

Public

AMR 51/49/99
22 March 1999

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (New York)

Amnesty International is urging the New York authorities to carry out an investigation into allegations that officers from the New York City Police Department - some on horseback and in riot gear - used excessive and unnecessary force against gay participants attending a peaceful rally in New York in October 1998. While the police use of force at the event is disputed, concerns remain at police behaviour, which has been criticised by community organisations and at least two state Assemblymembers.

Amnesty International has received copies of complaints of police abuse and misconduct which allege, among other things, that rally participants were randomly arrested for no apparent reason; police horses charged at seated participants; police used homophobic epithets against participants; handcuffs were applied too tightly so that people lost feeling in their hands and police refused to loosen or remove them when requested; HIV-positive arrestees were not allowed access to essential medication, despite repeated requests; detainees were denied food, water and toilet facilities for several hours - so that in one case detainees being held on a city bus were forced to urinate in a plastic bottle; police officers covered their badges to prevent identification; arrestees were frisked repeatedly by jail staff on arrival at a police station and told that if they did not comply they would be considered to be resisting arrest; at least four women who were arrested were strip searched. Some physical injuries were reported as a result of the police action.

Although there have been reports that in recent years police attitudes towards minority groups has improved, a Task Force established by Mayor Giuliani in 1997 to report on police/community relations recommended in March 1998 that more sensitivity training towards such groups is needed.

Amnesty International is urging the police leadership to make it clear to all police officers that ill-treatment of any kind, including homophobic behaviour, will not be tolerated and to take steps to ensure that similar incidents do not occur in future.