

BULGARIA

Excessive use of force by members of special forces during police raid in Sofia

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S CONCERN:

Amnesty International is concerned about growing police violence in Bulgaria. Recent reports show that especially the special police forces (also known as the "red berets") have used unwarranted and unjustified force. According to newspaper reports, during a recent police operation against organized crime in a cocktail bar in Sofia, the police and the special forces severely ill-treated a number of people of whom three had to undergo emergency hospital treatment. Some people who allege they were ill-treated had been accidentally present in the bar or in the vicinity¹.

BACKGROUND:

On 2 March, Bulgarian police carried out a raid on the "La Skala" cocktail bar in central Sofia, the owner of which apparently was being subjected to extortion by local criminals. The main Bulgarian daily *Standart* reported, that at around 11am police intervened in a fight between racketeers on a boulevard in front of the "La Skala" bar. Upon police arrival, a number of racketeers managed to escape in a jeep while some 10 of them remained. Eye-witnesses stated that some two dozen masked police officers arrived (later reports mention at least 40 police officers), sealed off the area and handcuffed and arrested 10 people, beating them up in the process. One eye-witness recalled:

"I was in a nearby children's shop, buying some baby food together with two friends. Suddenly, two or three masked policemen appeared. They poked me in the chest with their automatic rifles and kicked me out of the shop. One of them ordered me to immediately lie down on the pavement, while another one twisted my arm behind my back ... Then they started to kick me and hit me with their rifles, on my kidneys, my legs and on my head. He beat my head against the pavement and said, 'So you see who's the boss around here don't you?' When I shouted to him that I didn't know what was going on, he said, 'Well the communists are in charge, you know!' and he hit my head against the pavement again and again ... At one point an elderly man in a wheelchair got involved in the fight, they cornered him, threw the wheelchair away, and started to beat him as well. The old man tried to shield his head with his arms and screamed, 'Boys what are you doing to me!' and they just went on beating him."

Two other witnesses had been shopping in a nearby tailor's atelier, they said when interviewed by a *Standart* journalist :

¹ N.B. The fact that some of the ill-treated persons might have been previously or presently engaged in criminal activities does not justify or warrant the police violence which was used against them.

"They took one man out [of the bar], he was together with two girls, clearly they were his friends. He was beaten up and when we took him into the atelier, we saw that at least four to five centimetres of the skin on his head had been ripped off. We bandaged him with some lining materials, and when the doctors on the two ambulances, that had been called in by the berets, saw the bandages they refused to take him. Fortunately the owner of the atelier was there, she called another ambulance. They had beaten up the guy ... The fighting lasted for one and a half hour and it was just like in an American movie. It looked like everything had been prepared in detail beforehand. They [the berets] singled out some other people. Six berets threw them on the ground in front of the bar, handcuffed them and started beating them up. Two of them tried to escape but they [the berets] got them near the Mercedes, ... near [a] large tree. They grabbed hold of them, handcuffed them and beat them up. With their fists, with their rifles, kicking them ... and afterwards they struck their heads against the trees. It was pure slaughter, the people were lying on the pavement and the berets hit them with their rifles and kicked them. "

A journalist working for the *Standart* visited some of the injured in hospital. Both of them had been sitting on the "La Skala" terrace when the raid started. One of them, a student and sportsman had a broken cheekbone and skull fractures. He stated that masked policemen had ordered him to lie down and then started to beat him up with their fists and with rifle butts, until the commander of the special forces intervened and they were taken to hospital by ambulance. He also alleges that policemen, who had escorted them to the hospital, handcuffed them to their beds. They remained in that position until the following Monday (that is, three days).

In the days following the police operation, some more details emerged about its nature and purposes. Firstly, the chief commander of the special forces in a public statement said that the operation had aimed to dismantle a band of racketeers which included among its members some former berets and that actually two of them had been arrested. The chairman of the union of former members of the special forces contested this, claiming that there were no former berets among the 12 arrested (of whom six were released the day following their arrest). Finally the chief commander stated no former berets had been involved in the "La Skala" operation. It was also alleged that the sole aim of the operation had been the arrest of just one racketeer.

What becomes clear among all these speculations however, is that the Bulgarian police authorities did not take sufficient measures, if any, to make sure that police officers would behave properly and use force only as a last resort and certainly not on people who by pure coincidence happened to be near the scene of the operation.