

Albania: political will needed to end torture

Torture and ill-treatment by police were not eradicated with the end of communist rule, Amnesty International said today as it published a report documenting the widespread use of such practices.

As the report demonstrates, torture and ill-treatment persisted both under the previous government of the Democratic Party and the present one of the Socialist Party.

"With national elections just a month away, human rights issues must not be exploited for party political purposes," Amnesty International warned. "Whatever party wins the elections, it will be faced with the challenge of ensuring that people in police custody are not subjected to beatings and other forms of violence," the organization added.

The report entitled *Albania: Torture and ill-treatment - an end to impunity?* (AI Index: EUR 11/001/2001), documents the routine torture and ill-treatment of children arrested as criminal suspects -- among them an 11-year-old boy, wrongly suspected of stealing a handbag, who was beaten, cut with a knife, and burned with a cigarette at a police station after arrest. Other victims have included members and supporters of the Democratic Party, the main opposition party, many of whom were arrested during sometimes violent protests in November 2000.

In the face of this situation, Amnesty International is calling on the Albanian authorities to put into practice domestic and international legal provisions prohibiting torture and ill-treatment.

"The instruments are in place to end police impunity for torture and ill-treatment. However, the authorities need to show a clear determination to end such human rights violations by police," Amnesty International said.

"Police officers who abuse their authority must know that they are not above the law," the organization added.

Amnesty International acknowledges that the collapse of law and order in 1997 and the subsequent growth of organized crime has made policing a particularly difficult and dangerous undertaking. However, under the terms of the international treaties to which Albania is party, the prohibition against torture and ill-treatment is absolute, and the fact that a detainee may have committed a criminal offence can never justify such misconduct by police.

Toleration of human rights violations by the police is illustrated by developments in the city of Elbasan in central Albania, where police success in tackling crime has been accompanied by repeated reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees.

"Yet Elbasan may also give grounds for hope," Amnesty International said. Combined pressure from the press, local human rights organizations and the Ombudsman, and the efforts of a number of victims to seek redress through the courts, have forced the authorities to recognize publicly the existence of human rights abuses by police and to bring about an improvement in the conduct of the local police.

"We urge the government to ensure that such improvement will not remain an isolated and temporary exception to the rule of impunity," Amnesty International said.

Background

Over the past decade Albania has seen achievements in the field of human rights, among which its accession to key international human rights treaties -- including the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment in 1996 -- and the adoption of a constitution in 1998. In February 2000 parliament elected the country's first national Ombudsman (People's Advocate), with powers to investigate complaints by citizens against state authorities. Recommendations by the Ombudsman have led to the dismissal of a number of police officers responsible for ill-treatment. Additionally, there is now a considerable body of legislation in place covering the courts and justice system, the police, prisons and prisoners. Professional training for police, including human rights education, has improved.

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