

8 November 2000

AI Index AFR 53/003/2000 - News Service Nr. 213

South Africa: Amnesty International welcomes Government action against racially-motivated violence by police

Amnesty International welcomes the swift response of the South African authorities to the shocking evidence of the police torture of suspected illegal immigrants, broadcast on state television on 7 November [2000]. The arrest and suspension from duty without pay of six members of the South African Police Service (SAPS) East Rand Dog Unit and the clear statement by the Safety and Security Minister, Steve Tswete, condemning their brutal and racist treatment of the victims in their custody, should send an unequivocal message to all members of the security forces that such abuses will not go unpunished.

In April 1999, after the BBC and local television broadcasts of similarly brutal assaults against arrested criminal suspects by members of the SAPS, Amnesty International called on the government to ensure that ill-treatment, torture, and unjustified use of lethal force against arrested suspects be investigated and that those responsible be held accountable, particularly in light of the widespread evidence of abuses by the security forces.

Amnesty International has continued to receive corroborated evidence, including during a visit to the country last month, of the torture and severe ill-treatment of individuals in the custody of law enforcement agents, including the military. The alleged abuses included the use of electric shock, suffocation tortures, forced painful postures, suspension from moving vehicles and helicopters, and severe and prolonged beatings.

Despite efforts by the government to retrain and improve resources for law enforcement agencies, which should have a positive impact on

their professional conduct, a persistent complaint made by victims of these human rights violations and by civil society organizations has been the lack of a clear and consistent message from the authorities condemning these practices. This failure, combined with the deficient resources for complaints investigation bodies, has contributed to the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of those abuses.

Amnesty International hopes that the swift government response in the wake of this most recent evidence of systematic brutality by members of the police against individuals in their custody, will help break the cycle of impunity. At the same time, the organization urges the authorities to give full and public support for police or military officers who undertake their duties in a professional manner consistent with the law and the Constitution, or who speak out against any unlawful activities by their colleagues.

For further information on previous press releases on police brutality, please refer to the AI Index AFR 53/05/99

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