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USA: Disproportionate use of force against protestors at Republican National Convention

Amnesty International is concerned by allegations of excessive use of force and mass arrests by police at demonstrations in St. Paul, Minnesota during the Republican National Convention (RNC) from 1 to 4 September 2008. It is calling on the city and county authorities to ensure that all allegations of ill-treatment and other abuses are impartially investigated, with a review of police tactics and weapons in the policing of demonstrations.

The organization's concerns arise from media reports, video and photographic images which appear to show police officers deploying unnecessary and disproportionate use of non-lethal weapons on non-violent protestors marching through the streets or congregating outside the arena where the Convention was being held.

Police are reported to have fired rubber bullets and used batons, pepper spray, tear gas canisters and concussion grenades on peaceful demonstrators and journalists. Amnesty International has also received unconfirmed reports that some of those arrested during the demonstrations may have been ill-treated while held at Ramsey county jail.

Amnesty International is also concerned at reports that several journalists who were covering the RNC were arbitrarily arrested while filming and reporting on the demonstrations. They include Amy Goodman, host of independent news program 'Democracy Now!' and two of their producers Sharif Abdel Kouddous and Nicole Salazar who were both allegedly subjected to violence during their arrest. A photographer for the Associated Press (AP) and other journalists were also arrested whilst covering the demonstrations.

Sharif Abdel Kouddous described his arrest to media, "*...two or three police officers tackled me. They threw me violently against a wall. Then they threw me to the ground. I was kicked in the chest several times. A police officer ground his knee into my back...I was also, the entire time, telling them, "I'm media. I'm press...." But...that didn't seem to matter at all.*"

Amnesty International recognizes the challenges involved in policing large scale demonstrations and that some protestors may have been involved in acts of violence or obstruction. However, some of the police actions appear to have breached United Nations (UN) standards on the use of force by Law Enforcement Officials. These stipulate, among other things, that force should be used only as a last resort, in proportion to the threat posed, and should be designed to minimize damage or injury. Some of the treatment also appears to have contravened US laws and guidelines on the use of force. The UN standards also stress that everyone is allowed to participate in lawful and peaceful assemblies, in accordance with the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Amnesty International urges that an inquiry be carried out promptly, that its findings and recommendations be made public in a timely manner. If the force used is found to have been excessive and to have contravened the principles of necessity and proportionality, then those involved should be disciplined, measures put in place and training given to ensure future policing operations conform to international standards.

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