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RACISM: POLICE IN EUROPE GUILTY OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

The rising tide of racist violence in Europe is finding a grim echo in the behaviour of the region's police forces, says Amnesty International.

According to the human rights organization, police in many Western European countries - the very people who should be investigating and preventing racist violence - have taken part in bloody attacks and degrading treatment themselves.

"We know of people being badly beaten up, a 14-year-old asylum seeker having his arm broken, a motorcyclist being run down by a car and then beaten up by the driver - all assaulted not by racist organizations but by police officers," said Amnesty International.

"And to make things worse, it is pitifully rare for these officers to be brought to justice for their behaviour. And the responsibility for that must go to governments - by failing to punish their own agents for racist abuse, governments implicitly condone racist attacks in society at large."

In the United Kingdom, for example, victims of police ill-treatment have taken their cases to the civil courts, where in several recent cases tens of thousands of pounds sterling have been paid out by the police - without ever admitting their liability.

In July 1991 the London Metropolitan police force paid £40,000 compensation to Leslie Burnett, a black landscape gardener. He had been arrested for allegedly tampering with a car and was severely beaten, kicked and called "a black bastard". The police paid - but did not accept responsibility for the attack.

Sadly, cases such as this are far from unusual. In country after country in Western Europe, police have been involved in ill-treatment and torture where the race of the victim appears to have been a factor, and all too frequently those responsible have not been brought to justice:

! Austria Mustafa Ali, an Austrian of Egyptian descent, and a friend are stopped by police for "jay-walking". They are the only non-Europeans among several pedestrians crossing the street and are subjected to racist insults. When Mustafa Ali refuses to pay a fine, he is beaten up and arrested, in custody he is pushed through a

window and loses consciousness. Although he makes a formal complaint, a police conspiracy of silence prevents officers being prosecuted;

! France 1991, Aïssa Thich, a French citizen of Moroccan parents, dies in a police cell of an asthma attack, after police reportedly beat him and refuse to allow him medication. A police doctor is charged with involuntary homicide, but no action has yet been taken against the officers who assaulted him;

! Denmark 1990, Babading Fatty, a Gambian tourist, and Himid Hassan Juma, a Tanzanian tourist, are detained by police and allegedly ill-treated while in prison. Their cases were included in a wider judicial investigation into the treatment of asylum-seekers in Copenhagen prisons.

! Germany 1992, among several reports of assaults on asylum-seekers by police, Amnesty International hears of a raid on a hostel in Gränitz, where people are pulled from bed, beaten with batons and punched. Allegations of ill-treatment are currently being investigated;

! Portugal 1991, 19-year-old Luis Gravanita is stopped by police, taken to a police station, punched and kicked, and called "a worthless piece of Angolan shit". Luis Gravanita is white and a Portuguese citizen, but born in Angola. No news of any investigation has been received;

! Spain 1991, Arab tourists Mohammed Hegazy and Raed Shibli are arrested and severely beaten after one of them spoke in Italian to a civil guard. They made a formal complaint, but it is not known whether any investigation has taken place;

! Italy 1992, Daud Addawe Ali, a Somali asylum-seeker, is rushed to hospital after being beaten unconscious in police custody. The government claims he was involved in a violent struggle before his arrest but has failed to provide any further information.

! Greece 1990, Sehmus Ukus, a Turkish Kurd, is tortured by Athens Anti-Narcotics police. As well as beating him, his captors burn his feet and genitals with a cigarette lighter. When a senior police officer asks his subordinates why, they reply: "He is a Turk." No disciplinary action has been taken against the officers involved;

These represent only a few illustrative cases of a grave problem which needs to be urgently addressed, said Amnesty International. "In the present climate, with racial attacks on the increase and racist groups growing in

size, that failure to act is tantamount to condoning racist crimes in society at large.

"It is time for governments to act - time to stop these human rights abuses and bring those responsible to justice."

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