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ALLEGATIONS OF PHYSICAL ASSAULT AND RACIAL ABUSE BY PARIS POLICE: THE CASE OF KARIM LATIFI



Amnesty International is concerned about the alleged physical assault and racial abuse by several Paris police officers of Karim Latifi, a 29-year-old French IT consultant of Moroccan origin, in February 2002. The incident occurred after Karim Latifi tried to intervene in the questioning by police of some youths whom he knew through his community work. As a result of the alleged ill-treatment Karim Latifi had a broken nose and was unable to work for 15 days.

The following account of the alleged ill-treatment of Karim Latifi is based on statements made by him to Amnesty International and on several eye-witness accounts and medical reports.

On the night of 22 February, Karim Latifi was driving along the rue Rébeval at about 21:30, on his way to a family dinner to mark a day of religious importance, when he found the road blocked by a considerable number of police vehicles. After waiting a few moments, he got out of his car and approached the officers, who were questioning a group of young men, two of whom he recognized from his work in the community. Hoping to defuse the situation, he asked the officers what was happening, but was told in an insulting way to mind his own business¹. When he asked not to be addressed in the familiar “*tu*” form, the officers searched him and demanded to see his papers. These he produced, but one of the other young men asked the officers why they were treating him without respect. When an officer told him to shut up, Karim Latifi asked him how he could expect young people to respect him if he insulted them in such terms². One officer, calling him a “dirty Arab”, then allegedly pushed Karim Latifi into a stairwell on the corner of the rue Jules Romain and proceeded to beat him, aiming for his head. Up to 15 officers were reported to be present during the subsequent assault when he was struck by truncheons, punched, kicked and racially abused³.

Karim Latifi alleged that, under the force of the beating, his face began to swell and he felt close to losing consciousness. His nose was broken. Despite repeated protestations, the officers refused to stop. Eventually, after the beating had ceased, he was handcuffed and told to “lick the wall”⁴. During his subsequent transfer to the central police station of the 19th arrondissement on the rue Eric Satie, he was subjected to continued racist abuse. At the station, he continued to have difficulty breathing, in part due to the swelling and to asthma. He remained handcuffed until released 15 minutes later, without charge, by a lieutenant who was not involved in the original incident and who told him politely that no charges would be brought against him.

Medical reports issued that night at the Hôtel Dieu Hospital, and the following day by Karim Latifi’s own doctor, detail physical injuries including haematomae on the thighs and on the right arm, grazing to the wrists of both hands and to the nose, which on X-rays showed to have been broken. These injuries prevented Karim Latifi from working for a total of 15 days, whilst a psychiatric examination reported him to be suffering from post-traumatic stress with associated symptoms of anxiety, insomnia and lapses of concentration. Apart from the medical reports, a number of eye-witness statements corroborated, in greater or lesser detail, Karim Latifi’s claim that he had been assaulted by police officers.

On 27 February 2002 Karim Latifi lodged a criminal complaint against Paris police with the police complaints service, the *Inspection générale des services* (IGS). However, on 10 July, the Paris public prosecutor set his complaint aside [*classé sans suite*] on the grounds that the investigation had “not been able to distinguish sufficiently the nature of the offence” to enable prosecution (“*L’examen ... n’a pas permis de caractériser suffisamment l’infraction pour permettre d’engager la responsabilité pénale ..*”). However, this was an administrative decision and judicial proceedings continued after Karim Latifi decided “*d’engager une poursuite judiciaire par voie de citation directe*”, or to take his case to the court directly.

¹ “*De quoi tu te mêles, allez, dégage, casse-toi*”

² “*Excusez-moi, mais comment voulez-vous que les jeunes vous témoignent du respect si vous leur parlez de la sorte, si vous les insultez?*”

³ “*Sale Arabe*” (dirty Arab) is one of the insults Mr Latifi recalls in his statement.

⁴ “*Lèche le mur, espèce de bâtard*”

According to press reports, one police officer stated that Karim Latifi had refused to supply his identity documents and had encouraged the two youths to resist detention and questioning. This is inconsistent with Karim Latifi's immediate release from police custody without charge.

Amnesty International raised its concern about this case when, on 30 June 2002, the organization wrote to the Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy asking, *inter alia*, to be informed about the outcome of the investigations into the complaint by Karim Latifi. In response, the Minister informed the organization on 29 October that the public prosecutor had decided not to pursue the inquiry ("*classée sans suite*"). Karim Latifi's case was also included in one of Amnesty International's Worldwide Campaigns in September 2002 whereby members from different parts of the world sent letters to the French authorities calling for a prompt, thorough and impartial police and judicial inquiry into the alleged assault on Karim Latifi.

Karim Latifi is currently pursuing a private prosecution (*engager une poursuite judiciaire par voie de citation directe*).