

Bulgaria: Shooting and burning -- rough justice for Roma teenagers

Police brutality continues to be reported in Bulgaria, often at the expense of the country's 800,000 strong Roma community, Amnesty International said today. The organization is releasing reports detailing two alleged incidents of brutality perpetrated against Roma children by police officers.

On 10 May 2000 in Sliven a slightly built 14-year-old Roma boy, Atanas Djambazov, was shot in the head and arm by a police officer guarding a wine factory bordering the town's Roma ghetto. Allegedly the police officer then walked away from the unconscious teenager, leaving him without assistance. Atanas was reportedly trying to escape from the factory yard after he and some friends had taken wooden pallets from it for firewood.

On 29 April 2000 in Vidin a 16-year-old Roma boy, Tsvetalin Perov, suffered third degree burns to 15 per cent of his body in police detention. Epileptic and with learning difficulties, Tsvetalin has often been in trouble with the police, and was allegedly ill-treated by police officers on several occasions. On this occasion the police claim that Tsvetalin set fire to himself, yet there are inconsistencies in their account and crucial material evidence has vanished. Tsvetalin alleges that a police officer beat him unconscious and that he was then awoken by the pain of being on fire. The reported difficulty in extinguishing the fire and the severity of the burns make it probable that a fire accelerant such as lighter fuel was doused on Tsvetalin beforehand.

"Thorough and impartial investigations should be carried out into these incidents and any similar episodes," Amnesty International said. Given the continuing frequency of reported police violence, the

organization is calling on the Bulgarian authorities to devise and implement a national strategy to stamp out police brutality.

Background

Impoverished and socially excluded during the last 10 years of transition from Communism, the Roma community often finds itself drawn into abrasive contact with the law enforcement agencies. A 1999 survey by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee showed that 60 per cent of Roma convicts alleged they were beaten during arrest or interrogation.

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