

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT TUESDAY 11 JUNE 1991.

AI Index: EUR 45/07/91

Distr: SC/PO

UNITED KINGDOM: @HUMAN RIGHTS SAFEGUARDS "SERIOUSLY UNDERMINED" BY THE GOVERNMENT.

Amnesty International said today that the United Kingdom government's handling of major human rights issues has "seriously undermined confidence" in the country's legal safeguards.

"Some of those safeguards in fact clearly fall short of international standards," the human rights organization said.

In its latest report, the organization said the procedures used to investigate serious allegations that suspects were ill-treated or unarmed civilians unlawfully killed have not brought to light all the important information -- and the government has failed to set up independent inquiries to openly scrutinize overall patterns of police and army malpractice. Instead, the organization said, the government has resorted to "internal inquiries and secret reports".

"The secrecy shrouding police and military investigations has led many victims and their relatives to allege that authorities have actually suppressed important information and deliberately concealed unlawful actions," Amnesty International said. A senior police constable, John Stalker, appointed to investigate a number of killings by security forces in Northern Ireland even said he was obstructed and prevented from carrying out a full investigation.

Amnesty International said also that in Northern Ireland the safeguards now in place to prevent ill-treatment of suspects by police do not actually work, and the laws on the use of lethal force by security forces are not strong enough to prevent unlawful killings.

Some members of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which recently examined the United Kingdom's human rights record, said they were concerned about disputed killings by security forces in Northern Ireland and by the lack of thorough investigations into them.

Amnesty International said there have been hundreds of allegations of police ill-treatment in recent years. Even the official Police Complaints Authority has said that disciplinary cases against police officers in England and Wales seem to be "shrouded in mystery, which detracts from the credibility of the system".

Different laws in Northern Ireland provide fewer safeguards for people arrested under anti-terrorist legislation. Steps that have been shown to prevent ill-treatment, like bringing suspects before a judge shortly after arrest and allowing lawyers to be present during interrogation, are not followed when people are arrested under anti-terrorist laws in Northern Ireland.

Many people there say they were beaten in police raids or at the scene of an arrest. Others have said they were convicted for serious crimes based on uncorroborated confessions they made after being ill-treated or threatened with violence in police stations. Yet officers are seldom disciplined for malpractice, even in cases where suspects have been acquitted after the judge threw out their confessions as evidence.

Amnesty International said its concerns about ill-treatment and unfair trials were closely linked in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In cases like the "Birmingham Six" and "Guildford Four" - where people were convicted after killings in pub bombings - those

convicted say they were ill-treated or threatened into making false confessions which were then used to convict them. In both cases, the convictions were later declared unsafe and the prisoners released.

The organization said that in several cases it has also been shown that the police or prosecution have held back crucial evidence that might have changed the outcome of a trial. In some cases the forensic evidence has been shown to have been misleading.

The organization said it welcomed the establishment of an independent Royal Commission - to review the criminal justice system - following the release of the "Birmingham Six" in March of this year. "The same issues that the commission is looking into in England and Wales are not, however, being examined in Northern Ireland," Amnesty International said. "Specific cases of police misconduct which have still not been examined elsewhere in the United Kingdom must also be urgently investigated."

The organization said that even though more than 300 people have died in disputed killings by security forces in Northern Ireland there has still been no wide-ranging investigation into this pattern of killings -- to determine how the laws and investigation procedures can deter possible unlawful killings.

The coroner's inquests that do follow such killings cannot by law deliver a verdict of "unlawful killing" and cannot compel members of the security forces to testify at the inquest.

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