gun butts to break up a demonstration outside the Military Court. At least 13 demonstrators and bystanders were injured and some were hospitalised, two seriously.

Amnesty International has frequently stated its concern that military courts are used in Lebanon to try cases which should come before ordinary criminal courts.

After examination of Lebanon's report in 1997, the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern over "the broad scope of the jurisdiction of military courts in Lebanon" and stated that all cases concerning civilians should be transferred to ordinary courts.

Amnesty International calls on the Lebanese Government to halt all trials of civilians before the Military Court. The government should release the detained students if they are not to be tried before civilian courts, in trials conforming to international standards.

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