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Nigeria: End police intimidation of National Human Rights Commission

The Nigeria Police Force must immediately stop investigations into statements made by the head of Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) accusing the police of extrajudicial executions, Amnesty International said.

Police today summoned Chidi Odinkalu, Chairman of the Governing Board of the NHRC, to appear before their Criminal Investigation Department for questioning.

According to the letter summoning Odinkalu, the police are "investigating [a] complaint of damaging remarks allegedly made by the Chairman... against the Nigeria Police Force."

"The police ought to be spending their time and energy investigating allegations of extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances and torture committed by their officers, rather than harassing the National Human Rights Commission," said Erwin van der Borgh, Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"This police intimidation and harassment of the NHRC is deeply disturbing. The Nigeria Police Force must immediately stop undermining the Commission's ability to carry out its mandate, which is in line with Nigeria's international human rights obligations and commitments."

On 5 March 2012, Chidi Odinkalu said that the Nigeria Police Force carries out torture and more than 2,500 extrajudicial executions annually.

This followed a widely reported public address in February 2012, when the Inspector General of Police admitted that the police carry out torture and extrajudicial executions.

Amnesty International's research has found that the police kill hundreds of people every year with impunity. Many are unlawfully killed before or during arrest in the street or at roadblocks. Others are tortured to death in police detention.

A large proportion of these unlawful killings may constitute extrajudicial executions. In other cases, people disappear from police custody.

The majority of cases go uninvestigated and unpunished. Victims' families rarely receive justice and are often left with no answers about the fate of their loved ones.

Some relatives are threatened if they seek justice.

Few of the police officers responsible for the violations are held accountable, and in most cases there is not even an investigation.

Human rights activists, doctors and lawyers who work on cases of extrajudicial executions are often subjected to intimidation.

According to one lawyer, “If you are suing the police, you will find yourself in a difficult situation. It is the police that will investigate and give report. They threaten us, they tear our clothes, they have pulled their gun at us but have not killed one of the lawyers yet.”

Anyone who asks for information about suspects is at risk of being beaten, harassed and intimidated by the police.

“Doctors are reluctant to go to the police station because the police detain and label doctors as accomplices and they beat up those who visit police stations to assist suspects,” one doctor told Amnesty International.

“This police investigation goes against the clear commitment President Goodluck Jonathan made last year when he signed into law the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Amendment Act,” said Erwin van der Borcht.

“The Act is supposed to ensure that the NHRC can work independently to improve the human rights situation in Nigeria.”

The Act, signed into law on 26 February 2011, gives the NHRC the power to investigate human rights violations, visit police stations and places of detention.

The Commission also has the power to decide on complaints of human rights violations, with the force of a High Court decision.