

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

Index: PRE 01/536/2011

EMBARGO: 25 October at 14:00Hs GMT (10:00am in the Dominican Republic)

Dominican Republic urged to tackle alarming levels of police abuse

Authorities in the Dominican Republic must urgently reform their police force to tackle alarming levels of killings and torture, Amnesty International said in a new report today.

'Shut up if you don't want to be killed': Human Rights violations by the police in the Dominican Republic, documents scores of cases of killings, torture and ill-treatment at the hands of police, gathered during three research missions in the country and the lack of effective investigations

"Authorities must ensure those responsible for the killings and torture face justice and that steps are taken to change the policies and practices that allow these abuses to take place," said Javier Zúñiga, Head of Amnesty International's delegation in the Dominican Republic.

"The official view continues to be that human rights violations are committed by a few corrupt or unprofessional officers who are swiftly dealt with and held accountable but the reality paints a very different picture."

Between January and July 2011, 154 people were killed by the police in the Dominican Republic, according to the Office of the Prosecutor General -- in comparison to 125 over the same period in 2010.

Statistics from the Office of the Prosecutor General, show that 10% of all the murders recorded in 2010 were committed by the police. Several police officers were also killed.

The vast majority of the fatal shootings were described by the police as "exchanges of gunfire" with criminal suspects. However, in many cases, forensic tests support the allegations that police officers deliberately shot to kill.

Amnesty International's report warns that police killings of young people could be taking place as a deterrent.

"Police killings should not become the way to solve the problem of repeat offenders and warn young people against crime," said Javier Zúñiga.

Amnesty International also found that while in police custody, criminal suspects have been threatened with death, beaten and denied food, water and essential medicines. Some have had plastic bags put over their heads and were hung from bars or nails by their handcuffs.

At least two people last seen in police custody are feared to have been the victims of enforced disappearance.

Only a fraction of cases reach the courts or are even investigated.

An array of obstacles, such as lack of independence and resources and the failure to properly collect and preserve forensic evidence prevents most responsible from facing justice.

"The system for investigations of police abuse in the Dominican Republic is disorganised and

lack proper procedures to handle complaints of human rights violations by the police. Whether a police officer faces justice for a killing or torture depends largely on whether the victim or their family lodges an official complaint, the level of publicity a case attracts and the political pressure exerted on prosecutors,” said Javier Zúñiga.

“We acknowledge that police officers usually face serious dangers while doing their jobs. However, we believe that their conduct is actually exacerbating the violence and creating a climate in which human rights are completely ignored.”

As one young man told Amnesty International in October: “If you rob somebody and this person files a complaint, if the police identify you as the robber, they look for you and without letting you speak they shoot at you... I was there when the police caught a friend of mine. He was a robber. The police were looking for him. One day the police went to his house. He was hiding somewhere else. The police told him: ‘Come out, we are not going to kill you, we just wanted to question you’. When he came out, they shot him twice in the head.”

Note to Editors

An Amnesty International delegation will be in the Dominican Republic between 24 and 30 October.

Javier Zúñiga, Special Adviser and Chiara Liguori, Researcher on the Dominican Republic, will be available for interviews in English, Spanish, French and Italian.

A copy of the report “‘Shut up if you don’t want to be killed: Human Rights violations by the police in the Dominican Republic” will be available from 25 October at 14:00Hs GMT on www.amnesty.org.

Facts and figures, case studies, photos and a video are available upon request.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact: Josefina Salomon, +44 7778 472 116, jsalomon@amnesty.org