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Bahamas: Deaths in custody must lead to greater police accountability

The deaths of two men while in police custody in the Bahamas last weekend highlights the urgent need for greater accountability for police abuses, Amnesty International said today.

33-year-old Jamie Smith and 20-year-old Aaron Rolle died while detained at two different police stations in the capital, Nassau, last Friday and Saturday respectively.

The circumstances of the men's deaths and the reasons for their original detention are still unclear. Authorities said the incident would be investigated by the Coroner's Court, a judicial body which suffers from serious backlogs due to lack of resources.

Their deaths are the latest examples of alleged human rights abuses by police – including similar fatalities in police custody or alleged unlawful fatal shootings -- have occurred in recent years.

In the vast majority of the cases, those responsible did not face justice.

“The continuous lack of justice for unlawful killings at the hands of the police shows that the authorities are not doing enough to ensure that investigations are thorough, independent, impartial and timely,” said Javier Zúñiga, Special Advisor at Amnesty International.

“Authorities in the Bahamas should seriously consider the establishment of an independent body to investigate police abuses and provide such an institution with sufficient resources. This would ensure not only greater efficiency in the investigations but would also help restore public confidence in the police force.”

Amnesty International has documented a number of cases of human rights abuses by police officers, including unlawful killings, ill-treatment and excessive use of force during arrests and detentions. At least six people were reported to have been killed by police in disputed circumstances in 2012 and at least one man died in police custody.

The June 2012 conviction of a police officer for the death in custody of Desmond Key in 2007 was a rare instance of the police being held to account where impunity is the norm.

The family of 18-year-old Brenton Smith who was shot dead by police in 2009 have not been so fortunate. A coroner's inquest found that the police officer charged with his death had acted in self-defence. His family rejected the verdict and pointed to a number of key facts disregarded by the jury which reportedly included relatives of serving officers, such as the fact that Brenton was unarmed, and that the pathologist's testimony stated that the entry and exit wounds were consistent with a person whose arms were down.

In January the Police Commissioner announced that there had been 243 complaints made against the police in 2012, of which 128 were complaints of assault.