

# URGENT ACTION

## CLAMPDOWN ON FREE EXPRESSION

**Puerto Rico authorities responded violently to demonstrations on 1 May by repressing protesters and violating their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. With more demonstrations planned, peaceful protesters are at risk of further human rights violations.**

Since at least 2016, regular protests have taken place in Puerto Rico mobilizing thousands of people from diverse sectors of society that disagree with austerity measures that are putting at risk the economic, social and cultural rights of Puerto Ricans. On 1 May 2018, recognized internationally as International Workers' Day, protesters met at several locations in the capital San Juan. According to protesters who spoke to Amnesty International, national police stopped and blocked them from proceeding on the corner of Avenue Ponce de León and Roosevelt. After approximately one hour of blocking marches police let off tear gas without warning and began to violently push back against demonstrators and fire rubber bullets. According to media reports and protesters who spoke to Amnesty International, while a small number of protesters threw stones at the police, the large majority were peaceful.

Activists from Amnesty International Puerto Rico participated in the demonstrations as part of their campaign "Protest is not a crime", which promotes protection of peaceful freedom of expression and assembly in the context of ongoing protests against fiscal reforms. The Director of Amnesty International Puerto Rico, Liza Gallardo, was among the peaceful protesters. "We were there to insert the message of freedom of expression in the march," she said.

Following the demonstrations, six young people arrived at Amnesty International's office suffering the effects of tear gas. The office also received calls from concerned relatives asking if the organization had information about those detained. It received reports of at least 11 short-term detentions. "I couldn't breathe well... I was trying to run but couldn't see," said a protester who had marched with Amnesty International, "... they [the police] kept throwing tear gas." Another protester running away from the police told Amnesty International that he found a teenager convulsing and unconscious on the ground. He said there were no ambulances available, and carried the teenager to safety.

In 2013, the governments of the USA and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico signed an agreement for sustainable reform of the Puerto Rican police, which would take place over 10 years. The implementation of the reforms, initiated after repeated allegations of human rights violations by the police, is overseen by an independent federal tribunal who had observers present at the march on 1 May. On 4 May, a United States District judge court ordered an "independent evaluation and assessment, followed by a report, of the May 1 demonstrations."

**Please write immediately in Spanish or your own language:**

- Calling on the Governor to immediately guarantee the rights to freedom of expression and assembly;
- Calling on the authorities to make public as soon as possible the findings of the court ordered investigation into the 1 May demonstrations, and bring those responsible to justice;
- Urging the authorities to engage in dialogue with civil society actors to ensure police protocols and public order regulations comply with international human rights standards.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 15 JUNE 2018 TO:**

Governor of Puerto Rico

Ricardo Rosselló Nevares

La Fortaleza, PO Box 9020082

San Juan, PR 00902-0082, Puerto Rico

Fax: +1 (787) 723-3287

Email: gobernador@fortaleza.pr.gov

Facebook: www.facebook.com/rrossello

Twitter: @ricardorossello

**Salutation: Honorable**

Secretary of the Department of Public

Safety

Héctor M. Pesquera

Email: hmpesquera@dsp.gov.org

Twitter: @DSPNoticias

**Salutation: Honorable**

**Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.** HIS EXCELLENCY WOODY JOHNSON,  
U.S. Embassy London, 33 Nine Elms Lane, London, SW11 7US, United Kingdom, Phone: (0)20 7499-9000

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



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### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Puerto Rico continues to face a serious financial crisis as a result of crippling external debt of more than USD 70 billion, according to figures from the authorities.

The Financial Oversight and Management Board, established by US authorities in 2016, implemented several austerity measures during 2017. These measures could have negative consequences on human rights, in particular access to health care, housing, education and work. On 9 January 2017, the UN Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights publicly expressed concerns over the adverse effects that further austerity measures would have on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. The government of Puerto Rico continued to refuse to conduct a thorough audit of its debt despite calls from local civil society organizations.

In December that same year, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights visited Puerto Rico. He expressed concern regarding the lack of consideration given to social protections in the projected austerity measures.

Excessive and unnecessary use of force by police was also reported during protests related to the fiscal crisis on 1 May 2017, International Workers' Day. The American Civil Liberties Union documented the indiscriminate use of tear gas against protesters without prior dispersal orders, contrary to international law and standards. Observers collected canisters which revealed that expired tear gas had been used. Additionally, video evidence showed the use of rubber bullets against largely peaceful protesters. Other concerns were raised concerning police officers not being properly identifiable during the protests, and undercover police infiltrating protests and making arrests without identifying themselves.

On 20 September, Hurricane Maria caused the largest natural disaster on the island in modern history. According to the authorities, at least 64 people died, but due to uncertainties regarding the actual number, the Governor announced that a new investigation would be carried out. The hurricane destroyed infrastructure and buildings, leaving many people without housing and access to potable water, food, and essential services including medical treatment and education. The slow response of the local and federal government resulted in a deepening of the humanitarian crisis caused by the hurricane. In October, UN human rights experts noted that the lack of an effective emergency response came in the context of an "existing dire situation caused by debt and austerity measures". In December, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights expressed concern over the emergency and reconstruction efforts.