

USA:
HIGHLIGHTS OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S REPORT ON
POLICE BRUTALITY IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Amnesty International's investigation into police brutality in the Los Angeles area found that officers have for years been guilty of using excessive force - mostly in black and latino neighbourhoods - amounting at times to torture and leading to serious injuries or death.

KEY POINTS RAISED IN THE REPORT INCLUDE:

- Officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) regularly use higher levels of force than set out in their guidelines, frequently out of all proportion to the threat posed by the victims.
- In a number of disturbing cases, suspects have been shot, sometimes many times, even though they didn't appear to pose an immediate threat of death. In some cases officers continued to fire after the suspect was apparently disabled.
- There were allegations that, contrary to police guidelines, many of the people bitten by police dogs were unarmed or suspected of only minor offences and that in some cases dogs had been set on suspects after they were in custody.
- Police dogs appear to have been used to inflict unwarranted injury on suspects, particularly in black or latino neighbourhoods.
- Racial minorities, especially blacks and latinos, are more frequently victims of abuse by the LAPD and LASD than other groups.
- Police officers and sheriff's deputies have acted with virtual impunity, receiving little or no disciplinary action even in serious cases and only rarely being brought to justice.
- The most common types of force used include kicks, punches or beatings with batons. People are hit on the head with heavy metal flashlights or lead-filled straps known as "saps", even though hitting suspects on the head is generally prohibited. Police dogs attack people who have surrendered or pose no threat, and the dogs are not called off when they should. "Tasers" are used, which fire darts that give an electric charge on contact with the victims.

CASES HIGHLIGHTED IN THE REPORT

The report focuses on three main areas: physical brutality, shootings and police dogs. The following are a selection of cases from the report showing the use of excessive force; fuller details of these cases are in the report.

- Luis Murrals, a latino man, was blinded in one eye after being beaten by LAPD officers at the end of a car chase in April 1988.
- Scott Mace lost a testicle after being kned in the groin by LASD deputies and Russel Trice was left with a serious back injury after a number of deputies allegedly beat them in their apartment where the deputies were following up complaints about a noisy party.
- Hong Pyo Lee, a 21-year-old Korean, died in March 1988 from nine gun shot wounds to his back and the back of his neck. Lee, who was unarmed at the time, was shot simultaneously by four sheriff's deputies who opened fire at the end of a car chase.
- James Bailey, an unarmed black man, was shot dead in September 1988 at his father's house by a sheriff's deputy who had chased him after seeing a suspected "drug-related transaction".
- Hortencio Torres was bitten on his arm and other parts of his body after being attacked by a police dog searching for five suspects in a shooting incident in June 1988. Torres, who hadn't been involved in the shooting, was bitten on the arm and other parts of his body; he alleged that the dog was allowed to continue attacking him even after he had been searched.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S INVESTIGATION

- Amnesty International had received reports of ill-treatment from throughout the country for several years, and had taken action on a case in Chicago. Reports of brutality by the LAPD and the LASD were received before the beating of Rodney King in March 1991, but the flow of such allegations increased following the publicity around the King case. The intensive investigation leading up to the publication of this report took place over the past year, including a fact-finding trip to Los Angeles in September 1991. The investigation team included Rod Morgan, who is Professor of Criminal Justice at Bristol University, United Kingdom, and is also an expert adviser to the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture.
- This report is not exhaustive. It examines about 60 cases from both the LAPD and LASD where civil damages were paid to alleged victims of police abuse. Although the police have said that civil actions do not necessarily prove police misconduct, Amnesty International has found a disturbing number of cases where police officers and sheriff's deputies have used unjustified force.
- Civil lawsuits do not provide a complete picture of police abuses, but represent only a small proportion of the total number of complaints filed against the police each year, most of which do not result in litigation. However, as police internal investigations are not usually made

public, civil lawsuits are significant because they are often the only cases in which there has been some independent evaluation of the evidence given on both sides.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International has made a number of recommendations for tackling police brutality in the Los Angeles area, including:

- LAPD and LASD leaders should make it clear that torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment will not be tolerated. They should use strong disciplinary measures and criminal prosecutions where appropriate.
- The LASD should tighten up its guidelines on the use of firearms to bring them into line with international standards.
- The canine units of both departments should be investigated to make sure that the use of police dogs doesn't amount to unwarranted force.
- The federal government should take a more active role in monitoring complaints of excessive force by state law enforcement agents, in preventing such abuses and in bringing those responsible to justice.

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