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Sweden: five years on, still no justice for Osmo Vallo

Five years after the disputed death in police custody of Osmo Vallo, no one has been found responsible and held accountable for his treatment, Amnesty International said today.

“The Swedish authorities have failed to uncover the full circumstances of how Osmo Vallo died,” Amnesty International said. “Indeed, the many investigations into the cause of death have only served to obscure the basic facts.”

Osmo Vallo died shortly after his arrest on 30 May 1995 -- he was ill-treated by police officers and bitten by a police dog, and he was stamped on his back by a police officer as he lay face down on the ground.

No attempts were made to assist or resuscitate him. Instead, the police officers transported him still handcuffed to the hospital. Pathologists carrying out subsequent post-mortem examinations disagreed on whether the police violence and/or positional asphyxia contributed to his death.

“Osmo Vallo’s death was not an isolated incident. There is a pattern of similar deaths in custody in which the manner of restraint and excessive use of force by law enforcement officials may have caused asphyxia,” Amnesty International said.

“The fact that the Prosecutor General acknowledged, almost five years after Osmo Vallo’s death, that he may have died from being stamped on his back by a police officer is a sad indictment of the whole investigation process.”

“This could indicate the participation of the Swedish authorities in a cover-up in order to prevent the full truth from being known,” the organization continued.

In closing the investigation into Osmo Vallo's death, the Prosecutor General acknowledged that there had been flaws in the investigation and urged, on 30 March, that a further investigation be carried out into how the authorities had handled the different aspects of the case.

Amnesty International strongly urges that this investigation be carried out by a totally independent body, possibly including experts from other countries. The organization urges that the investigation should include the handling of Osmo Vallo's case by the different authorities, with a view to explaining why those responsible for his death have not been brought to justice, as well as examining the serious allegations of a cover-up.

It should also carry out a more thorough investigation into the other cases of deaths in custody since 1992 in order to determine the causes of death and the full circumstances of the deaths, which the families have a right to know, as well as how these deaths were handled by the authorities involved.

“The findings of such investigations should be made public and the investigative body should formulate recommendations to ensure that what happened in the case of Osmo Vallo could never happen again,” Amnesty International said.

Background

The police investigation into the death of Osmo Vallo was not carried out thoroughly and impartially. The scene of arrest was cleaned before

detailed forensic testing, and some eyewitnesses were reportedly asked to keep quiet about what they had seen.

The first post-mortem examination was not carried out properly: it failed to take account of the detail of eyewitness statements and thus examine the body thoroughly. A thorough examination would have discovered the broken ribs and damage to a neck vertebra.

The regional prosecutor failed to question the discrepancies between the eyewitness statements and the post-mortem examination; and failed to bring prosecutions based on the many eyewitness statements concerning the police officers' treatment of Osmo Vallo, which were consistent with the 39 wounds and bruises found on his body.

The National Board of Forensic Medicine (*Rättsmedicinalverket*) failed to review properly the post-mortem examination, and the Judicial Council (*Rättsliga rådet*) of the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*) failed to produce an authoritative and impartial report on the post-mortem examinations and on international concerns on positional asphyxia as a cause of death in police custody in certain circumstances.

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