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USA: Amnesty International calls for review of New York City police shooting tactics

Amnesty International has called for a thorough review of police shooting tactics, following the acquittal of four white police officers involved in the shooting of black West African immigrant Amadou Diallo.

In a letter sent to the New York City Police Commissioner, Howard Safir, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and City Council Speaker Peter Vallone, the organization expresses deep concern about the circumstances under which Diallo died, but makes no comment on the verdict.

Diallo, who was unarmed and had no criminal record, died in a hail of police bullets in February 1999 after police claimed they mistook the wallet he was holding for a gun.

"The Diallo case is one of more than a dozen incidents in the past five years, in which black, Hispanic or other minorities have been shot in highly questionable and disputed circumstances," Amnesty International said.

In most shootings officers were either not charged or were acquitted after pleading they acted in self-defence or mistook an object for a gun. Some were even found not to have violated policy despite questionable tactics.

Amnesty International has met with the bereaved relatives of many minorities who have been shot and, rightly or wrongly, they are convinced that the officers would not have responded in the way they did had the victims been white. The perception remains that officers are able to act with impunity in such cases.

"Many shootings, including in the Diallo case, appear to violate international standards set out under UN rules which provide that law enforcement officials shall, as far as possible apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms," the organization added. "They should also act with restraint in such use, and should fire their weapons only when strictly unavoidable to protect life."

Concern has also been raised by the fatal police shooting just two days ago of another unarmed black suspect, Malcolm Ferguson, during a struggle with a plain clothes officer, in an area of the Bronx near to where Diallo was shot. "This case raises yet again serious concerns about police tactics and whether the victim posed a deadly threat," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International urges the City of New York a thorough administrative review of the Diallo shooting, AI called on the police and city authorities to provide the strongest assurances to the community that police officers in the performance of their duty would treat all

people with respect for their fundamental rights and human dignity, regardless of their race or background.

Other New York City police shootings in recent years include:

- 16-year-old Dante Johnson, black, unarmed, shot and critically injured in May 1999 after running away from three police officers who had stopped to question him and a friend while they were standing in the street. The officers came from the same street crime unit as those involved in the Diallo shooting. No charges have been brought against them although the case remains under review by the Bronx District Attorney.
- Antoine Reid, black, seriously injured after an off-duty NYPD officer shot him in the chest in June 1998, when Reid tried to wash his car windshield. The officer had been removed from patrol duty because of prior complaints but had been allowed to keep the service revolver with which he shot Reid. He was acquitted of criminal charges after a non-jury trial in July 1999, but was fired last week after facing a police disciplinary hearing.
- William J Whitfield, black, shot dead in a New York supermarket on 25 December 1997, by police who said they mistook the keys he was carrying for a gun. Although the officer was cleared of wrongdoing, it was revealed he had been involved in eight prior shootings.
- Frankie Arzuega, a 15-year-old unarmed Puerto Rican boy shot dead by a NYPD officer in January 1996. He was shot while sitting in the back seat of a car which pulled away as officers tried to question the driver. No criminal charges were brought against the officer. Amnesty International also reported on more than 30 cases of questionable shootings of minorities in its June 1996 report: *Police Brutality and excessive force in the New York City police department*.

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