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Greece: New government should address police violence

Police in Greece routinely use excessive force including chemical sprays against largely peaceful demonstrators. Despite numerous accounts of people being brutalised during arrest or detention the authorities are refusing to acknowledge the extent of the problem creating a climate of impunity, Amnesty International warned in a new report published today.

“The newly established Greek government has an opportunity to acknowledge the extent of the police violence and take necessary steps to address the frequent failure by police and judicial authorities to conduct prompt impartial and effective investigations. Failure to do this will lead to yet more violations going unpunished” said David Diaz-Jogeix, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Programme.

The Greek authorities have for far too long brushed off such violations as ‘isolated incidents’.

The new report, *Police violence in Greece: Not just “isolated incidents”*, documents human rights violations committed by law enforcement officials and the inability or unwillingness of police and judicial authorities to bring those responsible to account.

The severe austerity measures introduced in the wake of the deepening economic crisis in Greece provoked many largely peaceful demonstrations.

Numerous allegations point to the use of excessive use of force, including the use of chemical irritants and stun grenades in a manner that violates international standards.

Demonstrators, especially those beaten or gassed by police often are unable to complain as in the haze of pain they cannot note the identification number of the offending officers displayed, if at all, on the back of helmets.

During arrest and detention demonstrators have been beaten and denied access to a doctor or lawyer.

This treatment is also experienced by people accused of membership of domestic armed groups and members of vulnerable groups, such as migrants and asylum seekers detained for migration purposes; and communities living on the margins of society including many Roma.

“Often officers responsible for criminal conduct remain unpunished and victims cannot receive effective remedy and reparation,” said David Diaz-Jogeix.

“This is happening because of systemic problems in the investigation, prosecution and punishment of human right abuses.”

In addition, the definition of torture in the Greek Penal Code is considerably narrower than in international treaties to which Greece is a party. Amnesty International knows of only a very small number of cases where law enforcement personnel have been charged with torture.

The failure of the Greek authorities to address effectively incidents of violations of human rights by law enforcement officials has contributed to victims losing confidence in the criminal justice system and becoming reluctant to report such incidents. They have also failed to establish a truly effective and independent police complaints mechanism.

“No one is above the law. Least of all the very people empowered to uphold it,” said David Diaz-Jogeix.

“Unless the Greek authorities make violations by law enforcement officials an absolute priority and address the systemic problems which permit them to happen then impunity will prevail.”

Cases

Manolis Kypreos, a journalist, covering protests against the new austerity measures in Athens’s Syntagma Square told Amnesty International how on 15 June 2011, a commander of a police unit ordered a police officer to throw a stun grenade at him. Shortly before the attack, Kypreos had reportedly identified himself as a journalist. Manolis Kypreos suffered total loss of hearing in both ears which put an end to his career as a journalist. At the end of 2011, the Athens Prosecutor’s Officer of the First Instance Courts filed charges against as yet unidentified police officers for intentionally causing the journalist serious bodily harm.

Riot police beat Yiannis Kafkas, an unemployed psychologist and post-graduate photography student, during an anti-austerity demonstration in Athens on 11 May 2011 causing him near fatal head injuries. According to his lawyer and Yiannis himself, he was hit with one of the fire extinguishers that riot police carry with them. Yiannis Kafkas remained in hospital for 20 days, ten of them in intensive care, after having emergency surgery. In February 2012, the police submitted its findings into the beating of Yiannis Kafkas to an Athens prosecutor. However, the prosecutor had reportedly not yet decided whether charges were to be brought against a known or still unidentified police officer.

Christos Chronopoulos, who was suffering from mental health problems, was arrested for causing a disturbance at a café and taken to a police station in Athens after 11pm on 22 May 2007, and detained there. He was later taken to hospital by ambulance. Doctors at the hospital found that Christos Chronopoulos had sustained a grave head injury, subdural haematoma, swelling of the brain and multiple bruises on his sternum and one wrist. He was operated in the early morning of 23 May 2007 and spent two months in intensive care, several weeks in a coma, three months in a neuro-surgical wing, and another six months at a rehabilitation centre. As a result of his head injury, Christos Chronopoulos suffers from incontinence, post-traumatic amnesia, epilepsy, visual disturbance and significant difficulties in walking. He is no longer able to care for himself and is looked after by his relatives. After investigation, an Athens prosecutor recommended that four police officers be referred to trial for jointly causing Christos Chronopoulos serious bodily harm during the exercise of their duties. However, on 26 January 2011, the Athens Judicial Council of Misdemeanors decided not to charge the four officers on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence of guilt. This decision was appealed by the prosecutor of the Appellate Court. Only to be rejected by the Appellate Judicial Council on procedural grounds. Following an appeal, the Supreme Court refer the case back to the Appellate Judicial Council. In April 2012, the Appellate Council decided to refer the four officers to trial.