

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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South Korea: Call for unimpeded access to food, water and necessary medical treatment for Ssangyong striking workers

Amnesty International today called on the South Korean government to ensure that striking workers at Ssangyong Motor plant in Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi province have immediate and unimpeded access to food, water and any necessary medical treatment, and that the police comply with international standards for the conduct of law enforcement officials.

Beginning 16 July, the management at the car assembly plant blocked all food and water from entering the factory, where about 800 laid-off workers have been occupying the paint shop since 22 May. Since 19 July, it has prevented medical personnel from entering the compound. The workers are protesting against the massive lay-off affecting 1,100 workers.

Striking workers have been rationing food as supplies are running low. They also cannot wash or use the toilets. Over the past month, workers have clashed with more than 3,000 riot police and hundreds of private security personnel hired by Ssangyong, resulting in injuries on both sides. Most of the wounded workers and others suffering from chronic medical conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure have been denied medical attention because management, reportedly with help of police, have stopped medical personnel from entering the building.

Since 19 July, doctors were allowed limited access to the compound on only three occasions – on 22 July, to treat a man shot in the face by a police Taser stun gun, and again on 30 and 31 July. However, there are reports that other strikers are also in need of urgent medical attention as a result of action by the police and private security personnel. In particular, some have reported skin irritation and blisters resulting from contact with liquefied tear gas ejected from a water cannon.

In an apparent attempt to bring an end to the occupation, police helicopters are reported to have been dropping liquefied tear gas during the day and running surveillance throughout the night since 20 July. Through a loud speaker, the management has also been making announcements, calling on striking workers to end the protest and playing loud music day and night.

In no circumstances is it permissible for management or law enforcement officials to attempt to bring an end to a strike by denying the strikers access to essential needs such as food, water or urgent medical treatment. Even if police intervention becomes necessary because strikers' actions present a substantial risk of violence to persons or serious damage to property, the police must comply with international standards, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, which states that law enforcement officials may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty. In this regard, Amnesty International is concerned in particular at the police use of electro-shock devices (Tasers). Such weapons are potentially lethal and should be used only where officers are faced with an imminent threat of death or serious injury which cannot be contained by less extreme measures.

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