

Greece: Athens Olympic Games security raises human rights concerns

The first summer Olympic Games following the attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001 start on 13 August. They are accompanied by unprecedented security measures, which raise questions about transparency, accountability and impunity.

Halya Gowan, Deputy Director of the Amnesty International (AI) Europe and Central Asia Programme, explains the organization's concerns about security measures being taken that are the most comprehensive of the games' history, both in terms of policing the events and in the role being played by NATO and NATO countries.

"AI recognizes the Greek government's responsibility to protect everyone within its jurisdiction during the games, but is concerned that such measures may violate human rights. For example, not only will Greek security forces be armed, but media reports indicate that foreign security staff may also be armed. How will the Greek government ensure that all such agents operate under Greek authority? What are the guarantees that immunity clauses will not cover violations of human rights perpetrated by foreign personnel, for example under diplomatic immunity clauses?"

"Amnesty International has, in the past, had concerns about the impunity enjoyed by Greek police and border guards for violations of human rights including excessive use of force. What are the guarantees that the security forces will be accountable for their actions: that security measures will be carried out in a manner that is compatible with international human rights law as well as domestic legislation -- that each violation of human rights will be investigated thoroughly, independently and impartially, and that perpetrators of such violations will be brought to justice?"

The Greek government pushed a new piece of legislation on "terrorism" through parliament in advance of the Olympics. It incorporates into Greek law the European Union (EU) measures adopted after the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. The legislation envisages longer and harsher sentences for "terrorist acts" compared to those for criminal acts. It also incorporates the EU-wide arrest warrant adopted in 2002.

Human rights organizations are concerned that the new law does not fully guarantee a fair trial and does not clearly define "terrorist acts". Measures aimed at increasing the security should be in line with international human standards and ensure that what is listed as a "terrorist offence" is a recognizably criminal offence and must not result in an infringement of, for example, the rights of association, of peaceful assembly and of freedom of expression.

In a message to the previous summer Olympic Games in Australia, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said that the games were a declaration of humanity against its enemies -- intolerance and war. For Athens 2004, the challenge to live up to the ideals of the past is still open.