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USA: Police brutality in Prince George's County must not be tolerated

Federal and local authorities must ensure that police actions in Prince George's County, Maryland, adhere to international standards on police use of force and on the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

"While some reforms have been recently introduced to tackle police brutality and complaints have reportedly fallen in 2001, there remains a disturbing pattern of abuse, mainly against the county's African-American population," the organization added. Reports include shootings, deaths in custody from dangerous restraint holds or other use of force, and unresisting suspects being mauled by police dogs.

Cases of particular concern to the organization, highlighted in the report, include:

The death of Prince Jones, an unarmed college student, who was shot in September 2000 after an undercover officer tailed his car for several miles, mistaking him for a black suspect involved in an earlier incident.

The deaths of two prisoners, in March and June 2002, after they were restrained in a WRAP device (similar to a strait jacket and designed to prevent deaths from choking or asphyxia).

The shooting of five reportedly mentally ill or disturbed people in 2001, at least one of them fatally. Although the Prince George's County Police Department has since introduced a range of non-lethal weapons -- such as pepper spray and bean bag rounds -- for dealing with suspects who are mentally ill or high on drugs, such devices are often not effective in such cases. In October 2001, Caesar Nathaniel Allen, a paranoid schizophrenic, was shot dead with 10 bullets after reportedly being pelted with four cans of pepper spray and 15 pepper ball missiles.

Amnesty International is also concerned about a "code of silence" which results in police officers failing to report misconduct, or even covering up abuses. "This 'code of silence' is reported to have hampered many investigations into police use of force," the organization stressed.

An investigation by the US Department of Justice, initiated in November 2000, is currently underway to determine whether the Prince George's County Police Department engaged in a "pattern and practice" of brutality and racial discrimination. Amnesty International is urging the Justice Department to release its findings and recommendations as soon as possible. In the summer of 2001, the organization sponsored three sessions in which Justice Department investigators were invited to hear complaints about alleged police misconduct.

"Police, County and federal authorities must send out a clear message that police abuse will not be tolerated and bring to justice those officers responsible for misconduct," Amnesty International said.

Background

Although pepper spray has been promoted as a safer and more effective alternative to mace or impact weapons, research has found that it can be harmful to people with respiratory problems or heart disease, and that it may not be effective against subjects who are extremely agitated or under the influence of drugs, possibly leading to over-use of the spray to dangerous levels. Pepper spray was demonstrably ineffective in the case of Caesar Allen (above). Amnesty International has called for an independent, national inquiry into police use of pepper spray and, in the meantime, for police departments to either cease using pepper spray or to introduce strict guidelines and limitations on its use, with careful monitoring procedures. Amnesty International believes that police departments should introduce training programs designed to minimize the risk of unnecessary force and death or injury in such situations.

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