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Case studies: Public outrage: police officers above the law in France

Lamba Soukouna, who suffers from sickle cell disease, told Amnesty International that on the evening of 8 May 2008 he was ill-treated by police officers outside his home in the Parisian suburb of Villepinte (Seine-Saint-Denis).

Lamba Soukouna was entering his apartment building, when he noticed a group of police officers in riot gear outside the opposite building. They charged at a group of young people outside, who dispersed in all directions. Lamba Soukouna turned back to go inside when two groups of police officers ran into his building. One officer grabbed him from behind, pushed him against the wall and hit him on the forehead with the butt of his rubber bullet gun. Lamba Soukouna fell to the ground and passed out for a few seconds. When he came round he felt blood running down his forehead. The officers kicked him in the back and ribs as he lay on the ground.

Lamba Soukouna was on his way to report the incident at the gendarmerie. On the way there he was stopped by one of the officers who had assailed him, forced into a police van and handcuffed.

At the police station, Lamba Soukouna repeatedly asked for his medication, which was necessary to control his chronic illness, but it was not given to him. After several hours during which no-one told him why he was detained, he was finally taken to a hospital where he was treated for the injury on his forehead and was signed off work for six days.

Lamba Soukouna was then returned to the police station where he was charged with assaulting a police officer.

Lamba Soukouna denied all allegations. He repeatedly asked for his medication but it was not given to him. Consequently he suffered a violent fit, having difficulty breathing and suffering extreme pain. He remained in hospital for three days.

Lamba Soukouna made a complaint to the Inspectorate (IGS) regarding the incident. Both his complaint and the charges against him are still under investigation.

Betty Sow told Amnesty International how on 17 August 2006, she witnessed a violent incident involving three police officers in civilian clothes and three local residents, including her cousin, in rue Clovis-Hugues, Paris. Betty Sow, who was six months' pregnant at the time, asked the police what was happening. In answer to her persistent questions one of the police officers punched her in the mouth. At this point, Betty Sow's brother, Yenga Fele, rushed to the scene and asked the police officer if he realized he had punched a pregnant woman. A policeman fired teargas at him and Betty Sow. Both Betty Sow and Yenga Fele were hit with batons. Despite her obvious pregnancy, Betty Sow was hit with a baton close to her lower

abdomen. As a result, she fell down and lost consciousness. She was taken to hospital where she remained under police custody for 48 hours, accused of “group assault” against the police officers. She was signed off work for three days and following the incident she began suffering contractions. (Eventually gave birth to a daughter at full term.)

On 19 August, the Paris prosecutor opened an investigation against Yenga Fele and Betty Sow, for alleged “group assault” against police officers. Betty Sow presented a complaint of ill-treatment against the police officers. Despite the numerous witness testimonies and medical reports, on 27 November 2006 her complaint was closed without further investigation.

On 19 November 2008, Betty Sow was ordered to appear before an investigating judge who was apparently re-examining her complaint. She gave her testimony to the judge but has had no news on the complaint since.

On 27 January 2009, Betty Sow was convicted of assaulting the police officers and was given a one month suspended prison sentence. Her brother was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment. They were both ordered to pay 1,500 euros in compensation to each police officer. They have appealed against the judgement.

Abdelhakim Ajimi, died in Grasse after being restrained by police officers during arrest on 9 May 2008.

In the afternoon of that day, he had gone to his bank and tried to withdraw money. When he was turned down, witnesses say he grew angry and aggressive and the bank manager called the police. Abdelhakim Ajimi left the bank but a unit of police officers stopped him close to his home, on Boulevard Victor-Hugo, and tried to arrest him. It is alleged that he violently resisted arrest and struggled with the police officers. In the struggle, a shop window was broken and one of the police officers suffered a fractured collarbone.

Numerous witnesses to the incident said that the police officers appeared to have been using excessive force against Abdelhakim Ajimi. After handcuffing him three police officers held him face-down on the ground for a prolonged period of time. One of them punched Abdelhakim Ajimi twice while he was being held on the ground. Another officer knelt on his back while a third held him in a stranglehold with his arm. Witnesses state that Abdelhakim Ajimi’s face turned purple and it was clear that he could not breathe.

Rescue services took the injured police officer to hospital. Witnesses allege that the police officers told the paramedics not to attend to Abdelhakim Ajimi as they had the situation under control. Abdelhakim Ajimi was taken by police car to the police station where he was declared dead at 4.30pm. According to police testimony, Abdelhakim Ajimi was alive but in a poor condition upon arrival at the police station. However, several witnesses to his arrest have stated that they believe he was already dead when he was put into the police car.

On 13 May, the public prosecutor in Grasse opened an investigation into “involuntary homicide”. The two police officers suspected of being responsible for Abdelhakim Ajimi’s death were summoned for a hearing with the investigating judge on 16 December but to date have not been charged with any offence.

Abou Bakari Tandia, an irregular migrant of Malian origin, was stopped in the street in Paris by police officers on the evening of 5 December 2004 and taken to the police station for an identity check. After his arrest, he fell into a coma in his cell and at around midnight the emergency medical services took him to hospital where he remained in a coma until he died, on 24 January 2005.

Abou Bakari Tandia’s family were not notified of his arrest and admission to hospital until 9

December. Together with a representative of the Malian consulate they visited the hospital but were not allowed to see him for another three days. When the family finally saw him, they noted that his body was swollen and he had a large round wound on his chest which did not appear in any of his medical reports. They also noted that he had no visible head injuries, despite the fact the police claimed he had fallen into a coma after deliberately banging his head against the wall in his cell. Neither the autopsy report on his body nor any of the medical reports from either of the two hospitals he was admitted to recorded any evidence of a head injury.

In April 2005, Abou Bakari Tandia's family made a complaint of "torture and ill-treatment resulting in death".

There was little progress in the case until more than two years later, when in November 2007 Abou Bakari Tandia's family appointed a new lawyer. He made a number of formal requests for investigatory acts to the investigating judge and prosecutor which resulted in substantial new evidence being uncovered. Medical documents, which were misplaced, are now being examined by expert forensic doctors to try to determine Abou Bakari Tandia's cause of death. Their conclusions are expected in May.

More than four years later Abou Bakari Tandia's cause of death has still not been established. His family continue to call for a full investigation.

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