

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Press Release

### Nigeria: Amnesty International says police “kill at will”

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Amnesty International exposed the shocking level of unlawful police killings in Nigeria, in a new report released today.

“The Nigerian police are responsible for hundreds of unlawful killings every year,” said Erwin van der Borcht, Director of Amnesty International’s Africa Programme.

“Police don’t only kill people by shooting them; they also torture them to death, often while they are in detention.”

“The majority of the cases go un-investigated and the police officers responsible go unpunished. The families of the victims usually get no justice or redress. Most never even find out what happened to their loved ones.”

Police frequently claim that the victims of shootings were ‘armed robbers’ killed in ‘shoot-outs’ with the police or while trying to escape custody. These claims are often highly implausible.

Fifteen-year-old Emmanuel Egbo was killed by a police officer in Enugu in September 2008. According to witnesses, he was playing with other children in front of his uncle’s house when three police officers came up to them. One officer pulled out a gun and shot the boy, claiming he was an armed robber. He was unarmed. In August 2009, his family discovered his body had disappeared from the mortuary. As of November 2009, the body is still missing.

Amnesty International said that some police officers see the killings of ‘armed robbers’ in detention as acceptable practice.

In June 2009, the organization visited the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) detention centre in Abuja, which is located in a disused abattoir outside the city.

Suspects are held in a vast warehouse previously used for slaughtering cattle. Chains are still hanging from the ceiling. When Amnesty International delegates visited the building, about 15 people were held in cells. Amnesty International delegates counted at least 30 empty bullet cases scattered on the ground.

Unofficially, a policeman told Amnesty International that many “armed robbers” are taken there and shot.

Amnesty International said that one of the main problems is ‘Nigeria Police Force Order 237’ under which police officers are allowed to shoot suspects and detainees who attempt to escape or avoid arrest – whether or not they pose a threat to life.

“Force Order 237 is so impermissibly broad. It simply gives police officers permission to shoot people. It is against international standards, and is being abused by police officers to commit, justify and cover up illegal killings,” said Erwin van der Borgh.

“The government must repeal Force Order 237 and publicly announce that the use of lethal force is only allowed when strictly unavoidable to protect life. This simple step could make a big difference to the number of unlawful police killings we are seeing in Nigeria.”

Enforced disappearances in Nigeria are rife. Typically, in the first days or weeks following arrest, families are allowed to visit their relatives in detention. Later on, police tell them their loved ones have been “transferred to Abuja”. Other times, they simply deny any knowledge of their whereabouts.

The Nigerian government says that they do not condone extrajudicial killings. But they are not doing enough to stop them and bring the police perpetrators to justice. Even on the rare occasions when police officers implicated in an unlawful killing are prosecuted, they are often released on bail or escape custody. Some are simply transferred to other states.

“Ending unlawful killings and enforced disappearances by the police will require serious legal reform and commitment and support from the Nigerian police force,” said Erwin van der Borgh. “The Nigerian Police Force must introduce a new code of conduct throughout its chain of command – from the very top to the bottom. If not, the cycle of violence will simply continue.”

Notes to editors:

- Over the past four years, the Nigerian government has set up two committees to review the Nigeria Police Force and present recommendations for reform. Their recommendations have never been implemented.

- The Nigerian police force is affected by a severe shortage of funds. Officers do not have basic equipment, such as bullet-proof vests or handcuffs. They sometimes ask crime victims to pay for the petrol, pens and paper needed to conduct an investigation.

- Policing in Nigeria is dangerous work. On average, around 110 police officers are killed in shoot-outs with criminals every year.

For more details or to arrange an individual interview, please contact Amnesty International Press Officer Eliane Drakopoulos on tel: +44 7778 472 109.

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