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Georgia: Stop impunity and introduce badges to ensure police accountability

Amnesty International members are picketing the Embassy of Georgia in London on 11 March to call on the Georgian authorities to end impunity for police abuse. The organization is also urging the authorities to introduce identification badges for all police when conducting arrests as well as during meetings with detainees and prisoners, as an important safeguard against torture and other ill-treatment.

On 7 November 2007, police were believed to have used excessive force to disperse demonstrators who were calling for the resignation of President Mikheil Saakashvili, parliamentary elections, changes to the election rules, and the release of a number of prisoners, whom they regarded as political prisoners. Eye-witnesses reported that police beat and kicked scores of demonstrators. Officers did not wear identification tags and many were masked. According to official statistics, over 550 demonstrators and 34 police officers were hospitalized. The November events triggered an international outcry with international organizations and individual governments condemning police brutality and calling on the authorities to instigate a prompt, thorough, impartial and independent investigation with any suspected perpetrators brought to justice. On 28 February 2008 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the authorities "to make public the process and the results of the internal investigation carried out by the Ministry of Internal Affairs as soon as possible, and to inform the public of any systemic failings in addition to the personal responsibility of any public officials involved". However, to date the authorities have not done so.

Amnesty International also received complaints of police abuse in numerous other cases in recent years, in particular when conducting arrests and dispersing demonstrations. While 39 police officers have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment for torture or other ill-treatment since the government of Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in 2004, impunity persists amidst allegations that investigations are often not conducted adequately.

In numerous cases where police abuse has been alleged, police did not wear identification tags and officers of the special operative department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were, in addition, often masked. Amnesty International believes that the anonymity of police officers increases the risk of torture or other ill-treatment and perpetuates impunity. Masks or other means of disguising officers' personal identities should only be used exceptionally, if such measures are necessary for the personal protection or security of the officers concerned or similar reasons of necessity; in such cases the need for each officer to be identifiable by such means as a unique traceable identification number is particularly important.

The picket takes place outside the Embassy of Georgia at 4 Russell Gardens, London W14 8EZ, from 11:00 to 12:30. Amnesty International members will hand over to the Embassy mock police badges to highlight the lack of sufficient police identification badges in Georgia.

Media contacts:

- Barrie Hay: m. +44-7809-605535 (Country Coordinator on the South Caucasus, Amnesty International UK) // ***For interviews about the picket.***

- Anna Sunder-Plassmann: +44-20-7 413 5667 (Researcher, Eurasia team, International Secretariat of Amnesty International) // ***For interviews about Amnesty International's concerns in Georgia // Please call before 13.00 GMT on 11 March.***

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