

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

23 APRIL 2015

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: AFR 25/1515/2015

Ethiopia: Police must stop the use of excessive force against demonstrators

Amnesty International calls on the Ethiopian authorities to ensure that police refrain from excessive use of force in policing demonstrations, after police violently dispersed mass protests in Addis Ababa yesterday. The Ethiopian authorities must respect the rights of demonstrators to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly.

Video footage and photographs posted online show police beating protestors who appear to be offering no resistance, and tear gas being used against the crowd. A journalist in Addis Ababa told Amnesty International that 48 people had been seriously injured and admitted to different hospitals, and that many others sustained minor injuries. Two photos show wounded people being treated at hospital. Hundreds of others are reported to have been arrested.

The protests started on Tuesday following circulation of a video showing the killing of around 30 people believed to be Ethiopians by the armed group ISIS in Libya. Two of the named victims have been identified as coming from Cherkos, Addis Ababa. Hundreds of relatives and friends were gathered outside their family homes before spilling on to the streets towards Meskel Square. Many protestors in the photographs and video footages posted online are shown holding pictures of the two men.

Protests resumed on Wednesday morning, with thousands gathering in Meskel Square where a mass rally had been organized as part of the official three days of mourning announced by the government. Around 100,000 people took part in the demonstrations, which were initially targeted against the killings by ISIS, but later turned into anger towards the government, including its inability to protect Ethiopian citizens and more general calls for political reform. According to reports the police began to disperse the gathered crowd by force after some demonstrators shouted slogans during the rally, and as the situation escalated there were clashes between protesters and police.

In a statement on Wednesday evening, Communications Minister Redwan Hussein accused the opposition Semayawi (Blue) Party of trying to manipulate the demonstrations for their own political interests and of inciting the public to violence, which the party has denied. The minister said that seven police officers had been injured and hospitalized, but made no mention of injuries or arrests among the protestors. Eight members of the Semayawi Party were arrested, including three candidates in the

upcoming general elections on 24 May 2015. They are Woyneshet Molla, Tena Tayewu, Ermias Siyum, Daniel Tesfaye, Tewodros Assefa, Eskinder Tilahun, Mastewal Fekadu and Yidnekachewu Addis. At least one other party member was hospitalized after beaten on the head by police.

The Ethiopian authorities have an obligation to facilitate people's exercise of their right to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly. If there is a legitimate reason for which it is necessary to disperse an assembly, police must avoid the use of force where at all possible or, where that is not practicable, must restrict any such force to the minimum necessary. Law enforcement officials may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty.

The authorities in Ethiopia must ensure that there is an effective and impartial investigation into the use of force by police against protestors during the demonstrations and ensure that any police found to have used unnecessary or excessive force are subject to disciplinary and criminal sanctions as appropriate. Arbitrary or abusive use of force should be prosecuted as a criminal offence.

Amnesty International urges the Ethiopian authorities to ensure that in policing demonstrations in the future, the police comply with international law and standards on the use of force by law enforcement officials. With general elections a month away on 24 May, the Ethiopian authorities should commit to facilitating the right of protestors to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.