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Greece: Misconduct in the shadow of impunity

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(Athens) Unlawful shootings, beatings and ill-treatment, in some cases amounting to torture, are some of the human rights violations by Greek law enforcement officials examined in a report launched today by Amnesty International and International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights. The report will be launched at a press conference in Athens attended also by some of the victims of these violations.

"*Greece: In the shadow of impunity. Ill-treatment and the misuse of firearms*" documents 66 cases of alleged human rights violations. While the majority of the victims of such violations are Roma, immigrants -- often Albanians -- and asylum-seekers, members of the majority Greek population are not spared. A significant number of victims, including children, sustained severe injuries resulting from physical ill-treatment that required medical treatment or even hospitalization.

"Although the authorities claim that Greece is particularly sensitive to human rights, in practice legal provisions designed to protect these rights are frequently ignored, leading to serious human rights violations," stated Melanie Anderson, Amnesty International's researcher on Greece.

Detainees have alleged ill-treatment during arrest and in police custody. Slaps, punches and kicks are the most frequent complaints. However, in some cases detainees claim that they were beaten with truncheons or pistol or rifle butts - allegations often supported by convincing medical evidence.

Other allegations refer to verbal, sometimes racist, abuse and in some cases, sexual threats. In recent months, two detainees -- a Greek military conscript and a Nigerian immigrant, have alleged that police subjected them to electric shocks.

The report concludes that the physical and psychological torture or ill-treatment of detainees by police, whether to force confessions or other information out of them, or to intimidate and punish them, is relatively widespread. "The problem of police ill-treatment is not one of a few isolated incidents," stated Panayote Dimitras, spokesperson for the Greek Helsinki Monitor, the International Helsinki Federation's Greek member committee.

Abuses by law enforcement officials do not stop at beatings. In seven cases cited in the report, police officers shot and fatally wounded men in circumstances in which there was either no imminent

threat of death or serious injury, or the existence of such a threat was at the least questionable. In four other cases, police and soldiers on border duties are alleged to have fired at Albanians trying to cross into Greece illegally, wounding three of them - one of them fatally. The circumstances surrounding these incidents raise serious doubts as to whether the use of firearms was in accordance with international standards.

Amnesty International and International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights recommend improved training for police, with particular emphasis on non-violent measures of law enforcement, as well as training in handling weapons and assessing risk, to stop more deaths from occurring.

One of the main factors behind the persistence of human rights abuses is impunity: the failure of the authorities to bring those responsible to justice. Prosecution of officers alleged to have committed human rights violations is rare, and even when this results in a conviction the punishment is almost always nominal, such as a suspended prison sentence.

Official statistics relating to complaints of torture and ill-treatment confirm almost total impunity for police officers in such cases. The reasons include: failure to ensure that investigations are prompt, thorough and impartial; police 'solidarity' which obstructs the identification of perpetrators; the lack of legal aid for complainants; unduly protracted judicial proceedings and the tendency of courts to believe the testimony of police officers, even when the victim has powerful opposing evidence.

"Such impunity encourages the persistence of human rights violations and far outweighs the effect of any verbal exhortations or condemnations by government ministers," said Bjorn Engesland, of the International Helsinki Federation. Welcoming reports of forthcoming legislation in the field of police training, anti-discrimination law, and measures to speed up legal proceedings, Bjorn Engesland stated that details of these laws and -- crucially -- of their enforcement, remained to be seen. "The current climate of impunity must end now."

Amnesty International and International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights are calling on the Greek authorities to take urgent measures to put an end to persistent human rights violations, and to ensure that, if abuses do take place, victims or their families are granted fair and adequate compensation. Such measures include ensuring that legal provisions safeguarding the rights of detainees are enforced, that investigations into human rights violations are prompt and effective and that key evidence is protected. The report calls for a change in Greek law, so as to allow people alleging torture or ill-treatment direct access to state forensic services. At present such an examination can only be obtained by order of investigating officials or a court.

"The findings in Greece should prompt the EU to ensure proper accountability for the respect of human rights within the EU's borders," concluded Kostis Papaioannou, Chairperson of Amnesty International - Greek Section, commenting on Greece's membership -- and future presidency -- of the EU.

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The full report and other information for journalists is available on <http://news.amnesty.org/greece2002>

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