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Excessive use of force against Belgian demonstrators

Written question No. 590 to the Committee of Ministers
by Mr Göran LINDBLAD, Sweden, Group of the European People's Party

According to the Human Rights League and Amnesty International, among others, the Belgian police used excessive force and illegal methods against peaceful demonstrators representing the *No Border Camp* movement on their way to an authorised demonstration on 1 October 2010. Reportedly, at least 500 mostly 'preventive' arrests took place, and 14 people were seriously injured.

Whereas the alleged vandalism that some members of *the No Border Camp* movement had used against the offices of Frontex, IOM and a number of police precincts on previous days is to be condemned, there is serious reason for concern for the curtailment of the right to assembly and the right to free speech as well as for the violence that the Belgian law enforcement authorities allegedly resorted to against peaceful demonstrators.

The allegations of police violence include: unprovoked violence using fists, batons, pepper spray; holding people in stress positions without food, water, sanitation for long periods of time; beating up shackled prisoners; threats of sexual violence towards women; and theft of money and other personal belongings. This is clearly unacceptable.

These allegations have been dismissed by the Belgian Ministry of the Interior, despite numerous testimonies by witnesses of that day. No serious and impartial investigation has so far been undertaken into the above allegations, despite calls from Amnesty International and others.

It is important that the Council of Europe stands up for every citizen's right to freedom of speech, freedom of peaceful demonstration and assembly. These rights are all stipulated in the European Convention on Human Rights, which Belgium is committed to uphold.

It is equally of paramount importance that Belgium carries out - without further delays - an impartial and independent investigation into the allegations, take any measures necessary to sanction illegal police behaviour and ensures that a culture of impunity does not spread in the police forces. It should review its demonstration policing procedures to ensure demonstrators can identify every individual policeman in uniform, ban the wearing of face-hiding masks by riot police, etc.

Mr Lindblad,

Ask the Committee of Ministers:

to raise the above concerns with the Belgian authorities and to request that:

– Belgium lives up to its obligation as member state of the Council of Europe to guarantee that its statutory obligations to respect the rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights are fulfilled;

– the Belgian authorities report back to the Committee of Ministers, within a reasonable but tight deadline, about the results of a credible investigation into these allegations, and of the steps they propose to take with a view to uprooting violence and impunity within the police force and improving standards of policing procedures.