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Czech Republic: Past mistakes must not be repeated -- respect for freedom of expression

Amnesty International today called on the Czech authorities to ensure that the right to peaceful demonstration is protected and that international human rights standards are fully observed during policing operations in connection with the NATO summit in Prague on 21 and 22 November 2002.

"The Czech authorities have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of local inhabitants and property. Equally, it is also their duty to ensure that people are able to exercise peacefully their rights of freedom of assembly and expression," said Amnesty International.

Policing operations surrounding large demonstrations in the Czech Republic in recent times, particularly those which took place in September 2000 during the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund meeting in Prague, have resulted in numerous violations of international standards by law enforcement officials.

"The Czech government must ensure that the sorts of human rights violations seen in Prague in September 2000 are not repeated," said Amnesty International.

Amnesty International does not condone violence aimed at police or property, nor does it oppose the lawful use of reasonable force by law enforcement officials. "However, policing must be carried out in such a way as to ensure respect for and protect the rights of people engaged in peaceful protest," the organization added.

In the past, operations by law enforcement officials have violated international standards on arrest and detention, the use of force and firearms and the rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

After the protests of September 2000, Amnesty International investigated reports of arbitrary detention, police ill-treatment of detainees and other violations of detainees' rights. These have included violation of their right to prompt access to a legal counsel of their choice; to inform relatives or a third party of their whereabouts; to be informed about their rights and any charges against them in a language that they can understand; to adequate medical treatment and to conditions of detention respectful of the inherent dignity of the human person.

The organization urged the Czech authorities, as a state aspiring to accede to the European

Union, to heed the specific recommendations which the European Parliament issued to member states on 12 December 2001 'to ensure better protection of fundamental rights' during international meetings. The European Parliament requested states to 'avoid blocking borders or denying individuals or groups of people who seek to participate peacefully in legitimate demonstrations the right to cross borders'. The European Parliament also recommended that states 'avoid the use of guns', 'avoid a disproportionate use of force and instruct national police forces to control violence and preserve individual rights even in confused crowd scenarios where violent lawbreakers are mixed with peaceful law-abiding citizens.'

Background

Following protests organized in Prague on 26 and 27 September 2000 to coincide with the annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Amnesty International investigated more than 60 individual complaints of arbitrary detention, police ill-treatment of detainees and other violations of detainees' rights. The organization also analysed information concerning some of the investigations conducted by the Czech authorities into complaints submitted by the victims of the reported human rights violations.

According to numerous reports examined by Amnesty International, the detention of the vast majority of those held in custody appeared to have been arbitrary and in violation of international human rights standards. Furthermore, Amnesty International was concerned that in the majority of cases it examined those detained were subjected to ill-treatment, in some cases amounting to torture, by police officers following their arrest. Finally, Amnesty International was concerned that investigations into the complaints of arbitrary arrests and detention and police ill-treatment conducted by the Czech authorities could not be considered prompt, independent and impartial as required by international human rights standards.

Amnesty International's recommendations issued to the Czech government in March 2001 were reiterated by the recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture in May 2001 and the Human Rights Committee in July 2001.

For more information please see:

The Czech Republic: Arbitrary detention and police ill-treatment following September 2000 protests (AI Index EUR: 71/001/2001), <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/eur710012001>
Concerns in Europe: July - December 2001, Czech Republic (AI Index: EUR 01/002/2002), <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/eur010022002>

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