

Czech Republic: Police brutality should be firmly addressed

"We are concerned that the Czech police appear to have violated the rights of hundreds of people who were detained following protests organized to coincide with the annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Prague in September 2000", said Amnesty International in a report published today. This report is based on extensive information, including over 60 complaints of people who had been detained in Prague at the time.

"The findings of the investigations are illustrative of a pattern of police abuses reported in previous years by the organization when law enforcement officers violated the rights of those engaged in peaceful protests" said the organization. These and other abuses of rights of detainees in the past have also been documented by other bodies, including the Czech Government's Commissioner for Human Rights and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Among its various concerns, Amnesty International stresses that the detention of the vast majority of those who were held in custody was based on administrative decisions taken by the police which appear to have been arbitrary. "Such conduct would amount to an abuse of power", indicated the organization.

The experience of a group of 13 British nationals is illustrative of this concern. On 26 September at around 11.45pm they left a pub in the old city centre and proceeded to walk to the bus which was to take them back to Nottingham, in the United Kingdom. When they observed a police officer beating a man who was lying on the ground, and another officer beating a woman who was leaning against a parked vehicle, the group stopped. One of them, Deirdre Melia, asked the woman if she was all right. Suddenly, the group was reportedly assaulted by six police officers. "I was grabbed by the throat, by a policeman in riot gear, and pinned against a wall, held there and repeatedly called a bitch," stated Deirdre Melia. The police then examined their passports and arrested seven of them, who were then held in custody for 32 hours.

"Furthermore, in the majority of cases we examined, those who were detained were subjected to ill-treatment by police officers following their arrest", stated Amnesty International's spokesperson. In a few reported cases, in view of the severity of the force used by the police officers involved, and the pain and injuries which had been suffered by the victims, Amnesty International considers that the ill-treatment inflicted by police officers may amount to torture.

The police randomly and deliberately resorted to the use of force such as beating or prodding with a truncheon, kicking, slapping, pushing and twisting of fingers. Such actions were reported while people were handcuffed, as well as during actions to apprehend suspected protesters, and later, in places of detention.

Tadzio Mueller, a German national, was held in Lup<Yov< Street police station, where dozens of detainees had reportedly been beaten. "Everyone of us was taken into that room. They pushed my head down until it was between my legs and then a cop stuck his boot in my face...they shoved me to the ground, kicked me, walking over me...Four or five officers dragged me up from the floor, pushed me into the room where the arrest cells were and proceeded to beat me for a couple of minutes". As a result of blows on his left ear Tadzio Mueller suffered a ruptured eardrum.

In violation of their internationally protected rights, the overwhelming majority of those detained were not allowed to inform a member of the family or third person of their whereabouts and were denied access to a lawyer. In addition foreign nationals were denied their right to contact consular officials. At the outset of their detention the detainees were not medically examined. Several cases described in the report indicate that some of the detainees, who had suffered serious injuries, were not promptly provided with adequate medical care. In addition, the detainees were not duly informed of their rights in a language that they could understand.

Finally, Amnesty International is concerned that the initial investigations into the complaints of arbitrary arrests and detention and police ill-treatment conducted by the Police Inspectorate could not be considered prompt and impartial as required by international human rights standards.

Today Amnesty International calls on the Czech government to implement its recommendations as a matter of urgency in order to ensure that law enforcement officials respect the rights of people deprived of their liberty. The organization also urges the Czech government to put in place a system for prompt and impartial investigations into all complaints of torture and ill-treatment.

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