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Turkey: Fresh protests spark fears over pending tear gas shipments

All countries should suspend shipments of tear gas, armoured vehicles and other riot control projectile equipment to Turkey until the Turkish authorities can guarantee protesters' right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, Amnesty International said.

The call comes as police have again abusively used large amounts of tear gas and water cannon to disperse protests – some of them violent – in Istanbul and other cities around the country in the past three days. This new round of demonstrations was sparked when a young protester was killed in unclear circumstances as police responded to a demonstration in the southern province of Hatay early on Tuesday.

“The Turkish police’s return to the abusive use of force in response to demonstrations underscores the need for all countries to suspend shipments of tear gas and other riot control projectile equipment and armoured policing vehicles to Turkey, until steps are taken to prevent such deaths and injuries,” said Andrew Gardner, Amnesty International’s Turkey researcher.

“We’re calling on governments to take a stand and press Turkey to respect the right to peaceful protest and end the abusive use of force.”

New supplies of tear gas

According to media reports, the Turkish police authorities have requested an extraordinary order of riot control equipment – including 100,000 canisters of tear gas and more than 100 armoured vehicles. The tear gas may be supplied from Brazil, India, South Korea and the USA, four of its previous suppliers. Some reports have alleged an even larger order has been placed and that the National Police had already bought 150,000 cartridges in 2013 in line with their annual procurement plan.

The new supplies will replenish stocks that were greatly depleted or damaged earlier this year when police misused tear gas canisters and other chemical irritants, like pepper spray and water cannon, as well as used plastic bullets in excessive force against peaceful protests that began in late May.

Ahmet Atakan’s death

At the time of his death in the early hours of Tuesday, Ahmet Atakan had been taking part in a demonstration against – amongst other things – the death of another protester, Abdullah Cömert, after being struck with a tear gas canister fired by police on 3 June.

There are still conflicting reports over what led to Atakan’s death – the authorities assert he fell from a building, while some eyewitnesses claim he was also hit with a tear gas canister. An investigation into the death is ongoing. Amnesty International calls on the authorities to ensure that the investigation is prompt, impartial and effective.

Ongoing misuse of tear gas

In response to the protests since May, Turkish police and security forces have used tear gas, plastic bullets and water cannon in excessive, unwarranted and arbitrary ways to disperse protesters.

The Turkish Medical Association has reported that more than 8,000 people were injured at the scene of demonstrations. There is strong evidence linking three of the five earlier deaths connected with the Gezi Park protests to the abusive use of force by the police.

According to media reports, Turkish police used 130,000 tear gas cartridges during the first 20 days of the demonstrations. This greatly depleted the 150,000 cartridges budgeted for in the police force's annual procurement plan.

Amnesty International and other organizations reported from the ground how tear gas was misused in confined areas where it poses an increased health risk.

“Several months have passed and the Turkish authorities have yet to conduct independent and impartial investigations into the widespread and abusive use of force by police against peaceful protesters in Istanbul and other cities,” said Gardner.

“International partners – including in the European Union – must urge the Turkish authorities to bring to justice those responsible for the excessive use of force and ensure that all police are properly trained in how to respond to peaceful protests in line with international standards.”

Arms Trade Treaty

Amnesty International said that the Turkish security forces' abusive and unlawful use of force against protesters also underscores the urgency for a rapid entry into force of the recently adopted Arms Trade Treaty, which Turkey signed on 2 July 2013.

The treaty has parameters to ensure a risk assessment prior to licensing of exports of conventional arms – and under Article 5 states are encouraged to apply the treaty's provisions to the broadest range of conventional arms. In sophisticated internationally agreed control lists, chemical irritants, projectiles and their launchers and armoured vehicles are regarded as conventional arms. Under Article 7, when there is an overriding risk of the arms being used for serious violations of international human rights law, that export shall not be authorized.

Besides Brazil, India, South Korea and the USA, the following countries have in recent years supplied or indicated a willingness to supply riot control equipment to Turkey: Belgium, China, Czech Republic, Hong Kong, Israel, and the UK.