

AI INDEX : EUR 30/04/94
May 1994

ITALY - THE ALLEGED ILL-TREATMENT OF SALVATORE MESSINA AND FILIPPO CAMPANELLA BY VIGILI URBANI IN PALERMO

Amnesty International is seeking information from the Italian authorities about two allegations of ill-treatment made against the vigili urbani (local police under the control of the town council) in Palermo during March 1994.

Fifteen-year-old Salvatore Messina lodged a formal complaint alleging that he was threatened and beaten by vigili urbani at around 10.45pm on the night of 11 March, after two officers had almost run him over in their car as he was crossing a road in Palermo. He claimed he was on his way home and had just alighted from a bus, together with several friends. He said the police car stopped a few centimetres away from his left knee and that when he asked for an explanation, the two officers got out of the car and asked him for his identity documents. One of them then dragged him into the back seat of the car by his arm and slapped him violently several times, threatening to keep on hitting him unless he said he was "a piece of shit" ["un pezzo di merda"]. He eventually complied and was released.

Salvatore Messina made a complaint to the offices of the national police in Palermo shortly after his release and police officers accompanied him to the casualty department of Villa Sofia hospital just after midnight. The hospital issued a medical certificate apparently recording various injuries to the boy's face which were expected to take around two days to heal. A judicial investigation was reportedly opened into his complaint.

A spokesperson for the vigili urbani categorically rejected Salvatore Messina's allegations. He was reported as stating: "Messina was part of a group of people who were bothering all the cars driving down the street that evening. Furthermore, the boy was drunk and when he saw our police car arriving he placed himself in the middle of the road and began taunting and insulting our men. The officers placed him in their car in order to escort him home. However, once on board, he began slapping and punching

himself and saying that if his father were to find out he had been stopped by the police he would beat him up. Then, all of a sudden, he opened the car door and jumped out of the car."¹

Filippo Campanella, a 29-year-old electronics technician, stated that on the afternoon of 15 March he had double-parked his car briefly on via Wagner, Palermo, while waiting for his father, when a female officer attached to the vigili urbani ordered him to move on. He claimed that when he asked if he could wait a few minutes longer she called over a number of male colleagues to move him on by force and that they then punched and kicked him repeatedly until he lost consciousness. There were numerous eye-witnesses to the alleged incidents and the beating apparently ended when one of these, a local shopkeeper, phoned the emergency services asking for the intervention of the carabinieri. Filippo Campanella was transferred to a local hospital and 10 days after the incident was still in a neurosurgery ward receiving tests and treatment relating to a partial paralysis in his right leg which confined him to a wheelchair.

¹ "Messina faceva parte di un gruppo di persone che quella sera disturbavano tutte le auto che passavano da quella strada. Il ragazzo, fra l'altro, era ubriaco e quando ha visto arrivare una nostra pattuglia si è piazzato al centro della strada e s'è messo a fare il gradasso, cominciando ad insultare i nostri uomini. I vigili l'hanno caricato in auto per ricaccompanarlo a casa ma lui, una volta a bordo, ha cominciato a darsi schiaffi e pugni dicendo che se suo padre avesse saputo che era stato fermato dalla polizia l'avrebbe riempito di botte. Poi, a un tratto, ha aperto lo sportello ed è saltato giù dalla macchina".

The vigili urbani categorically denied ill-treating Filippo Campanella. They stated that he had thrown himself to the ground, pretending to be hit; they reportedly lodged a complaint against him accusing him of various offences, including insulting a public officer and resisting arrest (oltraggio e resistenza a pubblico ufficiale).

A judicial investigation was opened into the incidents and in April some 15 officers were under investigation, apparently in connection with a possible offence of coercion (violenza privata) against Filippo Campanella. Three of the officers were initially imprisoned for four days, then placed under house arrest, while one officer was under hospital arrest and a further 11 were suspended from duty, pending the outcome of further inquiries.

