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France: Deaths during forcible deportations from Roissy must be fully and impartially investigated

The recent deaths of two undocumented foreign nationals must be fully and impartially investigated, urged Amnesty International.

"These deaths which happened within two weeks of one another, are the first to have occurred on an aircraft during forcible deportation from French territory since 1991, and for that reason alone require urgent in-depth examination. The number of deaths in other European countries make it yet more imperative for these instances to be fully investigated."

Before receiving news of the death of Somalian national Mariame Getu Hagos on 16 January, Amnesty International had written to the Minister of the Interior about the death, on 30 December 2002, of Ricardo Barrientos, an Argentinian national, on an aircraft bound for Buenos Aires.

Both deaths appear to have occurred after the deportees were placed at the rear of the aircraft and their hands cuffed behind their back. Ricardo Barrientos was held in a "doubled over" position, with pressure applied to his shoulder blades.

"Existing expert advice on postural asphyxia has proved that handcuffing a person behind their back can restrict their ability to breathe, while any weight applied to the back in this position -- such as pressure applied by a police officer -- can increase breathing difficulty further," Amnesty International said.

Consequently, the organization urged that the deaths are examined fully and impartially by a body such as the *Commission nationale de déontologie de la sécurité*, which should investigate whether international human rights principles were followed. The conclusions of the current inquiry into Ricardo Barrientos' death by the public prosecutor of Bobigny should be made public, particularly considering the disputed versions about the exact circumstances and time of his death.

In its letter Amnesty International is asking the French authorities for clarification of the procedures in place for forcible deportation and whether these are fully in line with international recommendations or principles. Such recommendations include those issued by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment or the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Background

On 16 January Mariame Getu Hagos, a 25-year-old undocumented Somali national, died after being taken ill on board an aircraft awaiting departure to Johannesburg from Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport. According to reports, Mariame Getu Hagos had arrived in France five days earlier from South Africa, and was placed in the waiting area at Roissy. After his application for asylum was rejected, he resisted attempts to deport him and, after apparently becoming ill on two separate occasions, was examined by a doctor on emergency call. Deemed, nevertheless, fit to leave, he was accompanied onto the aircraft by three frontier (PAF) police officers, placed at the rear and handcuffed. Before take-off he reportedly again made efforts to resist departure and, according to the Interior Ministry, was restrained by the "customary techniques" ("*techniques habituelles*"). It is not, however, clear at this stage what these techniques involved. Shortly afterwards he collapsed and was taken to Villepinte hospital, where he died two days later. According to the PAF Mariame Getu Hagos had simulated the first two attacks of illness. However, a doctor attached to the emergency medical services (SMU) reportedly stated that the Somali's condition should have been taken seriously.

Public Document

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