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Lebanon: Call for independent investigation into killings of protestors

Amnesty International urges the Lebanese authorities to carry out a prompt and impartial investigation into the killing of three civilians by Lebanese soldiers during a demonstration today in Beirut. At least 17 people, including five soldiers and a press photographer, were also injured and two military vehicles were set on fire.

Based on information available, Amnesty International is concerned that the use of force employed by Lebanese security forces may have been excessive and in violation of international law.

As part of nationwide protests against an increase in petrol prices, hundreds of protestors were marching through the southern Beirut neighbourhood of Hay al-Sellom. Reports indicate that protestors were met with water cannons, retaliated by throwing stones, and were then fired upon by soldiers. While al-Manar television has shown pictures of soldiers firing into the air, it is unclear whether this was before or after shots had already been fired at protestors.

Under the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms, law enforcement officials shall, as far as possible, apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms; give a clear warning of their intent to use firearms, with sufficient time for the warning to be observed; and that intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. At this stage, however, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the lives of soldiers or others were under threat and that the resort to lethal force was necessary.

"We urge the Lebanese authorities to review their policing methods at demonstrations and to establish an independent and impartial enquiry into today's events," said Amnesty International. "Those suspected of having committed serious crimes and human rights violations, whether protestors or security officers, should be brought to justice."

As far as Amnesty International is aware, no such investigation was carried out into an incident on 7 April 2004, when at least 10 people were injured after Lebanese security forces charged at, and used batons against, peaceful demonstrators. The protestors were attempting to march to the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) building in Beirut, to submit a petition calling for the release of Lebanese detainees from Syrian prisons. Human rights defender Ghazi 'Aad was one of those beaten and his wheelchair was damaged.