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South Korea halts tear gas exports to Bahrain

By Song Jung-a in Seoul and Simeon Kerr in Dubai



South Korea has suspended tear gas exports to Bahrain, citing the unstable political situation in the Gulf state.

South Korea's Defence Acquisition Program Administration, which oversees the country's military trade, told two companies that sought approval to export to Bahrain in October and November to suspend shipments.

Lee Jung-geun, a spokesman for the defence agency, said the decision had been made because of the "unstable politics in the country [Bahrain], people's death due to tear gas and complaints from human rights groups".

Bahrain's interior ministry on Wednesday said it had not been informed by South Korea of any ban on the export of tear gas to Bahrain.

Mr Lee on Thursday said South Korea had not informed Bahrain of the decision "because there was no inquiry from the country about it".

The move comes after months of campaigning by rights groups who say the Bahraini authorities' misuse of tear gas has led to dozens of deaths as the Shia majority protests against the Sunni-led government.

The authorities have consistently argued that tear gas is necessary to maintain order, claiming that unrest is being stoked by the Shias' co-religionists in neighbouring Iran.

Bahrain's interior ministry in June solicited bids for 1.6m tear gas projectiles, 90,000 tear gas grenades and 145,000 stun grenades, according to a tender document leaked to Bahrain Watch, an advocacy group.

The order would have been of a similar magnitude to the 2m tear gas projectiles that activists estimate were fired by the security forces since pro-democracy protests swept the strategic island in February 2011.

"This is also a clear message to any other countries considering supplying tear gas to Bahrain that profiting from repression is unacceptable," Bahrain Watch said in a statement.

One of the companies seeking to export tear gas, DaeKwang Chemical, said it was "unlikely" to provide any material to Bahrain owing to increasing protests from human rights groups, said Kim Jong-bae, chief executive.

FT Video

Bahrain protesters clash as talks start



July 2011: The weekend saw some of the worse confrontations between police and protesters in the Bahrain capital of Manama since demonstrations began in February. Simeon Kerr records the developing unrest on the day that the Bahraini government embarks on its National Dialogue – the talks they say will bring a peaceful conclusion to the country's turbulence.

DaeKwang had been planning to sell 3m tear gas canisters for around Won30bn (\$28m) but the deal will probably be cancelled, he added.

"We had an offer from Bahrain and were close to signing the deal," said Mr Kim.

Mr Kim blamed the deal's collapse on a Korean broker, who has sent letters protesting against the shipment to the governments of South Korea and Bahrain, as well as environmental and human rights advocacy groups.

"Due to growing pressure from human rights groups, Bahrain seems to have given up imports from Korea," he said. "Our government doesn't seem happy about the shipments either."

Mr Kim said tear gas was a peaceful way to disperse protesters and is used across the world, including by the US and European countries.

"Even if Bahrain does not import it from us, it will import it from other countries," he said.

Daily low-level clashes between police and Bahraini youths continue amid lacklustre attempts to forge a political settlement.

The Shia-led protest movement is calling for greater accountability and an end to discrimination. The Sunni minority has rallied around the government.

The authorities last month arrested Ali Salman, leader of al-Wefaq, the main opposition group. He has been released but banned from travel. He has denied charges of inciting "religious hatred".

Also in late December, the government said it had foiled several terrorist incidents, raising fears among some analysts that the revolt could be turning more violent.

The interior ministry said it had defused a car bomb, intercepted a shipment of arms, including Iranian "handmade" bombs, and raided a warehouse containing explosives and ammunition.

Tear gas and sound grenades are the most commonly used tactics to disperse protesters, who over the past couple of years have become increasingly violent, using Molotov cocktails and homemade bombs.

Tear gas projectiles, which are sometimes thrown into houses, have caused as many as 39 deaths, according to Physicians for Human Rights. The government has previously denied that these deaths can be attributed to the use of tear gas.

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