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Mozambique: No justice for grieving victims of police killings

Amnesty International today urged the authorities in Mozambique to properly investigate and prosecute police officers suspected of unlawful killings, with families continually obstructed from getting justice over the deaths of their relatives.

In a report released today, 'I can't believe in justice anymore': Obstacles to justice for unlawful killings by police in Mozambique, the organization called on the government to make it clear to all members of the police that excessive use of force and unlawful killings will not be tolerated.

Since January 2006, at least 46 people have been unlawfully killed by the police in Mozambique.

Amnesty International also called on the authorities to ensure that families receive proper compensation for their loss.

"The families of victims face almost insurmountable challenges and only the most persistent and well-off have been able to get some small measure of justice. Most others are left without any justice for the loss of their loved ones," said Erwin van der Borgh, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

"Even worse, the government seems to have permitted and even encouraged a number of obstacles to be put in the way of victims' families as they sought justice."

Despite repeated requests, the authorities have provided Amnesty International with very little information into investigations into police killings in Mozambique, including during visits to the country. In some cases, Amnesty International was told that investigations were not carried out because the killing was presumed to be lawful.

International standards require an effective investigation be carried out into all cases of death or serious injury as a result of use of force or firearms by the police.

Chimène Costa, partner of Augusto Cuvilas, a dancer and choreographer shot and killed by the police in December 2007, told Amnesty International, "I can't believe in justice any more. I am not informed. There is no respect ... They just want us to forget. If you do not have money to pay nothing happens...".

Lawyers, journalists and human rights activists in Mozambique have all told Amnesty International that the police tend to "protect their own" and that this is one of the main obstacles to bringing police officers to justice.

"The apparent unwillingness of the police to conduct effective investigations into all killings by police, the

failure of superior officers to identify police suspected of serious human rights violations, and the tendency of police to protect other officers all contribute to the lack of justice in these cases,” said Erwin van der Borgh.

In its report, the organization called on the government to ensure that there are thorough, prompt and impartial investigations into all cases of police force that results in death or serious injury, and that the officers responsible are brought to justice. Families of those killed must also receive adequate reparation.

Other recommendations put forward in the report include that:

- police have access to alternative means to deal with potentially violent situations, so that force used is proportional;
- police are trained in techniques to lower tensions and avoid the use of force unless strictly necessary;
- autopsies are automatically carried out immediately in all cases of death resulting from police force or use of firearms;
- complainants, witnesses, lawyers, judges and others involved in the investigation of police actions are protected from intimidation and reprisals.