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South Africa: Torture and misuse of lethal force by security forces must end

South Africa's police, military and political authorities should swiftly bring to justice members of the security forces involved in human rights abuses, Amnesty International said reacting today to a BBC broadcast of filmed evidence of police abuses.

"The State has a duty to ensure that ill-treatment, torture, and unjustified use of lethal force against arrested criminal suspects are investigated and that those responsible are held accountable," the organization added. "This can only enhance, not undermine, the fight against crime."

"Although it is widely agreed that the police are under huge pressure to address high levels of violent crime while remaining inadequately paid and resourced, some incidents indicate a gratuitous use of violence, not commensurate with the threat posed by the suspects involved," Amnesty International said.

The evidence of police abuses filmed by BBC journalists and broadcast on 19 April 1999 is consistent with corroborated information received by Amnesty International, some of which was gathered during a visit to Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal and Western Cape provinces in April this year.

Such information concerns violations committed by -- among others -- members of specialised police squads such as the Murder & Robbery, Firearms and Dog Units, the Municipal Police and members of the South African National Defence Force stationed in Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal provinces.

The alleged abuses include the use of lethal force against individuals who had surrendered or were not posing a threat to life, beatings during raids on homes or after arrest, and the infliction of cigarette burns, electric shocks and suffocation torture on detained suspects, and the indiscriminate use of police dogs to inflict serious injuries on arrested or fleeing suspects.

Some of these abuses were associated with the withholding of information on the whereabouts of the arrested person, apparently to hinder family, medical and legal access to the detainee.

"These practices reflect a survival of past habits, a reliance upon coercive methods in crime investigation which can only contribute to failures in the prosecution of crime through the courts," the organization added.

Amnesty International is renewing its call on the government, as well as police and military authorities, to ensure the vigorous and independent investigation of human rights violations by members of the security forces, and for full cooperation with and support for the bodies conducting these investigations.

“The authorities should also grant full and public support for police or military officers who undertake their duties in a professional manner consistent with the law and the constitution, or who speak out against any unlawful activities by their colleagues,” Amnesty International said.
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