



POLICE ILL-TREATMENT IN FRANCE

LAMBA SOUKOUNA

“They hit me on the forehead with the butt of a flash-ball gun and started kicking me. I tried to tell them “Take it easy. I’m sick, I’m sick. What have I done to deserve this?” They didn’t listen and kept going.”

Lamba Soukouna, describing his ill-treatment to Amnesty International



Lamba Soukouna told Amnesty International how he was beaten by police officers outside his home in Villepinte (Seine-Saint-Denis, a suburb of Paris), on 8 May 2008. Lamba, now 31 years old, suffers from sickle cell anaemia, a serious genetic illness, and is registered as 80 per cent disabled.

Lamba told Amnesty International that just before midnight he was entering his apartment block, talking to a friend on the phone, when he saw a group of national police officers in riot gear charging at a group of young people outside. As Lamba entered his apartment building, two groups of police officers from the Villepinte police force ran inside. He says one officer grabbed him from behind and pushed him against the wall. Lamba says he shouted “Take it easy! I’m sick, I’m sick!” but the officer told him to shut up and hit him on the forehead with the butt of his flash-ball gun. Lamba Soukouna fell to the ground and believes he passed out for a few seconds. When he came to, he felt blood running down his forehead and shouted “Why did you do that? What have I done to deserve this?” A neighbour arrived and warned the police officers that Lamba suffers from a serious illness but despite this Lamba says the officers kicked him in the back and ribs as he lay on the ground.

Although Lamba was bleeding heavily and required medical treatment, he decided to go first to the *gendarmerie* station to report the incident, so the *gendarmes* could see his injuries firsthand. Lamba left in a friend’s car with his brother and two friends to report the incident. On their way they drove past the scene of a car accident, where a number of police officers were present. Lamba recognized some of the officers as those who had assaulted him. A police officer from a different police force who was present saw Lamba’s injuries and told him to go and get his injuries treated by the paramedics who were at the scene. As Lamba walked towards the paramedics he says one of the officers who had attacked him earlier grabbed him around the neck, dragged him for several metres and forced him into a police van, where he was handcuffed. They told Lamba’s brother that they were taking Lamba to the hospital, but instead they took him to the police station at Villepinte.

Lamba told Amnesty International that at the police station he was handcuffed to a bench and nobody told him why he had been arrested or gave him his vital medication despite his repeated requests. He was finally taken to Bondy Hospital at around 2am, where he received several stitches to his forehead, and was given a sick note for six days. He was then taken back to the police station, where, more than three hours after he was originally detained, he was finally told that he was being charged with insulting (*outrage*) and violently resisting (*rebellion*) a police officer.

Lamba says that the police officer who assaulted him claimed that Lamba had insulted him and tried to head-butt him, and had also encouraged the other young people present to attack the police officer before trying to run away. Lamba Soukouna denied all of these allegations and pointed out that due to his chronic disability he would be totally unable to run away as the officer claimed. Amnesty International has seen Lamba’s medical records and reports of his injuries, which are consistent with his account.

After being questioned, Lamba was returned to a cell. At 5am he suffered a violent fit as a result of having been

repeatedly denied his medication. He was in extreme pain and having difficulty breathing. About half an hour later Lamba was finally taken to hospital, where the doctor on duty told the police officers escorting Lamba that he could not return to custody due to the grave state of his health. Lamba had to remain in hospital for three days.

Lamba Soukouna made a complaint to the internal police investigation body (IGS) regarding the incident, but his complaint was subsequently closed without investigation. Lamba is still waiting to find out what charges, if any, will be brought against him as a result of the police officer's accusation.

ISSUE IN FOCUS: REPRISALS AGAINST COMPLAINANTS

In recent years Amnesty International has noted a significant trend for individuals who have made complaints of ill-treatment against police officers to be subject to unjustified criminal charges of *outrage* or *rebellion*. Evidence indicates that some police officers charge individuals who have suffered ill-treatment or excessive use of force with *outrage* or *rebellion* as a self-protection tactic to undermine the victim's own complaint of ill-treatment and thus escape punishment. Delegates of the independent body examining complaints against law enforcement officials in France (CNDS), the internal police investigations bodies (IGPN and IGS) and several NGOs have all confirmed this trend. One former police officer noted that bringing such charges also allows law enforcement officials to meet their pre-set targets for arrests and prosecutions easily.

Amnesty International has spoken to a number of individuals and lawyers who stated they would not pursue a complaint of ill-treatment against a police officer as they were afraid of reprisals, including retaliatory use of charges of *outrage* or *rebellion*.

In some cases individuals who complained about ill-treatment or excessive use of force have been prosecuted for defamation against the police officers involved even when their complaint was upheld. In its 2007 report the CNDS reiterated its extreme concern that this could develop into "unacceptable pressure, deliberately exercised against genuine witnesses and victims of ethical misconduct by law enforcement officials".

ACT NOW!

Write to the Minister of Justice calling on her to:

- Ensure a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation is conducted into Lamba Soukouna's complaint of ill-treatment; and
- Ensure that where complaints are filed by individuals and police officers in relation to the same incident, neither complaint is used to undermine the investigation of the other, and that both complaints are investigated together.

Write to the Minister of Interior calling on him to:

- suspend the officers accused of ill-treating Lamba Soukouna pending the outcome of criminal and disciplinary investigations;
- make the IGS report into the incident publicly available;
- ensure appropriate disciplinary measures are taken against any officer found to have ill-treated Lamba Soukouna and/or brought false charges against him; and
- issue instructions warning all police officers of the disciplinary consequences of bringing false charges.

WRITE TO:

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Ministry of Justice
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75042 Paris CEDEX 01
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M. BRICE HORTEFEUX
Minister of the Interior
Ministry of the Interior
Place Beauvau
75008 Paris CEDEX 08
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SALUTATION: DEAR MINISTER

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Learn more about police ill-treatment in France here: <http://www.amnesty.fr/despoliciersaudessusdeslois> and <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR21/003/2009/en>

Photo: Injury to Lamba Soukouna's head. © Private, 2008.