

Navi Pillay Urges Turkey's Government And Civil Society To Take Urgent Action To Defuse Tensions

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United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay on Tuesday welcomed last week's decision by the Turkish Government to put on hold further action on the Gezi Park development in Istanbul until there is a court decision, and then to submit the issue to a local referendum. She urged Turkey's government and civil society to build on this decision and to act in a manner which would defuse tensions.

“The atmosphere is still clearly highly combustible,” Ms. Pillay said, “and it is important that the authorities recognize that the initial extremely heavy-handed response to the protests, which resulted in many injuries, is still a major part of the problem. Because of that response, the scope of the protests broadened to include other aspects of governance, including those relating to fundamental human rights, such as freedom of assembly and freedom of opinion and expression.”

The initial demonstrations about the proposed redevelopment of Gezi Park developed into wider anti-government protests, during which thousands of people were injured or overcome by tear gas. At least four individuals have died so far, including a police officer, although the circumstances of some of these deaths remain to be clarified.

“In times of growing public outcry and large-scale protests, the Government must take all necessary measures to ensure that police forces do not resort to excessive use of force and other human rights violations while discharging their duties,” the High Commissioner said. “The aim should be to minimize damage and injury, and respect and preserve human life.”

“I am particularly concerned about allegations of excessive use of force by police against peaceful groups of protesters as this may have resulted in serious damage to health,” she added. “Reports that tear gas canisters and pepper spray were fired at people from close range, or into closed spaces, and the alleged misuse of rubber bullets, need to be promptly, effectively, credibly and transparently investigated.”

“Ensuring accountability of law enforcement bodies for their actions is essential in times of social unrest. Any excessive use of force should be punished, if trust in the authorities' willingness to abide by the rule of law is to be fully restored,” Ms. Pillay said.

The High Commissioner said the Government must ensure that the policing of demonstrations complies at all times with international human rights obligations and international standards on policing, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.

“I urge the authorities both to facilitate and protect peaceful gatherings and protests. The authorities need to ensure that acts of sporadic violence or other punishable acts committed by some individuals – which I unequivocally condemn – are not used to deprive others of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly.”

The High Commissioner said she was concerned about reports that significant numbers of people had been arbitrarily detained, for acts other than recognized crimes, including some lawyers and people using social media such as Twitter.

She expressed particular concern about allegations of ill-treatment of some of those held, and said “these allegations must be investigated as a matter of urgency and any perpetrators should be brought to justice. The Government must also provide adequate reparation to victims of excessive use of force and other serious human rights violations by security forces.”

Ms. Pillay said that addressing the current situation in Turkey through a human rights framework “could actually turn these major challenges into opportunities, in that it sets the scene for resolving some remaining systemic problems in the country’s approach to rule of law.” However, for this to happen, a broad spectrum of civil society needs to be fully involved in the search for a long-term resolution, she added, offering the support of her Office in the efforts to further develop human rights in Turkey.