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April 17, 2015

# South Korea: Clampdown against Sewol ferry anniversary protest an insult to the victims

The unnecessary use of force by South Korean police against families of

the Sewol ferry tragedy is an insult to the victims and a violation of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, Amnesty International said on Friday.

Police used pepper spray against participants of a vigil walk in memory of the victims, near Gwanghwamun district in central Seoul on Thursday night according to local media. One woman, the mother of a child who died in the accident, is reported to have suffered fractured ribs after a police officer used his shield to push into the crowds.

“The clampdown against an overwhelming peaceful protest is totally unjustified, unnecessary and an insult to both the victims of the Sewol ferry tragedy and their families,” said Arnold Fang, East Asia Researcher at Amnesty International.

The ongoing protests started on Thursday when tens of thousands of people took part in the vigil to mark the first anniversary of the ferry accident in which 304 people, mostly school children, died. They are protesting over the seeming lack of independence of the government’s investigation into the ferry accident.

Ten people were arrested in clashes with police during the walk on Thursday night and at least 400 police in Seoul encircled approximately 70 people during the early hours of Friday morning.

“One year on from the accident, the authorities have shown their true colours and disdain for the rights of the families and their supporters to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Family members should be free to peacefully express their views without fear of arrest or intimidation,” said Arnold Fang.

Amnesty International also saw police officers with no visible identification numbers, making it possible to evade accountability. Police have also prevented other family members from joining the protest and attempted to block people from providing food to the protesters.

The use of chemical irritants primarily to disperse peaceful protesters, rather than in targeted responses to specific acts of violence, is unlawful

under international legal standards.

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