

# Amsterdam mayor defends police against UN accusations of brutality during Covid protests

Amsterdam mayor Femke Halsema has responded through a letter to the city council to United Nations rapporteur Nil Melzer's criticism of police actions during the Covid protests, calling the Amsterdam police's actions "controlled" and "constitutional". However, she also writes the council is 'obviously willing' to collaborate should an investigation take place.

Melzer, who serves as the UN's Special Rapporteur on Torture, first criticized the Dutch police's behavior during the demonstrations in a series of tweets published following the January 2 anti-lockdown protest in Amsterdam. "This is one of the most disgusting scenes of police brutality I have seen since George Floyd," he said about a video of an arrest made during another Covid protest in The Hague last March. In the video, a demonstrator is shown being repeatedly hit by officers with batons and attacked by a police dog. The UN rapporteur addressed the tweet, which has since garnered more than 6,000 retweets, to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Despite the protest being forbidden by the municipality of Amsterdam, 10,000 people gathered in Museumplein on 2 January to protest the government's Covid lockdown measures and vaccination policies. This led Halsema to issue an emergency ordinance, empowering the riot police to break up the crowd with batons and shields. Thirty protesters were arrested, while several suffered minor injuries.

According to the mayor, this was the 'only option', given the health risks involved – with an expected turnout of 25,000 participants, the 6 feet distance rule could not be maintained, in a time when the Dutch healthcare system was in danger of being overwhelmed by the spread of the Omicron variant of Covid. Moreover, Halsema feared that the protest would turn violent and aimed to prevent this by breaking it up as soon as possible. "In times of

Covid," Halsema wrote in response to Melzer's criticisms of the police, "the playing field for local authorities is complicated."

Melzer's accusation of police brutality drew the ire of Dutch law enforcement agents, with The Hague police calling the comments 'disappointing' and the police union filing an official complaint against the UN rapporteur for 'premature conclusions'. As for Halsema, she called for "making a judgment in the event of an incident on the basis of thorough and weighted information".

Despite stirring controversy for his criticism of the Dutch police during the Covid protests, Melzer has not doubled

down on his statement, saying he is 'sincerely afraid of escalation of violence' in these situations. That is why he reacted so 'quickly' and 'firmly', he told NOS. Despite acknowledging he could have used more 'nuanced' words, the UN rapporteur stood by what he said, because 'with big words you get attention'.

Although in her letter the mayor of Amsterdam stated she was willing to collaborate should an investigation proceed, Gerrit van de Kamp, chairman of the ACP police union, has his reservations. "It would be good for the UN to carry out this investigation, but led by someone other than this person, who already has drawn his conclusions," he said to NPO Radio 1.

Antoine Buyse, a professor of Human Rights at Utrecht University, also commented on the matter to NPO Radio 1, saying the ordeal is proof that the state of affairs is 'striking'. "To me, it gives the impression of someone who is scrolling on Twitter, sees something serious and immediately says something about it," he argues. Indeed, at the time of sending the tweet, Melzer had neither verified whether a criminal investigation had already been launched against the police officers in the video, nor had he been in contact with the Rutte cabinet, the Dutch police or the Dutch Public Prosecution Service, according to the police.

According to his spokesperson, Melzer is currently discussing the issue of police violence during the Covid protests with the Dutch government. Incidentally, the UN rapporteur is due to travel to the Netherlands in March, and the theme of his official visit is police brutality. Melzer has said he will use this time to talk to the police directly. "I want to hear their side, because these incidents can also stem from the police force being overworked and overtaxed," he concluded.

Written by Beatriz Negreiros

