International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
26 June 2025

Protecting protests: UN anti-torture mechanisms call for responsible and accountable policing of assemblies

The four United Nations anti-torture mechanisms* have today issued a stern call for more responsible and accountable policing of protests amidst serious human rights violations. As civic space is increasingly shrinking, individuals seeking to exercise their right to peaceful assembly continue to be exposed to serious risks of torture and other ill-treatment, including through unnecessary and excessive use of force.

The experts welcomed proposals to develop international standards to prohibit the use, manufacture, and trade of weapons and law enforcement equipment, which have no other purpose than to cause excessive pain and suffering, and to strictly regulate those that can be misused to inflict harm.

The current scale of torture and other forms of ill-treatment is alarming worldwide, with a particular trend of heavy-handed and sometimes brutal policing of protests. Many authorities increasingly treat peaceful protests as security threats, rather than recognizing them as the lawful exercise of fundamental rights. Over the past year, the misuse of less lethal weapons in assemblies has caused serious injuries and deaths of protesters. Brutal assaults, mass arbitrary arrests and detention, torture during interrogations, unlawful killings and enforced disappearances have also been recorded.

The experts emphasized that any use of force must comply with the fundamental principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, precaution and non-discrimination and must be strictly regulated in accordance with applicable international standards, including the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and the United Nations Human Rights Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement.

At all times, persons exercising their rights to peaceful assembly, association and expression are to be treated humanely and with dignity.

Demonstrators, including human rights defenders, political opponents, journalists, workers, students and even bystanders have been exposed to risks of ill-treatment, compounded by an increased militarization of the police, which instils a climate of fear and intimidation, incompatible with the right to peaceful assembly.



SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
TREATY BODIES

UN VOLUNTARY
FUND FOR VICTIMS
OF TORTURE
ROAD TO
REDRESS.

"Restrictions on civic participation are being worsened by the ongoing availability of law enforcement equipment that, by design or impact, is considered inherently abusive, or is being misused," said **Alice Jill Edwards, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment**. "I am troubled by the ever-expanding development of torturous equipment. There must be limits placed on what equipment and weapons police and security forces can use against citizens. Support for an international agreement that regulates the use, manufacture and trade of certain items together with domestic implementation is sorely needed."

The anti-torture mechanisms have received worrying reports of the use of rubber-coated steel bullets, as well as water cannons, explosive grenades, defensive bullet launchers, pepper spray and other unknown chemicals being fired indiscriminately into crowds. An experimental acoustic weapon was allegedly used on protesters in one country, causing fainting, vomiting and disorientation.

The experts recalled that States have a duty to conduct an independent legal review prior to deployment, to determine whether the use of a less-lethal weapon may, in some or all circumstances, be prohibited under international human rights law. Additionally, less lethal weapons must be handled responsibly, and only by those with proper training. States must further act promptly to ensure impartial and effective investigations into any complaint of torture and other ill-treatment.

"The Committee regularly reminds States of their obligations under the Convention to ensure that all allegations of excessive use of force and ill-treatment are promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigated by an independent body, that there is no institutional or hierarchical link between the investigators and the alleged perpetrators, that those responsible are prosecuted and punished if found guilty, and that victims or their families obtain reparation", **said Claude Heller, Chair of the Committee against Torture**.

The experts expressed concern over the slow pace of justice and limited access to medical and other rehabilitation services for victims of police violence in a range of countries.

"After they were subjected to violent crackdowns in demonstrations, many traumatized survivors assisted by our grantees face multiple barriers in their quest for specialized medical care, psycho-social support, and legal remedies. We call upon States to provide victims with care, justice and reparation, and to take the necessary measures to avoid the repetition of such unlawful and cruel acts against peaceful protesters", **said Jens Modvig, Chair of the Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture**.

The anti-torture mechanisms stressed their continuous responsibility to advance towards the universal eradication of torture, including by contributing to the establishment of legal frameworks, safeguards and identification of best practices in torture prevention. This imperative is all the stronger during such turbulent times.

In 2022, a Group of Governmental Experts nominated by the General Assembly presented their recommendations and a way forward on possible international standards on trade in goods intended – or being misused – for torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

In 2023 the Special Rapporteur on Torture, reporting to the UN General Assembly, took up the issue of torture-free trade and issued a prohibited list of 20 weapons and other tools that have no purpose apart from inflicting excessive pain.

The undersigned encourage Member States to remain actively engaged in the consideration of an international legal instrument aimed at prohibiting inherently abusive items, and to regulate controlled weapons and goods which have a legitimate purpose, but which could be misused to inflict torture or other forms of ill-treatment, including in places of deprivation of liberty. They further encourage all States to join the Alliance for Torture-Free Trade.

The Mechanism representatives also invite States to use the Model Protocol for Law Enforcement Officials to Promote and Protect Human Rights in the Context of Peaceful Protests as a basis for training for law enforcement agencies and officials, as recommended by the CAT in several of its concluding observations to States Parties.

The role of National Human Rights Institutions and especially of National Preventive Mechanisms in observing protests and documenting cases of excessive use of force or unlawful use of equipment by law enforcement should be stepped up.

"National Preventive Mechanisms, mandated to monitor all places of deprivation of liberty, play a key role in preventing torture and ill-treatment in such settings— including by the unlawful use of equipment or weapons," **indicated María Luisa Romero, Chair of the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture**. She added that "The mandate of the National Preventive Mechanisms, without a doubt, extends to monitoring public demonstrations and protests, as has been made absolutely clear in the SPT's first General Comment, since the use of equipment, weapons and crowd control techniques by law enforcement during such events expose people to the risk of torture."

Experts welcomed commitments and actions taken in several regions, including amongst others, the amendments proposed by the European Commission to Regulation (EU) 2019/125, which would expand the list of equipment requiring trade regulation. They also welcomed resolutions and recommendations of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and of the Council of Europe on the prohibition of the use, production, export, and trade of tools used for torture.

While we welcome these significant efforts at regional levels, the size and breadth of the equipment market is global. For this reason, an international instrument regulating global trade in law enforcement weapons, restraints and equipment would help stamp out torture and other ill-treatment, protect victims and prevent further violations.

The experts also expressed satisfaction over the growing support of over 80 civil society organizations, several of which are bolstered by the Voluntary Fund for victims of torture, who play crucial roles in monitoring and reporting on violations, and supporting victims and survivors.

On this International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, the experts called to reaffirm our collective resolve to build a world free from torture or ill-treatment. Preventing unnecessary and excessive use of force by law enforcement officials in the context of peaceful protests not only safeguards individual dignity but also ensures that all people can exercise their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and participation in public life, without fear. By upholding these rights and embracing responsible and accountable policing, States can foster environments where peaceful assembly is genuinely respected, and where the voices of all are heard and protected.

***

** The joint statement is issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the UN Committee against Torture; the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and the Special Fund of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture; and the Board of Trustees of the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture*

