

AI INDEX: EUR 15/09/96

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE 10 00HRS GMT 6 JUNE 1996

BULGARIA: CASUAL VIOLENCE AND ILLEGAL ACTS BY POLICE OFFICERS BECOME WIDESPREAD

SOFIA- Despite significant improvements in the human rights situation which have occurred since November 1989, police shootings, torture and the ill-treatment of detainees, sometimes resulting in death, persist in Bulgaria on a large scale.

“There is a pattern of casual violence and illegal acts by police officers throughout the country,” Amnesty International said as it released a report today. “The problem is further compounded by a pattern of impunity of law enforcement officers responsible for human rights violations.”

Following two tragic deaths in custody in April 1995, which were widely reported by the Bulgarian media, the Minister of the Interior disclosed that 17 people had died in suspicious circumstances under police arrest between March 1994 and May 1995.

Despite repeated requests, the human rights organization has not received information from the Bulgarian authorities about investigations in seven cases of death in custody. In its report, Amnesty International documented further cases of deaths in custody where little or no information on investigations is available.

On 24 August 1995, 20-year-old Ilyan Veselinov Nikolov died in Stara Zagora prison. His mother has reportedly received notes from him in which he said he had been brutally beaten in the lock-up. However, she refused to reveal the name of the police officer involved because “he had unambiguously threatened our family.” On 30 January 1996, in Razgrad, 17-year-old Angel Zubchinov was brought from the police lock-up to the hospital where he died. An autopsy reportedly established that his death had resulted from a brain haemorrhage following a blow to the head.

In November 1995, the organization asked the Bulgarian Minister of the Interior, Lyubomir Nachev, about five shootings in which the victims were unarmed and not suspected of particularly serious crimes. However, the government has still not provided any information about investigations into these incidents.

Amnesty International has recorded an increasing number of incidents in which police ill-treat people on the streets and in detention. On 10 March 1995, Vasil Vasilev, a 19-year-old soldier on leave, on the way to a disco in Stara Zagora, was stopped by a police patrol. As he tried to explain that he was not a thief, the officers allegedly kicked him and slapped him on the face. One of them was wearing boots and jumped all over his body. Several hours later and after his collapse, Vasilev was admitted to the Military Hospital in critical condition with serious internal injuries. He underwent two operations.

On 5 April 1995, 67-year-old Girgina Dimova Toteva was taken by police officers to the station in Sevlievo to be questioned about a neighbour's complaint. When she refused to sign a statement admitting to assaulting her neighbour, a police officer reportedly slapped her face, hit her on the chest and back, and kicked her. She suffered a concussion and was admitted to

hospital several times for extensive treatment. The following day she lodged a complaint but the prosecutor did not open an investigation. In September 1995, Girgina Toteva was brought to trial for allegedly causing slight bodily injury to a police officer.

In fact, few victims make official complaints because they do not believe that perpetrators will be brought to justice. In the majority of the reported cases it is alleged that the victims were tortured and beaten in police stations to coerce them to sign “confessions” and reveal other information about a committed crime. Even more alarming is the fact that in many cases adequate medical care was not provided to victims who suffered injuries from ill treatment.

Police officers, particularly members of the Specialized Unit to Combat Terrorism, commonly known as the Red Berets, have on numerous occasions during raids in public places indiscriminately beaten and otherwise ill-treated anyone present.

“The Bulgarian Judicial system should make sure that any police abuses will be investigated. It has rarely done so,” Amnesty International said.

Many of the victims of these abuses committed by police officers are members of the Roma minority. Racist prejudices and lack of concern for the problems of this community are evident not only in Bulgaria but throughout the region. In some cases, doctors reportedly refused to give Roma victims certificates describing their injuries.

On 9 February 1995 in Gradets, Sliven region, Ilya Dimitrov Gherginov, a Rom, was seen lying on the ground in the street with his hands in handcuffs. A police officer who appeared to be under the influence of alcohol was beating him with a long piece of wood. The beating reportedly continued in the Gradets police station. The following day, Iliya Gherghinov was found dead, lying on the ground. His genitals had reportedly been crushed and there were many bruises all over the body. According to his wife who called for an investigation, the investigators told her that no case will be filed in the next five years.

Amnesty International sent a set of recommendations to the Bulgarian Government with a view to eradicating torture, ill-treatment by police and death in custody and to bring to justice those responsible.

“The Bulgarian authorities should organize effective training programs for all police officers aiming to ensure that they are given a thorough understanding of national and international human rights standards,” the organization said.

ENDS\...

.