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Ukraine must act to deal with endemic police criminality

The Ukrainian authorities must act immediately to deal with endemic police criminality, Amnesty International said today in a new report that reveals widespread torture, extortion, and arbitrary detention.

No evidence of a crime: Paying the price for police impunity in Ukraine, reveals how police are rarely punished for these crimes because of high levels of corruption, non-existent or flawed investigations, harassment and intimidation of complainants, and a low level of prosecutions for such crimes.

“Twenty years after the demise of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian police are still serving the state instead of the public. Ordinary Ukrainians are paying the price, many of whom have become victims of bribery and forced confessions,” said Heather McGill, Amnesty International’s expert on Ukraine.

“It is high time the Ukrainian authorities set up an independent agency to investigate all allegations against police officers and tackled the culture of impunity and corruption that prevails.”

Some police officers who torture or ill-treat detainees never face disciplinary or criminal proceedings, because of flawed investigations.

Complaints by detainees against police officers for torture and ill-treatment are either disregarded or dismissed regardless of how well-founded they might be.

The Ombudsperson’s office stated that they received 5,000 complaints about torture and other ill-treatment in 2010.

In August 2010, Yakov Strogan was abducted and tortured by police officers in civilian clothes in Kharkiv. He was accused of attempted murder. A lawyer recommended by the police offered to secure his release for \$10,000.

Dmitry Yashchuk was found dead in a Kyiv police station on 13 June 2010, a day after he was arrested and allegedly forced by police into confessing a crime he had not committed.

The first autopsy revealed injuries on his body. Police insisted that Dmitry Yashchuk committed suicide and the second autopsy appeared to confirm this, but his family still question whether he committed suicide, and if he did whether he was driven to it by police ill-treatment. His father told Amnesty International:

“From the beginning I didn’t believe the version that he had committed suicide. Show me my child. As it turned out there was something to hide. There had been beating.”

Police violations of the rights of detainees receive increased coverage in the media and the death of Dmitry Yashchuk and others in police custody sparked nationwide protests.

“The climate is changing – public opinion is less tolerant to torture and ill-treatment and the public is demanding more accountability for the police,” Heather McGill said.

“The authorities must bridge the gap between the declared intention to better protect human rights and police practices which are neither accountable nor transparent.”

Amnesty International believes that the best way to ensure this is to set up a fully resourced independent agency to investigate all allegations against police officers. Ukraine must ensure that witnesses are protected from harassment and in all cases where police officers are under investigation for serious human rights violations, that they are suspended for the duration of the investigation.

Police officers responsible for torture or other ill-treatment must be held accountable through disciplinary and criminal proceedings.

“The Ukrainian police must work hard for the public to regain their trust in them – do to this they must change the nature of their relationship from confrontation to partnership,” Heather McGill said.