



June 4, 2020

Senator Ron Johnson
Chair, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Senator Gary Peters
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Dear Chair Johnson and Ranking Member Peters:

Amnesty International USA calls on the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs to urgently investigate the role of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agents in the lawless and abusive crackdown on Black Lives Matter protesters this week in Washington, D.C. We are horrified that the orders to unjustifiably deploy tear gas and rubber bullets against peaceful protesters reportedly came directly from Attorney General William Barr, ostensibly at the behest of President Trump. If left unchecked, this abuse of power at the very highest levels of the U.S. government will send a chilling signal to authorities across the nation that they can continue to unleash brutal, unwarranted force against protesters.

Amnesty International is the world's largest grassroots human rights movement, comprising a global support base of millions of individual members, supporters, and activists in more than 150 countries and territories. Amnesty has fought for decades to protect the right to peacefully protest: from the historic uprising in Tahrir Square in 2011 to the roar of protests across Latin America and the Caribbean in 2019. In 2014, a team of Amnesty researchers monitored protests challenging police killings of Black people in Ferguson, Missouri – a precursor to the nationwide protests of today.

The standards governing dispersal of public protests are clear: enforced dispersal should only take place as a measure of last resort, when violence occurs or there is an imminent threat of violence. The type of equipment used to disperse an assembly must be carefully considered and used only when necessary, proportionate, and lawful. Policing and security equipment – including so-called “less lethal” weapons such as rubber bullets and tear gas – can result in serious injury, even death. Toxic chemical irritants, such as tear gas, should never be fired directly at people, used in confined spaces against unarmed people, or in situations where exits and ventilation points are restricted.

Here, security forces' reckless and unjustified firing of tear gas and rubber bullets against peaceful protesters flagrantly violated these standards. According to the *Washington Post*, agents from the U.S. Secret Service were involved in “rushing at” protesters in attempts to clear them from Lafayette Square.¹ Multiple former Secret Service agents expressed grave concern that Secret Service agents' response to protesters on Monday violated established protocols regarding

¹ Carol D. Leonnig, Matt Zappos, Josh Dawsey & Rebecca Tan, “Barr personally ordered removal of protesters near White House, leading to use of force against largely peaceful crowd,” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/barr-personally-ordered-removal-of-protesters-near-white-house-leading-to-use-of-force-against-largely-peaceful-crowd/2020/06/02/0ca2417c-a4d5-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html.

clearing of protesters.² Furthermore, agents from multiple other DHS agencies, including Customs and Border Protection, were reportedly deployed in response to the protests, which is cause for particular concern considering these agencies' history of abuses.

We urge the Committee to immediately launch an inquiry into the role of DHS agents, particularly U.S. Secret Service agents, in dispersing Monday's protests and to issue a public statement condemning their involvement in unlawfully cracking down on peaceful protest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joanne Lin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joanne" and the last name "Lin" clearly distinguishable.

Joanne Lin
National Director, Advocacy & Government Relations,
Amnesty International USA

² *Id.*