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USA: Racist police brutality remains endemic in many areas

Videotapes showing US police beating two unarmed black suspects in separate incidents in the past week are a disturbing reminder that police use of excessive force remains endemic in many areas, Amnesty International said today.

An incident filmed Saturday night shows an officer from Inglewood (a town near Los Angeles airport) lifting a handcuffed youth in the air and slamming his head onto the hood of a police car. The second incident, on Monday, shows two Oklahoma City police officers repeatedly beating a suspect on the ground with their batons. The suspect was pepper-sprayed twice. In both cases the officers involved were white, and the suspects black.

"It is even more disturbing that both incidents took place in routine stop and search situations," Amnesty International said. "While some departments have introduced reforms following heightened scrutiny in recent years, this has not filtered down to all departments or all levels, and allegations of police brutality, particularly towards minority suspects, remain common in many areas."

While welcoming reports that investigations have been opened into both cases, Amnesty International is disturbed by remarks made by an Oklahoma City police spokeswoman, apparently justifying the officers' actions on the ground that the suspect was "not compliant". International standards, such as those contained under the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, state that force should be used only as a last resort and it must be proportionate to the threat posed. Repeatedly beating a barely resisting suspect, including while he is lying on the ground, appears in clear violation of these standards.

There have been other disturbing cases involving the Oklahoma City Police Department. In January 2001, Amnesty International wrote to the Oklahoma City police chief to express concern about the case of Billy Bennet Jr, who died in September 2000 after being hogtied and pepper sprayed. Although the coroner ruled out positional asphyxia as a cause of death in the case, Amnesty International urged the department to ban hogtying as a dangerous form of restraint and to review the use of pepper spray. In the same letter, Amnesty International also expressed concern about several fatal shootings by Oklahoma City police officers in a four-month period.

Amnesty International will be raising its concerns about the latest cases directly with the

departments involved and urging them to review their use of force policies and ensure that human rights standards are incorporated into police training and fully observed.

Public Document

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