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Sweden: Amnesty International urges the Swedish government to inquire into deaths in custody

Amnesty International is concerned about a number of issues surrounding the disputed circumstances of the death in police custody of Osmo Vallo. In a new report, the organization raises concern about a number of issues, including: the reported torture and ill-treatment at the time of arrest and the circumstances leading up to his death; the failure of the police officers to attempt to resuscitate Osmo Vallo after his collapse; the investigation into the incident; the discrepancies between different post-mortem examinations; and decisions taken by the Regional Public Prosecutor.

Osmo Vallo was pronounced dead on 31 May 1995 shortly after being arrested by police officers in Karlstad on the night of 30 May. Eye-witnesses reported that he was kicked by police officers, that a police dog bit him multiple times and that an officer stamped on his back as he lay prone on the ground handcuffed. Post-mortem examinations revealed 39 wounds and bruises to his face, arms, legs and body.

The opinions expressed by four forensic pathologists present at the second post-mortem examination about the cause of death differed. Two of them opined that the findings strongly indicated that the joint effects of alcohol and amphetamine and of severe physical exertion had been of determining relevance to the cause of death. The other two experts opined that the probable cause of death could be postural asphyxia for a person affected by ethanol, amphetamine or cannabis.

In September 1995, the two arresting police officers were charged in connection with their failure to control the dog. Charges based on other reports of ill-treatment at the time of arrest were not brought. In April 1996, the officers were convicted of causing bodily injury and fined; they remained on duty, although one of them was transferred to another post. No disciplinary proceedings were initiated against them.

Based on eye-witnesses' accounts, Amnesty International believes that the conduct of the two arresting police officers violated Sweden's treaty obligations under international law. The organization also considers that the investigation into the circumstances of the death of Osmo Vallo was not in conformity with international standards.

More than two years have passed since the death of Osmo Vallo and several questions remain unanswered. His family still does not know the full truth about the circumstances that led to his death. Amnesty International is calling on the Swedish authorities to re-open the case of Osmo Vallo for further investigation.

International standards require a written report of the method, scope and findings of any investigation into deaths in custody where the circumstances are disputed. The authorities have not published such a report nor made clear what consideration was given to reports that officers kicked Osmo Vallo and stamped on his back as he lay handcuffed on the ground.

During the course of its investigation into the death of Osmo Vallo, Amnesty International was disturbed to learn that there have been a number of similar cases of deaths in custody in Sweden in the last five years.

"Amnesty International is concerned about a possible pattern which has emerged in these cases, in which it would appear that similar restraint techniques to those used on Osmo Vallo may have contributed to the deaths. There is growing international awareness that such restraint techniques can lead to asphyxia."

Amnesty International has highlighted the case of Osmo Vallo as an illustration of a possible pattern and has called on the authorities to institute a comprehensive review into all recent deaths in custody with a view to making recommendations in order to prevent further deaths. This review should examine methods of restraint and their inherent dangers and make recommendations for written guidelines on the use of restraint methods.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

To obtain a copy of Amnesty International's document, *Sweden: Osmo Vallo -- Action needed to prevent more deaths in custody* (AI Index: EUR 42/01/97).

* the English-language version is available from the International Secretariat; contact the Sweden team on 44 171 413 5675;

* the Swedish-language version is available from the Swedish Section of Amnesty International; contact the Section on 46 8 729 0200.

For media queries and interviews, please contact the Sweden team at the International Secretariat on +44 171 413 5675.